

On *Kala Pani* and Transoceanic Fluids

Islandness invokes a paradoxical relationship between concepts of isolation and susceptibility to transoceanic settlement. While the vast majority of work on island literature has focused on the former, my interest here is in tracing out how the transoceanic imaginary is a constitutive part of island literature. Elsewhere I have argued that the construction of the tropical island as an isolated and ahistorical space separated from the world-making of the European metropole was a constitutive part of the British empire. To render the very tropical island colonies, whose commodities, environment, and labour created European modernity, as fundamentally isolated and unrelated to the northern metropole is a mystification of the economic and social history of center-periphery relations. Understandably, postcolonial island writers have turned to the history of the sea in order to complicate the myth of island isolation. Thus island literatures that inscribe the mobility associated with the ocean and the movement of a diasporic (often male) subject who traverses space to produce history— in other words, narrative and time—reflect an important postcolonial genre that I have called the transoceanic imaginary. This genre is not only remapping how Britannia ruled the waves through the fluidity of the sea, but reconfiguring the layered complexities of diaspora and island settlement.

In this essay I explore Indian indenture narratives of crossing black waters, or *kala pani*, and their gendered engagement with the transoceanic imagination. Expanding upon the historical and missionary accounts that described indenture as all but slavery in name, postcolonial writers of Indian descent have depicted the ocean crossing in terms drawn specifically from Atlantic slave ships, suggesting a larger narrative of transoceanic migration and enforced labour.¹ Historically, the term *kala pani* means dark or black waters and refers to a religious restriction prohibiting high-caste Hindus from crossing the sea. As a term it powerfully encodes the dissolution and even negation of identity beyond national soil or a feminised motherland. Here I trace out the ways in which crossing *kala pani* has become a vital metaphor of diaspora for island writers, and examine the ways in which the ship and the sea are utilised as constitutive elements of a transoceanic imaginary in which men attain their spatial mobility and enter narrative time through the operative metaphors of feminised vessels and transoceanic fluids.

Notwithstanding the radical break signified by crossing *kala pani*,

Amitav Ghosh has argued that diaspora is “the mirror in which modern India seeks to know itself” (78). In the nineteenth century alone, over a million Indians were contracted as indentured labourers and sent to European colonies, particularly the islands of the Caribbean and the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Between 1879 and 1920, over 60,000 laborers, a diverse cross-section of India’s population, were shipped to Fiji to work for the sugar cane industry. This arrangement is attributed in part to Sir Arthur Hamilton Gordon, whose administrative experiences in Mauritius and Trinidad led him to introduce Indian labour to “protect” indigenous Fijians from the alienation of plantation capitalism. Until recently outstripped by tourism, monocrop agriculture has sustained Fiji’s economy even though rural Indo-Fijians have largely been excluded from land ownership and equal political representation.² Although Fiji became independent in 1970, it has undergone successive military coups (since 1987) coordinated by some indigenous Christian constituencies against Indo-Fijian political and economic ascendancy. In a nation of less than a million residents, over 80,000 Indo-Fijians have fled their homeland in the past two decades in a context in which agricultural leases were not renewed, Fiji was suspended from the Councils of the Commonwealth, and the nation’s constitution was rewritten.³ The majority of literature and scholarship about Indo-Fijian history continues to be produced outside the boundaries of Fiji, a nation quite literally torn between discourses of indigenous sovereignty and Indian diaspora. Thus, the contemporary practice of diaspora has generated a renewed interest in imagining and recuperating the transoceanic origins of Indian migrancy. Moreover, this historical entanglement between the indigenous and diasporic and which *vessel* of sovereignty will best suit the postcolonial nation is vital to understanding the rise in the use of *kala pani* as a metaphor in Fiji and in the postcolonial maritime novel in general.

As I have explained elsewhere, the fictional rendering of the transoceanic crossing has been predominantly a male-authored genre focused on the interactions between shipboard fraternities.⁴ From inscriptions of the middle passage to Indian indenture, novelists have utilised shipboard space to explore the complex cultural and ethnic relationships in order to complicate the racial homogenisation instilled by their colonial captors. Thus in these narratives we can see the process of migration shifts from specifically rooted ethnic identities (defined by caste, village, language, and religion, etc.) to a new routed formation of racialised masculinity. Both middle passage and Indian indenture ships were segregated by gender rather

than culture, caste, or ethnicity. Perhaps then it is not surprising that most novels that seek to explore these transoceanic legacies often emphasise the diversity of masculine ethnicities and the forging of homosocial allegiances rather than including the participation or experience of women in this fraternal shipboard milieu.⁵ As a result, both historical narratives tend to construct a migratory genealogy of forefathers and evidence anxiety about the relationship of women to the domestic despite the fact that African and Indian women migrated and laboured alongside their male colleagues in the fields of slavery and indenture. Indian and African narratives of transoceanic diaspora suggest that the cultural, social, and economic fracturing of community first occurs at home as a repercussion of European colonisation, before the actual process of migration. In fact, it is this concern with the domestic—understood metonymically as woman and nation—that underscores the transoceanic imaginary of these homosocial shipboard fraternities.

Crossing *Kala Pani*

The moment of crossing *kala pani*—the narrative space of transoceanic ships—is where Indian labourers reconfigure their relations to the domestic, imagined broadly in terms of nation, culture, caste, and gender. This is particularly evident in Fijian writer Jogindar Singh Kanwal’s historical novel *The Morning*, an overlooked but vital account of Indian recruitment, transoceanic crossing, and labour conditions in the Fijian sugar plantations.⁶ Originally written in Standard Hindi (titled *Savera*) and published in India in 1976 to precede the centennial anniversary of Indian indenture in Fiji (1979), the novel was translated into English in 1991 on the heels of the first two coups. Although Kanwal has been a rather prolific writer in English and Hindi of fiction, poetry, and history about Indian presence in Fiji, his work, to my knowledge, has never been incorporated into or cited in the small but growing body of Fijian *kala pani* theory and criticism. This is peculiar because *Savera* might be the first Indo-Fijian novel to be published (in Standard Hindi and in English) and its historical trajectory gestures towards a long and active literary engagement of Indians in Fiji, particularly in print media.⁷ Kanwal’s professional work as a teacher and a principal of an Indo-Fijian school in Viti Levu’s main agricultural district, Ba, exposed him to a rich oral history from *girmityas* (indenturers), testimonies that he incorporated into the novel alongside printed resources. As a historical realist novel, *The*

Morning was not originally conceived as fiction, he explains in his preface (8). The narrative is written chronologically and borrows directly from print media sources and published accounts of historian Kenneth Gillion and Christian missionary C.F. Andrews, an anti-indenture abolitionist and a friend of Gandhi who appears at the end of the book. Moreover, Kanwal explains that he minimised "local idioms" of the Fijian context and language because his narrative, he explains, should connect to those other spaces of indenture such as "Mauritius, Surinam, British Guyana, and Trinidad" (8). Bringing together oral history and the printed archive, Kanwal employs the realist novel to inscribe a historical diaspora in a way that he hopes will resonate with descendants of Indian indenturers across space and time. As such, he is much in line with other postcolonial writers who have utilised oral histories and genealogy as a historical counter-memory to the printed colonial record that privileged the "civilizing" telos of empire. Yet like most foundational narratives of national or diasporic history, these genealogies privilege the agency of masculine subjects. The author traces the history of indenture along the genealogical lines of Indo-Fijian "forefathers" (8), inscribing a patriarchal narrative of transoceanic diaspora.

Symbolically upholding the connection between the ship and the human body as vessel, Kanwal opens the narrative with his Indian protagonist's birthdate on May 15, 1879, the date of the first shipload of indentured Indians to arrive to Fiji (on the *Leonidas*). The novel begins in Uttar Pradesh but eventually spans the northern part of the subcontinent, documenting the great rural displacement created by nineteenth-century British land enclosures in which millions of Indians became indebted to a new landlord class, contextualising the reasons for this massive emigration. As a young man, the protagonist Amar Singh develops his political consciousness through Indian print media, particularly its critique of British colonial policy. This contributes to his resistance and eventual fight with his corrupt landlord, which results in his displacement from the land, his aging mother, and his fiancé, Shanti. His only option is to flee his home and pursue an indenture contract in Fiji. His migration across northern India to the recruitment depot and across the seas on the ship the *Ganges* positions Amar as a vessel of Indian indenture history. Kanwal spends three full chapters describing the transoceanic journey and the construction of a new Indian community of *jahaji bhai*, or "ship brothers," across the *kala pani*.

Before Amar departs India he is warned by a pandit "that a Hindu's religion is defiled once he crosses the seas. When he comes back he won't be accepted back in the community because he would be considered impious and desecrated" (21). Although Kanwal has borrowed this language of contamination and rejection from the historical archive and there is palpable dismissal of the indenturers in India today, it is important to juxtapose this narrative alongside the fact that 40% of the Fiji-Indian population returned after their indenture contracts were completed (Grieco 715). Other characters in Kanwal's novel fear that in crossing *kala pani* "as soon as you reach the black ocean you will be forcibly converted to Christianity" (31). *Kala pani* is defined in various ways but it generally entails an abhorrence of caste contagion, whether by food preparation, labour, or spatial contact with so-called untouchables. This adds an interesting dimension to current theories of diaspora because it suggests a fundamental social hierarchy that resists the unifying but homogenising historical trajectory of group migration. By extension, the insistence on these hierarchies and the refusal of cross-caste commensality also signals a resistance to the historian or novelist's consolidating vision of the subjects of history.

What Fijian author Satendra Nandan calls "the dark and dreaded *kala pani*" ("Migration" 42) is echoed throughout the majority of literature and scholarship of Indians in Fiji; this reiterates a uniformly critical view of the crossing and a focus on the transoceanic vessel, even though it was not the originary space of cross-caste commensality. Vijay Naidu explains that indenture entailed five steps: recruitment in the villages; transportation to the depot where migrants were held for weeks; the transoceanic crossing; quarantine upon arrival; and resettlement (7). Historians such as Ahmed Ali point out that the process of "being *déraciné*" began in depots rather than the ocean voyage: "the loss of caste caused by commensality in the depot was made worse by the loss of caste through crossing the *kala pani*" ("Indians" 3). Most writers ignore the caste mixing in the depot, following Subramani's frame to his groundbreaking book *The Indo-Fijian Experience*, which asserts that Indians "had crossed the dark ocean and thus had lost caste" (x). But it seems that if contagion is the primary issue, then the depot experience (which could last months) would be no less traumatic for the migrant seeking to maintain his or her caste status than the voyage itself. In the depot the migrants were not clear as to where they were being sent, they were housed for weeks, and in some cases months,

with strangers from all over India, they were often unable to communicate with other Indians or the English-speaking colonial officers and agents, and finally, they could not be assured that dietary and religious restrictions were being followed by those who prepared their food. In some cases, migrants who might have fled the depots to return home reportedly did not do so because either they could not afford the train fare or had already lost caste status due to the irreligious conditions. As Kanwal depicts in his novel, riots occurred in the depots and across *kala pani*. So while the transoceanic crossing is not, historically speaking, the originary space of caste mixing, the conceptualisation of a mobile vessel of history has produced a far more fluid metaphor for diaspora than the immobile spaces of the depots.

I am intrigued by the new currency of the term *kala pani* because according to oral testimonies and historical documents, indentured Indians did not often invoke this term or concept as an organising metaphor for their migration.⁸ It is important to ask why crossing *kala pani* has become the dominant metaphor for Indian indenture diaspora, and why the question of contamination would concern the majority of migrants, who were not high-caste Hindus, and who might have even felt, in some cases, that the disruption of the caste and gender hierarchies of the homeland was beneficial. Strictly speaking, caste status did not apply to the majority of Indian labourers who were Muslim, Sikh, Christian, Jain, Buddhist, and Adivasi, as they would be outside of the caste system altogether. Moreover, recent scholars have suggested that despite the nineteenth-century outcry over the "prostitution" of Indian women in the fields of indenture, a gendered narrative of contamination, some women gained sexual and economic autonomy by crossing *kala pani*.⁹ Turning to the historical archive, A.L. Basham explains that the first ban against travel by sea derived from early Vedic texts, which described it as a "grave ritual impurity" and outlined a three-year penance, suggesting that it was not a lifelong banishment from spiritual and familial unity (162). Sporadically over the next sixteen-hundred years, various Hindu texts reiterate the ban on transoceanic travel but specifically limit this to male Brahmins of the "twice-born" caste. Despite these prohibitions, Basham asserts that they had little impact on trade and travel. In fact, he suggests that the sophistication of Muslim and Chinese seafaring shifted Hindu trading practices from the ocean to the land; the ban on crossing *kala pani* reflected a new economic reality and justified what he describes as a developing "antipathy" to mariners and

non-Hindus (165). Given its restricted applicability to male Brahmins, why has the concept of crossing the *kala pani* functioned as such a potent metaphor for the history of diaspora?

Theorising an Indian (or high caste Hindu) relationship to the sea is complicated by the colonial archive which emphasised the rootedness of South Asian culture at the very moment when Great Britain sustained the concept of its "civilising" telos through an active maritime nationalism. Speaking in terms of genre, Basham points out that classical Sanskrit includes no seafaring epics in the tradition of Odysseus, Jason, or Sinbad (164-5). Yet the North Indian indenturer's lack of familiarity with the ocean has been greatly exaggerated by historians, Brij Lal warns, and the archival record upholds a stereotypical "Hindu landlubber." This is visible in the castigating terms of imperial historian I.M. Cumpston who described Indian migrants as "floating caravans of barbarian tourists" (qtd. in Lal, "Understanding" 217), who presumably lacked the political autonomy to chart their national course. Other British officials insisted that the Hindu had "no migratory instinct" due to the need to arrange women's marriages (William Crooke qtd. in Lal, "Fiji Girmityas" 15). On the one hand, the lack of precedent for a transoceanic epic suggests the ways in which new maritime genres have been adopted and reformulated to conceptualise the mass emigration of Indian indenturers and helps us position the fictional *kala pani* narrative as an innovative form that is forged in relationship to British colonial literature of transoceanic colonialism as well as its critiques from the black Atlantic. Yet on the other hand, these colonial texts invoke a gendered hierarchy between a feminised landscape (the space of domestic marriage) and a masculinised telos across the sea where the subject is expected to chart a vessel's course rather than "floating" aimlessly like an uncivilised "tourist."

Ghosh argues, "the links between India and her diaspora are lived within the imagination. It is therefore an *epic relationship*: an epic without a text" in which the creative writer plays a constitutive part (76). The epic is significant because the "symbolic spatial structure of India is infinitely reproducible" (76), and this is sustained by the diaspora's attachment to texts of banishment and return such as the epic *Ramayana*. The production of space, as feminist theorists have pointed out, is generally feminised, while temporality is metaphysically conflated with masculinity. Thus Indian masculinity, the colonial narratives suggest, is feminised in its spatial reduction to the domestic planning of women's weddings. Moreover, this

gendering of space was constitutive to the production of anti-colonial nationalism in India, as Partha Chatterjee and others have demonstrated, in ways that reified spatial relations to segregate women from participation in the public realm except as symbolic vessels for the national domestic telos. For writers in the diaspora, who cannot reintegrate and renaturalise their spatial relationship to the motherland through a return to originary national soil, the ship provides an alternative vessel of nation-building. This has particular relevance to Kanwal's novel, a text that reinscribes the ways in which men attain spatial mobility and therefore enter narrative time through feminised vessels of proto-nationalism.

From *Kala Pani* to *Jahaji Bhai*

The ship and the ocean are epistemologically connected in terms of conceiving a vessel of history—a vessel often gendered as a masculine shipboard community. A ship is a world, many scholars have claimed, but it is certainly a homosocial one without the presence of women. The term “diaspora,” I am fond of pointing out, is etymologically derived from “spore” and “sperm” (Helmreich 243). This is apparent in the most important symbol of crossing *kala pani*: the fraternity of *jahaji bhai*, or ship brothers.¹⁰ As Sean Lokaisingh-Meighoo has argued, the *jahaji bhai* has functioned as an important trope for Indo-Caribbean masculine origins, and serves as a marker of the overlap between homosocial and homoerotic relations between male migrants. The concept of *jahaji bhai*, originating from an era of rupture, thus serves as an imaginative vessel of historical continuity in the wake of religious, ethnic, gendered, sexual, and caste differences between Indian migrants (84). Rather than sidestepping the homoerotic subtext to the *jahaji bhai*, Lokaisingh-Meighoo seems to literalise the condensation of diaspora/sperm by suggesting that it be fully embraced and appropriated as a trope of queer Indo-Caribbean identity (90).

My concern here is with the ongoing erasure of women across the *kala pani* that *jahaji bhai* narratives, queer or otherwise, continue to perpetuate. Black and Indian diaspora literatures often gender maritime history so that the homosocial experience of shipboard men naturalises the masculine origins of diaspora. Vijay Naidu locates the pan-Indian brotherhood as a variant from the African experience. He quotes Hugh Tinker's observations of African male slaves: “they never forgot the ship which brought them over, and they never forgot the men they were shackled to. The shipboard relationship took on the quality of a blood

relationship, which no subsequent divergence erased” (qtd. in Naidu 84).¹¹ Importantly, the production of this maritime discourse is entangled with the domestic, understood in feminised and national terms. *Kala pani* narratives in the Caribbean have specifically foreground a shared history between Indian and African migrants, emphasising a shared transoceanic imaginary that can be effectively used toward creolised nation-building. Yet *jahaji bhai* discourse in Fiji has a radically different domestic context. Imagining a shared transoceanic history with the African middle passage places the emphasis on a global grammar of diaspora in opposition to the indigenising discourse of Fiji nationalism, particularly since the coups. Thus the concept of *jahaji bhai*, while uniting Indo-Fijian men across the divisions in religion, caste, and ethnicity, does not bring Indians in closer relation to their indigenous compatriots.¹²

This construction of an Indian brotherhood, while destabilising caste hierarchy and cultural differences between Indian men, is often dependent upon the spatial trope of woman-as-nation. In Kanwal's novel, for example, women are central to both the late nineteenth-century anticolonial movement in India as well as the labourers' efforts to gain better legal and social conditions in Fiji. His protagonist Amar is significantly torn between two gendered and sexualised tropes of colonial liberation, symbolised in the women characters Shanti, his former fiancé who is active in the anti-colonial movement in India, and Jamuna, his future wife who experiences sexual harassment in the Fiji plantations and helps to organise worker resistance. Since these women function as both sexual and proto-nationalist symbols, Amar, indentured in Fiji, cannot simultaneously possess them without becoming either a polygamist or otherwise illicit lover of two budding nations.

In fact, the narrative forestalls (hetero)sexual and ideological closure; Amar does not marry Jamuna until the labourers achieve legal protection after a series of strikes, and many years later, their son returns to India and conveniently marries Shanti's daughter. Amar is so focused on assisting his *jahaji bhai* in their strikes that Jamuna is not textually represented at her own wedding. She then disappears as a character except to return as a reproductive vessel for his son Krishna and to assist in Krishna's marriage to Radha, Shanti's daughter. This reflects a diasporic reinscription of Vaishnava Padabali, or Bengali lyric verse of the love of Krishna and Radha that roots the futurity of the narrative in Hindu India. Returning to visit his home village and reflecting on the marriage of their children, Amar

describes Shanti's self-sacrificial devotion to the Indian national cause as "a second religion" (Kanwal 209), blending the secular and sacred narratives of devotion in the tradition of (Bengali) anticolonial nationalism. He meets her under the old mango tree of their youthful courtship and reflects on how he "had come back to [his] roots, the soil of [his] Motherland" (210). Although women's "claims to nationhood [are] frequently dependent upon marriage to a male citizen" (Parker et al. 6), Kanwal suggests that in the pre-national colony, women function as the means by which male diasporic subjects can claim their rights to territory and cultural belonging. Since the "trope of the nation-as-woman ... depends for its representational efficacy on a particular image of woman as chaste, dutiful, daughterly or maternal" (Parker et al. 6), it is not a coincidence that Amar deflects Shanti's sexual desire into a self-sacrificial devotion to the Indian motherland. Moreover, Amar's struggles over the rumours of Jamuna's sexual promiscuity are only alleviated when she rescues him from a murderous kidnapping plot and when she devotes herself to the indenturers' cause by being jailed alongside him. Through marriage alliances that desexualise his love interests and conflate women with the motherland, Amar utilises women as vessels to claim Indian and Indo-Fijian national belonging.

Jahaji bhai, a diasporic concept of masculine Indian origins, is based upon the fraternal construction of the imagined nation that relies on women for its regeneration.¹³ This "passionate brotherhood" (Parker et al. 6) in nationalist discourse has been refitted for the *jahaji bhai* with its gender hierarchies intact. This is why it is not an accident that in a novel that foregrounds women as anticolonial agents, *The Morning* erases them when it comes to crossing *kala pani*. Women feature considerably in this novel but only in terms of domestic and national devotion. For instance, Amar's mother, his love interest Shanti, and the women labourers in the plantation context are vital to his picture of indenture. Strikingly, even though there was a strict quota of forty women for every one hundred male emigrants, Kanwal neglects to depict them in his long chapters on crossing *kala pani*. In a novel based heavily upon the transoceanic imaginary, women are suppressed as mobile subjects.

However, this doesn't mean that the symbolic logic of the feminine is absent as well. In the three chapters that describe the journey to Fiji, Indian men of diverse caste and ethnic origins reformulate their relation to each other. A Brahmin who refuses to eat because of his fear of contagion from "untouchables" is critiqued by Amar and the author; ultimately the Brahmin

dies on the ship and the narrator comments, "it was perhaps symbolic that at the death of this man with such staunch and uncompromising belief in the elitism of the Brahmin faith, people belonging to different religions had gathered to pay their last respects. His forehead had thus become a Triveni where the tears of Hindus, Moslems and untouchables had formed a confluence" (57-8). Here the homosocial bond of *jahaji bhai* is articulated as an emission of emotive bodily fluid. In a scene that blurs the distinction between homosocial and homosexual relations between contained shipboard men, their bond is rendered religiously pure upon the sacred forehead of a Brahmin, even while the narrative seems to critique caste privilege and high-caste Hindu models of purity and contamination. Through the mechanics of devotional fluid, a "clean" bodily emission opposed to "impure" fluids such as sperm, snot, and urine (see Douglas), masculine purity is maintained in the crossing of the contaminating *kala pani*. In this particular case, masculine communities are bonded together through feminised fluidity even when women as subjects are invisible. This is especially apparent when we recognise the Triveni as a key female image of the trinity of three holy Indian rivers (Ganga, Yamuna, and Sarasvati). In this case, *jahaji bhai* must mobilise feminised metaphors of fluidity in order to solidify their homosocial bonds. Women may be erased from the fraternal shipboard communities, but they are symbolically invoked through the feminisation of the Triveni.

The conflation of women with fluidity is also apparent when we consider that the ship the men are traveling on is called the *Ganges*, the name of an actual ship of Fiji indenture yet one that Kanwal utilises as a focal metaphor for diasporic male community. The Ganga River, named for Ganga Devi, the daughter of Meru (the Himalayas), is a feminised source of purification in Hindu tradition and is mobilised in the novel as a counter to the *kala pani's* feminised contagion. Consequently, the movement of the *Ganga*, a fresh water river/ship across the dissolving propensities of the salt sea provides a symbolic vessel for maintaining the sanctity of the masculine shipboard community into uncharted space. The Triveni's utilisation as a metaphor on the ship is particularly interesting when we consider that the sexually "contaminated" figure of Jamuna is symbolically operative in her cognate, the feminised Yamuna River. The coming together of three sacred and feminised sources of fluidity (the Sarasvati is thought to flow underground) evident in the Triveni allows the masculine community on the ship to forge their homosocial bonds through feminised resources

that sanctify their own exchange of bodily fluids. The process of realigning a north Indian culture of sacred rivers towards a transoceanic imaginary of their new location in Fiji is dependent upon the naturalising and generative logic of feminisation, read alternatively as purity or abject contamination.

This diasporic concern with the oceanic imaginary, the fluid space of ships and the watery trajectory between nations, invokes an ideology of the feminine which is sufficient to perpetuate masculine reproduction without having to incorporate actual women subjects. Just as nations are often gendered as feminine vessels, so are the ships and the bodies of water that surround them. Thus the ship, as a vessel of Ganga, becomes a reproductive metaphor for the birth of a male diasporic community. In fact, in Nandan's terms, the space of *kala pani* is the "womb-wound." In Kanwal's novel, the sea is a feminised and consuming body that might contaminate high-caste voyagers. While on his deathbed, the Brahmin mentioned earlier instructs his shipmates to relay the message to his wife "that the sea has swallowed" him, even though he still remains on the ship (57). Another passenger associates the sea with his deceased wife: "by traveling on the sea always I remain close to her" (56), he explains.

Just as the sea is invoked as the primordial feminine, the image of the woman as a "rudderless vessel" has a particular currency in Indo-Fijian discourse that is tied to notions of sexual and caste purity. Using the issue of sexual morality to leverage his arguments against the indenture system, Christian missionary C.F. Andrews wrote extensively about the breakdown of the Indian family and the denigration of women on the Fijian plantations. He described the Indo-Fijian woman as "a rudderless vessel with its mast broken, drifting on the rocks; or like a canoe being whirled down the rapids of a great river without any controlling hand. She passes from one man to another, and has lost even the sense of shame in doing so" (qtd. in Lal, "Veil" 139). Andrews' construction of an immoral feminine fluidity has been adopted by many other historians and writers. An Australian overseer described the Hindu woman in Fiji "as joyously amoral as a doe rabbit. She took to her lovers as a ship takes to rough seas; surging up to one who would smother her, then tossing him aside, thirsting for the next" (Gill 73). Interestingly, these constructions of female fluidity, loose boundaries of identity and behaviour have been transposed to male *girmityas* crossing *kala pani* in more recent scholarship. Although he does not cite Andrews as a source, Naidu describes a history in which "the Indians were cast adrift, rudderless and pilotless in the rough seas" (76). Following suit, Kanwal's

protagonist describes the labourers as "rudderless vessels plying the waves of life's ocean without purpose and direction" (96). In these texts, women do not need to appear in any material or corporeal way in the narratives of crossing *kala pani* because feminised metaphors of fluidity, loose moral behaviour, and social degeneration are already operative. Thus, the *jahaji bhai* can regenerate themselves and a masculine purity by invoking feminised tears, the Triveni, or the black waters that surround them.

In conclusion, I want to foreground the gendering of the transoceanic imagination and the larger issues this highlights about the feminisation of embodied vessels as a constitutive element of diaspora discourse. The Indian women who did migrate to Fiji and other colonies have been repeatedly blamed by missionaries and historians for low moral character, sexual promiscuity, and for catalysing the high male suicide rate on plantations. But the low proportions of women to male labourers was also a part of African and Melanesian plantation labour and did not result in blaming of women for their own scarcity. More recently, scholars such as Shaista Shameem, Rhoda Reddock, and Patricia Mohammed have argued that the high rate of male violence against Indian women more likely derived from a crisis in masculinity caused by the loosening of patriarchal cultures in the crossing of *kala pani*. Like narratives of masculine travel and trade, women are seen to interrupt good relations between men and to cause violence. This is evident in Jamuna's role in *The Morning*; sexual jealousy over her causes our protagonist to strike his fellow *jahaji bhai* and demoralises the labourers' political unity.

The narrative that Indo-Fijian women were "loose" might be accounted for by the fact that of the women who migrated to Fiji, sixty-four percent were single; that is, unaccompanied by a male relative. Interestingly, many more high-caste women traveled alone to Fiji than their lower-caste counterparts, suggesting that women's travel outside of their domestic spheres *in itself* catalysed their interpretation as "loose." The fact that most of these women registered for indenture outside of their home districts suggests, to the astonishment of historians, that women of the higher castes in north India were much more mobile and not as constrained by social conventions than previously assumed. Discovering that many women in India were mobile before crossing *kala pani* has caused even sensitive historians, like Brij Lal, to fall back upon a gendered binary between passive historical victims and active, mobile prostitutes. Correcting the historical record that blamed recruiting agents for manipulating the migrants into indenture, Lal

describes how these tales of trickery were greatly exaggerated. But when he discovers high-caste women who are inexplicably traveling all over north India in the nineteenth century, registering in districts far from their homes, he assumes all these women “lost their way” and were manipulated by the recruiters (*Girmitiyas* 99-109; compare to *Chalo Jahaji* 130-31). He neglects to explain how thousands of women came to be “lost,” unless we presume they had a terrible sense of direction.

The inability to account for these traveling women is tied to the ways in which, to quote Janet Wolff, “practices and ideologies of *actual* travel operate to exclude or pathologize women” (224). The moment women enter into masculinised travelling theory or practices they are either excluded as subjects (across the *kala pani*), or branded as “rudderless” and immoral hypersexual beings. As Wolff points out, the exaggerated division between public and private space has led to a discursive formulation whereby “the ideological construction of ‘woman’s place’ worked to render invisible, problematic, and in some cases *impossible*, women ‘out of place’” (234). Thus mobile women are perceived in terms that suggest moral or sexual looseness; the woman “out of place” is assumed to have lost all social strictures.

It is specifically because ideologies of the feminine, invoked as symbols of absorption and fluidity, are necessary for imagined *jahaji bhai* communities to regenerate themselves that actual travelling women are not permitted to enter textual history. In the diasporic discourse of *kala pani*, to locate an already fluid and loose feminised subject in the transnational space of black waters would so weaken the foundation of domestic cultural stability that the brotherhood of migrants—and by extension, the patriarchal genealogy of diaspora—would collapse. In relegating women to the space of “Mother India” or its fallen daughters in the plantations of Fiji, the structure of Kanwal’s transoceanic diaspora novel aligns women with immobile space; this allows the masculine *girmitiyas* to regenerate across oceanic space, render it into place, and therefore produce historical time. This is as much of a remapping of colonial historiography as its spatially gendered legacies.

Coda: *Kala Pani* and Passing Other Fluids

In her book, *Diasporic (Dis)locations*, Brinda Mehta has helpfully reformulated the discourse of *kala pani* as a methodological tool for understanding Indian women’s agency in the diaspora. She explains,

“enduring the hardships of the *kala pani* was a worthwhile risk to take because it offered the potential for renegotiations of gendered identity within the structural dissolutions of caste, class, and religion” in the transoceanic crossing (5). She recuperates crossing the *kala pani* for Caribbean women writers and configures it as a space of inbetweenness, hybridity, mobility, and tremendous potential. This marks an important shift in the predominantly masculine discourse of *jahaji bhai* and offers a more fluid and innovative frame with which to approach the histories and literatures of the transoceanic imaginary. While as yet there are no Indo-Fijian texts that specifically imagine women’s diaspora in the vein of say, Ramabai Espinet’s novel, *The Swinging Bridge*, I’d like to conclude by recuperating an alternative rendering of feminised fluid and contamination that foregrounds women’s agency.

Drawing from an event recorded in the archives, Kanwal describes the sexual harassment and rape of women in the sugar plantations by Australian overseers and the women’s resistance to this abuse. When one overseer, Peter, attempts to rape Jamuna, she responds with an attack to his groin and threatens to dice him into pieces with her cane knife (163). In retaliation, Peter creates impossible tasks for the women’s gang until Jamuna conceives of a solution. She pretends to be receptive to his sexual advances, distracting him until a large group of women labourers surround the overseer and beat him until he loses consciousness. Over his prostrate body they sing of their own contribution of bodily fluids to the plantation economy: “we irrigate the fields with our sweat and blood / And the Sahib is here merely to give orders” (167). When he awakens, Peter demands that the women fetch him some water. They respond by dragging him to a sewer drain and “each of these oppressed women took turns to squat over his prostrate form and give him ‘water’” (168). Peter disappears and Jamuna is jailed under suspicion of his murder. She is only released when a letter from the overseer surfaces, explaining his return to Sydney and his feeling that “the way [he] was treated by the gang of Veisaru women is so humiliating that [he] wish[es] [he] were dead” (175). The men in the community realise that their attempt to physically oppose this overseer would have resulted in probable hanging (168). Yet the very symbolic system that assumes that men are physically and spiritually pure until contaminated by the corporeality of feminised fluids is successfully used by these women characters (and their historical antecedents) to resist at least one exploitative plantation context. Moreover, the exchange of women’s

fluids—from sweat, sexuality, to the humiliating use of urination—become powerful metaphysical alternatives to the founding discourse of *jahaji bhai*. Thus we might approach the gendered economy of fluids by arguing for the dissolution of hierarchies of purity on the one hand, or, following the example of these women, turn to the latent power that is invested in the contaminating fluids as a vital locus of resistance.

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Notes

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- 1 Transoceanic journeys in both black diasporic and Indian indenture narratives overlap in historically significant ways, particularly in the Caribbean. In material terms, the creation of Indian indenture was a direct result of the emancipation of slaves in the Caribbean so that one population was recruited to replace the labour of the other. For the first few decades, the same ships that had brought Africans across the middle passage were used to transport Indians and Chinese. These connections were vital to postcolonial Fijian writing. In Subramani's groundbreaking collection, in an essay that describes a return to his grandmother's "Mother India," Fijian writer Vijendra Kumar explains, "like Alex Haley, I was looking for my roots" (86). In the same volume, Raymond Pillai's poem "Labourer's Lament" condenses Jewish and African diasporas and grafts them onto the Indo-Fijian experience by explaining that "from Africa they cast us out" (161). A few years later, the poetry of Satendra Nandan would make the connection to the middle passage explicit by drawing upon images of shipboard containment, poor hygiene conditions in the journey, and death through shipwreck. In a similar vein, Som Prakash has written that Indo-Fijians were "caste adrift in the middle passage" (404 my emphasis).
- 2 Indigenous Fijians retain over 85% of their lands.
- 3 See Victor Lal's *Fiji: Coups in Paradise: Race, Politics, and Military Intervention*.
- 4 See my *Routes and Roots: Navigating Caribbean and Pacific Island Literatures*.

- 5 Exceptions that inscribe women on the ships include John Hearne's *The Sure Salvation*, Fred D'Aguiar's *Feeding the Ghosts*, Patricia Powell's *The Pagoda*, and Ramabai Espinet's *The Swinging Bridge*.
- 6 See the works of K.L. Gillion, Brij Lal, and Hugh Tinker for Indian historical context in Fiji and Brinsley Samaroo on the comparative context.
- 7 The Indian community in Fiji maintained a prolific print culture, including bi- and tri-lingual newspapers that were exchanged across the Pacific and India from the beginning of the twentieth century. See Guru Dayal Sharma's *Memories of Fiji: 1887-1987* and Kanwal's *A Hundred Years of Hindi in Fiji*. Subramani's novel *Dauka Puraan* is the first novel written in Fiji Hindi, a mixture of Bhojpuri and Awadhi.
- 8 See, for instance, the oral testimonies in Ali's *Girmit: Indian Indenture Experience in Fiji* and Vijay Naidu's *The Violence of Indenture in Fiji*. Few studies of Fiji Indian indenture even mention the term *kala pani* until 1979. But with the centennial of Indian indenture in Fiji, two collections, Subramani's *The Indo-Fijian Experience* and Vijay Mishra's *Rama's Banishment: A Centenary Tribute to the Fiji Indians 1879-1979*, have framed the discourse of diaspora in terms of crossing *kala pani*. By the 1990s, the majority of academic production on the indentured Indian diaspora would follow suit.
- 9 See Rhoda Reddock's "Freedom Denied: Indian Women and Indentureship in Trinidad and Tobago, 1845-1917," Shaista Shameem's "Migration, Labour and Plantation Women in Fiji: A Historical Perspective," and Patricia Mohammed's *Gender Negotiations Among Indians in Trinidad, 1917-1947*.
- 10 Most scholars emphasise the construction of a more "egalitarian" relationship of *jahaji bhai*, which emerged as a founding narrative of Indian diasporan identity (Lal, "Understanding" 222).
- 11 Caribbean scholars have also used *jahaji bhai* to signify the reconstruction of Indian diasporic culture and, as in *kala pani* discourse, there is a deliberate attempt to theorise a pan-diasporan culture across a spectrum of migratory histories. See Frank Birbalsingh's *Jahaji Bhai: An Anthology of Indo-Caribbean Literature* (1988) and *Jahaji: An Anthology of Indo-Caribbean Fiction* (2000). Lal has made an effort to make the term more inclusive in *Chalo Jahaji: A Journey through Indenture in Fiji*.

- 12 Satendra Nandan's poem "Lines Across Black Waters" narrates the 1987 coups in terms of brotherly conflict via the *Mahabharata*. Thus the violent familial war over political sovereignty waged between the Pandava and the Kaurava brothers foreshadows the Fiji coups. The discursive celebration of the communal *jahaji bhai* is in some ways a relevant displacement of what is formulated as a fraternal battle between two ethnic groups in post-coup Fiji.
- 13 See the works of Partha Chatterjee and Sangeeta Ray.

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On the Trail of the Post-Colonial: Transcultural Spaces, Cosmopolitanism, and the Islands of the Mediterranean

*Kevin Edelman, the bawab of Europe, and the gatekeeper to the orchards
in the family courtyard, the same gate which had released the hordes that
went out to consume the world and to which we have come slining up to
beg admittance. Refugee. Asylum-seeker. Mercy.*

Abdulrazak Gurnah

Cosmopolitanism isn't hard work; repudiating it is.

Anthony Kwame Appiah

Since the nineties, the need for a theorisation of new transcultural dialogic spaces has emerged in cultural and post-colonial studies. The rise of global socio-economic and political phenomena—such as the widening economic divide within the “world-system” (Wallerstein, *passim*), the escalation of migration and the drastic measures enforced by governments of overdeveloped countries in controlling their borders, together with the political and cultural fractures created by episodes of global terrorism—have all contributed to shift interest towards a theorisation of transcultural spaces. Such a shift has become particularly resonant in post-colonial debates about globalisation and neo-colonialism, debates which are especially relevant to the Mediterranean region today. Notwithstanding that in the past fifteen years, the islands of the Mediterranean have been the site of arrival for the majority of the refugees and migrants from both Asia and Africa attempting to enter the EU, their role as possible transcultural spaces has been largely overlooked within the scholarships of transculturation, Mediterranean and island studies. This paper attempts to redress such a gap.

The islands of the Mediterranean Sea share a long history as “contact zones,” which Mary Louise Pratt defines as “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today” (33). Like the Cuban island context in which Fernando Ortiz theorised “transculturación,” Mediterranean islands share a history of many arrivals, conquests, pillages, and departures. The transcultural nature of the islands is mostly celebrated