



## **A Goddess-like Power and Possession: Depictions of Creole Women's Spirituality in Ramabai Espinet's Work: *The Swinging Bridge* and Myriam Chancy's Work: *The Scorpion's Claw***

"Literature is about imagination and freedom of expression. It can serve political purposes, but it is fueled by struggles of the soul." (Mayra Santos-Febres qtd. in Da Costa-Willis 2003)

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### **Abstract**

This paper examines Creole spirituality in the works of Ramabai Espinet: *The Swinging Bridge* and Myriam Chancy: *The Scorpion's Claw*. The writer proposes that women in Creole societies can use spirituality as a form of empowerment, self-realization, and liberation against the restrictions of patriarchal society. First, elements of spirituality in Ramabai Espinet's novel: *The Swinging Bridge* will be analyzed. Then, examples of spirituality in Myriam Chancy's novel: *The Scorpion's Claw* will be explored and comparatively contextualized with Espinet's work: *The Swinging Bridge*. In addition to the primary textual information and fictional contestations, supporting postcolonial analyses are also examined.

**Keywords:** Spirituality, Postcolonial Analyses, Creole Societies, Indo-Caribbean, Afro-Caribbean, Mother-Goddess Imagery, dehumanization

Prior to detailing spirituality in the novels named, I will briefly reference an account of Indo-Caribbean women's spirituality that is presented by Lommarsh Roopnarine, a lecturer at the University of the West Indies in Trinidad. According to Roopnarine, "The pride and boldness of bindi is not to be missed in the centre of the forehead [a red dot]- is an outward manifestation of the inner intellectual and spiritual strengths upon which Indo-Caribbeans draw to take advantage of available opportunities and influences. (2014) Here it can be observed that Roopnarine highlights the association of intellect with spirituality in Hindu culture. One can also acknowledge the bindi as a symbol of beauty as well. It adorns the forehead, where it is strategically placed between the physical eyes. But one can also consider the bindi as a third and sacred eye, since Roopnarine states that it is an outward manifestation of the inner intellectual and spiritual strength. What the latter statement also reveals about the bindi is that it seems to be a conduit between the physical, the metaphysical and world of Indo-Caribbean people. By the same token, Sharon Abercrombie notes that Indo-Caribbean women's spirituality can be traced back in time to the unbroken line of the Mother Goddess imagery. The Great Mother that is firmly rooted in the psyche of the people of Neolithic times is the Madonna of our psyches as well. Abercrombie then adds that the Mother Goddess was also celebrated in art and dance. (Abercrombie 2011)

Similarly, in Ramabai Espinet's novel: *The Swinging Bridge*, one observes that the Mother Goddess is revered by the Indo-Trinidadian women. For a classic example of the foregoing, Ramabai Espinet writes:

My mother's name was Gainer Beharry. They say she used to sing and make up her own songs too.... Her brother was Prabhu... The brother marry off Gainer to a man in the village when the father die... The man was old and she run away in the night. She thief a little money to help with the trip. She was trying to find the Vashnava. She see how they used to sing and dance for money... To the end, she used to say she was in Chinidad. She was in a place where they had a lot of other rands in Benares.

It was up some steep steps and they would climb up early in the morning and walk round the Shiva statue whole day, praying and chanting. People used to give them money in the day, but in the night, men would come and take them. She used to hide in the night. (Espinet 273)

It appears that Espinet's heroine Gainder, a major character that embodies matriarchy in her own right, uses creativity and spirituality as survival mechanisms. Gainder and her allies are prostitutes, who simultaneously reverence the statue of Shiva, a Hindu Mother Goddess figure. Gainder and the other prostitutes display sinful behavior of selling their bodies, but sees to it that they pray and chant the whole day, perhaps as a form of catharsis.

Besides, there seems to be a link between the material and immaterial lives of Espinet's heroine, Gainder et al. Gainder and company craftily fuse spirituality with commerce, and the latter one discovers, is a necessary evil for Indian women such as Gainder. It is a necessary evil for Gainder as she spares no time - in running from an oppressive marriage trap and independently daring to journey along the Kalapani Crossing. After engaging in a brave feat such as crossing the Kalapani, alone, Gainder ends up aboard a ship that lands her in "Chinidad." And it is in "Chinidad" that Gainder struggles to earn a livelihood. Worshipping the Great Indian Mother figure, Shiva, praying and chanting appears pivotal to Gainder's existence. To qualify this statement, Lommarsh Roopnarine (ibid), points out that: "Indo-Caribbean women have not had to convert to Christianity to gain access to opportunities. Instead, they have maintained their ancestral Hindu and Islamic religions to empower self and familial development in their new Caribbean domicile. (2014) Seemingly, Gainder Beharry and her sister Hindu worshippers in Espinet's *The Swinging Bridge* at best, creolize their indigenous and ancestral spiritual practices with the materialistic and secular social influences in the new space-the Caribbean, that they now occupy.

In comparison, Espinet's: *The Swinging Bridge* resonates with readers since the other women stalwarts in the persons of Grandma Lil and Muddie, to whom Mona, the protagonist looks up with unparalleled admiration for their strength of character, spirituality and will power, are forces for one to reckon with. Gainder, already stated above, is the root from which Grandma Lil and Muddie sprung. Grandma Lil sees it fit to keep her family together. She does not leave her husband and children even after, she learns about Grandpa Jamesie's arranged bride Etwaria. Grandma Lil writes songs and recipes and preserves them for her future generations of women. The recipes are guarded with determination from Grandpa Jamesie and the men in the family. The secret of the woman's songs and recipes are regarded as a woman thing, in Grandma Lil's mind. This observation can also be viewed from the angle that Grandma Lil's songs and recipes are sacred and spiritual implements, which occur on purely feminine spiritual boundaries.

Like Grandma Lil, Muddie, her daughter, is the thread that connects her to her offspring, despite differences of opinions at times. Mona, Muddie's daughter and the protagonist of *The Swinging Bridge* regards Muddie as the apple of her eye. Mona finds strength in Muddie's perseverance to succeed and her resilient nature, notwithstanding her struggles for survival within the repressive socio-political patriarchal context. Muddie remains in her unhappy marriage with Da Da, regardless of his irrational nature and heavy drinking problem. Coupled with his demanding attitude and drinking problem, Da Da does not know how to manage money and ends up in some serious debt, which even causes an added strain on his own parents, Grandpa Jamesie and Grandma Lil. Yet, Muddie sticks to Da Da's side through thick and thin. Perhaps more important, is Muddie's fervent spirituality. Muddie does not waver to offer her children the necessary moral and spiritual support. Muddie's spirituality serves as a form of redemption for Mona, her daughter, for example. It is the single thing that consoles Mona, when times are most trying. Muddie's spiritual power and strength is Mona's solace and stronghold (especially during the time of Kello, her ill brother's grave illness. And Mona is particularly able to embrace this spiritual force, when Kello dies. Likewise, the quote that follows exemplifies this. "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in time of trouble. Therefore, we will not fear, though the earth be removed" (Espinet 211).

Clearly, the foundation that Muddie lays for Mona as a developing girl child- gives her the underpinnings that are necessary for her to become a strong and resilient character. Muddie's undying determination to escape the social, political and economic repression she experiences in her native Trinidad and find a new home in Montreal- one could infer, is a character trait that also sparks Mona's interest to resent the binding societal orderings, and become a community activist. Simultaneously, it would seem that Mona is a forceful voice for scores of voiceless Indo-Caribbean and other women of the new generation. As stated, it takes the strength, determination, and will power of a strong and powerful line of women- to fuel Mona with positive spiritual energy and at length- inspire her to become an advocate for justice and positive change.

That Mona is an independent thinker, a guide, and source of support for Carene, the woman with whom she does research on critical aspects of women in the Caribbean islands such as Haiti- whose traditional history has been suppressed by the colonizer, it demonstrates the high level of spiritual influence that Muddie's tutelage, might have on Mona.

Thus, Mona and Carene attempt to tap into the erased parts of themselves as empowered Caribbean women, to bring into focus the Caribbean folklore, proverbs, riddles and stories that truly characterize themselves [Caribbean women] and their unique colonized circumstances. The interviews that Mona conducts are striking. She begins to reconsider everything she learns about Haiti such as the story of Cecile Fatiman, the priestess, who took part in the sacrifice of a pig. Priestess Cecile, slits the pig's throat and offered the blood as a sacrifice. The sentence "They took for granted her part in the sacrifice... But even today, her role had remained secondary... The thought of yet another woman edited out of history made me angry," (Espinet 11) evidences Mona's critical examination of the complexity of these suppressed histories. Then Mona continues: "And I saw a connection between Fatiman's act that stormy night, and the lives of these Haitian women, who found their way to Montreal by hook or by crook, carrying whole families on their backs." (11) Mona suddenly comes to a point of self-realization and relates the stories and experiences of the Haitian women in Montreal to the market women in Haiti, who carried food for the market on their backs, uphill and downhill, as they "keep the sluggish economy boiling like the pots of bone at the roadside." (11) Mona even plans to produce a film that would depict critical aspects of her traditional Indo-Caribbean way of life, as those she observes about Madame Cecile's Haitian woman's spirituality- resembles that of her Indo-Caribbean women. The trajectory of strong women characters and their influence on their offspring in Gainer Beharry's family is symptomatic of a solid matrilineal heritage. They are not only matriarchal women, but they exhibit reasonably strong forms of matriarchy. Their families are their number one priority. They also blend their spirituality with their creativity to balance familial and civic responsibilities. Grandma Lil's entrepreneurial skills combined with her ancestral spiritual knowledge, her good social sense of the impulses of her community, and her independent nature, exemplify her self-realization and ability to resist forms of societal oppression. Unquestionably, the previous statements underscore Grandma Lil's unmatched and towering heroic abilities. Therefore, it could be implied that she is a matriarch of sorts. The credentials listed, depict Grandma Lil's agency and her ability to assert herself spiritually, culturally and economically.

Along these said lines, Chris Klassen argues that:

The strong, independent woman figure may be found in all women, a natural part of the female self that has been denied and suppressed. The ideology of Goddess within is illustrated here. As a sign, the Goddess represents a new set of criterion, and incorporated into the dominant construction of woman. This new criterion (strength, independence, and power) is viewed to have always been a part of the dominant woman identity. (2011)

Accordingly, Klassen draws on women's innate abilities to use the strength of their souls to help cope with their endless struggles within the limited social spaces that are granted them within the confines of hegemonic orderings. Considering that Espinet's women characters Gainer, Grandma Lil, Muddie, and Mona are able to circumvent the various social loops that surround them such as the gendered expectations of domineering and chauvinistic men or husbands, and still manage to stand out as triumphant since 'they do it their own way' or rather they define their own ways of being- it suggests that the source of their strength and power ought to come from a force that is, greater than themselves. The force which I describe here is: the unshakeable spirituality of Espinet's strong women characters. To be more specific, spirituality seems to be the agent and essence that guides, informs, and propels Espinet's women characters in their daily pursuits and enables them to valiantly and tirelessly cope with their various tribulations. The women characters are able to cope with their endless tribulations by combining their spirituality with their creativity, resourcefulness, plus their ability to repurpose and recreate, despite the societal labyrinths, they must navigate or weave their ways through, in the stagnating colonized 'Third World' spaces.

In a similar vein, Myriam Chancy's novel: *The Scorpion's Claw* presents Josephe, the heroine, who comes of age to the value of the spiritual and rich cultural impulses of her native Haiti. Josephe becomes aware of the surrounding social conflicts and how these conflicts impact women folk in her own family and in other families. Josephe constantly reminisces on Mami Celeste, who is her spiritual protector. "Her voice comes back to me, softly, as when I bent over her flowers, her face away from me, she would say: *Ou se papiyon, mon se lamp.*

And I know I will find her before there are no suns left for me to see.” (Chancy 81) Josephe also develops an even stronger sense of self as she witnesses the Mambo Priestess perform her Voodoo rituals. The Mambo performs baptisms. Josephe begins to understand that the Mambo priestess is a symbol of the Haitian’s people’s survival in the Caribbean, their new home since their African ancestors have been socially uprooted from their ancestral homeland, Africa. And in their new homeland owing to the dispersal, torture and dehumanization given them in the new land of the colonizer, the single thread that connects them to their African ancestors is their spirituality and possession. Hence, the Mambo is seen a female power symbol, when she becomes possessed by a force that is accorded her by Ogun and Damballah, a genderless god. Damballah is able to outstretch the tentacles of her power to all four corners of the earth.

As an instance in point, Chancy writes:

But now she is filled only with a rare euphoria, such as she has felt when falling in love... the sound is like the wave of a memory, bittersweet and incomplete, treasured because it charts the way of becoming-where one has been and where one has yet to go. One cannot describe the sound itself, but the devotees repeat it, make it over and over again until it becomes something larger than itself, a dancer in the dance of consecration... They lose themselves to the dancer among them, the greatest dancer of them all. They lose themselves to each other as their spirits fuse to the gods above. Angular adult bodies become smooth, convex, concave, fitting into each other. They dance together as one huge wave will crash upon the shore of the inhumanity they must all face separately, once the possession is over, once they each pick themselves up to walk back into the mountains and their separate, isolated existences... (177)

What Chancy brings into focus here is the oneness and interconnectedness of worshippers of Voodoo. She demonstrates that although Haitian women are politically limited in the colonized world, they still have a sense of autonomy in areas such as Voodoo worship. Moreover, it would seem that the philosophy of the Priestess and her followers share a oneness with each other. They also seem to be the eyes and ears of each other. The Mambo’s leading role as a spiritual counselor and healer exemplifies this. Notably, the Mambo’s ability to move from one physical state to a metaphysical and spiritual state, and become possessed with spiritual power, is testament to her wit and skill in defining her own way of being. In a similar form, she is able to assert some degree of power in the limited space that the colonizer’s prison affords. Simply, it is the instrument that the Mambo utilizes to enable her fellow Haitian women and men, to escape the shackles of the colonial morasse. The Mambo asserts her spirituality and unites her Haitian women and men. And this appears to be made possible, by her strong connection with Mother Nature, the ancestors, and pantheon of gods.

Chancy further states that:

There is no sound so cacophonous as this, so noiseless as this, the dancers tell each other, as the figures embrace, drinking in the waters of the other into oneself. But there is no self left to soak it all in... Desiree follows in the dance. She feels arms embrace tightly. She feels the beating heart of the other against her own and understands now that she has met herself. The heart of the other is her own. (177)

This particular profound instance of Afro-Creole spirituality in which Chancy’s woman character, Desiree follows the dance and feels the embrace tightly, is consistent with George Lamming’s heroine, Fola in his work: *Sea of Adventure*. In *Sea of Adventure*, Fola is overcome with the spirit and experiences an intoxication like no other, as she goes on a journey of self-discovery to the African homeland. There, she is able to connect with her ancestors and experiences an intense sense of fulfillment. She practices African Spirituality, and is also able to flesh out her own identity problems and obstacles.

Simultaneously, Kenneth Ramchand in his book: *The West Indian Novel and its Background* points out that George Lamming notes in his other work *The Pleasures of Exile*:

The West Indian Negro who sets out on a similar journey to Africa is less secure. His/ her relation to that continent is more personal and more problematic. It is more problematic because the conditions of his/ her life today, his status . . . are a clear indication of the reasons which led to the departure of his ancestors from the continent . . . His/ her relation to Africa is more problematic because he/ she has not been introduced to it through history. He/ she knows it through rumour and myth, which is made sinister by a foreign tutelage . . . he /she appears reluctant to acknowledge his or her share of the legacy, which is part of his or her heritage. (160-161)

Lamming's argument mirrors the socially marginalized state and the seemingly confused mental state of the colonized subject. There appears to be a longing or a yearning for something greater than him/ herself. Fortunately, it appears that even a momentary return to the continent of Africa either psychologically or spiritually, promises relief for the colonized natives. More precisely, in the case of the colonized natives, who are the descendants of enslaved Africans and who have been subjected to historic trauma off their homeland, they can find a reprieve from the historic, social and psychological trauma. From these observations, the idea of returning or journeying to the continent of Africa either spiritually or ideologically, is both symbolic and liberating physically and mentally. It can open up a space for the healing process of the colonized to begin. Moreover, it can be seen as a ray of hope and a window of opportunity- to reap justice for what can be considered the unjust and groundless displacement of the enslaved African.

To be more specific, provided that the descendants of the enslaved African become aware of the root causes of their [the descendants of the enslaved African] struggles, they can begin to speak the language of struggle. Speaking the language of struggle, can serve to liberate the oppressed peoples of color, even in today's Caribbean Society. George Lamming's heroines mentioned in previous sentences, assert selfhood and step outside the societal box. In like manner, Myriam Chancy's women characters, Desiree and Josephe, can be deemed as spiritually-grounded women change agents and liberationists with disruptive voices that echo difference, and who spell out relief from societal oppression in Haiti. Equally important, Chancy's missive speaks to the traditional spirit-filled Haitian culture that seems to promote unity, selflessness, and a strong sense of communalism. From these observations, there seems to be no intersections in the social and cultural practices. Spirituality seems to be tied to the material social sphere. Hence, there exists a slimmer chance of selfishness and greed being the oppressive kings in the land. Clearly, a balance between spirituality and material possessions or resources suggest that the material resources would be more evenly distributed among the stakeholders, as opposed to widespread selfish distribution of material resources- that is occasioned within the socio-political spaces of Western Patriarchy. It appears needless to mention that, the welfare of the common people seem to be given due concern and attention. Using Chancy's fictional depiction of spirituality and material resources, the statement: "the heart of the other is the heart of her own," strongly exemplifies the latter view.

Furthermore, Chancy writes the following:

The figures rise from the red, red earth and salute Bondye one last time, they shed their masks, their robes, the coiled serpents drawn upon their foreheads... the women walk away to prepare the sweet white potatoes for the evening meal and pluck the chickens clean of their feathers. The men find the men and walk away to dig the roasting pits. As they move apart, each group smiles at the other across the wide clearing, as if waking from dreaming from dreaming, dreams where water is the sign of peace and blue is the color of truth... the gods are satisfied.(178)

As stated, it can be revealed here that the spiritual interconnectedness includes matters of women and men. Since, the women prepare the evening meal of white potatoes and plucked chickens, while the men dig the roasting pits- it shows how Chancy's women and men characters harmonize each other. And naturally, it would allow for less gender conflict. Equally important, the presence of Damballah, a genderless god, in the spiritual exercises- suggests that neither men nor men, have superordinate privilege over each other.

Accordingly, Sarah Frantz and Katharina Rennhak relate that personal identity is the result of a web of relationships- with one's family, spirituality, the community, and the larger world. They also claim that most male characters in the Native American Tradition, particularly contemporary male characters, pull between experiences of self-made manhood, with its emphasis on individualism, and Native American masculinity, with its concern for connection with harmony. "Men and women preferred to regard themselves as members of a totem and then a community." (208) In brief, the cosmology and oneness of natural and spiritual elements, appear a worthwhile consideration in Native American culture. The same seems applicable in Haitian culture, as witnessed in the cultural observances of the goddesses Mambo and Damballah in Myriam Chancy's work: *The Scorpion's Claw*. Furthermore, this train of cohesive communal and spiritual observances found in Ramabai Espinet's novel: *The Swinging Bridge* exemplify the same. In a similar fashion, Lomarsh Roopnarine (ibid) in his critique of Hindu Women posits that they maintain Hindu and Islamic traditions to empower self and familial ties in their new Caribbean domicile. (2014) Moreover, the concept of the unbroken line of Mother Goddess imagery mentioned earlier on, and her role in the cohesion of the secular aspects of life with the religious, supports the said line of thinking.

Collectively, the fictional depictions of Chancy's and Espinet's novels coupled with the observations of Roopnarine, Ramchand and Lamming, Frantz and Rennhak et al, insinuate that marginalized women in the Black and Brown communities, can use their spirituality as a point of departure from institutionalized societal oppression. Therefore, it is with the foregoing observations that one surmises, Creole women's spirituality can be deemed a godlike force, which serves as a form of empowerment, self-realization and liberation for marginalized women and peoples of color.

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### Biography for Dr. Linda Smith

Dr. Linda Smith was born on St. Thomas, U.S Virgin Islands. She is the proud mother of Jiva and Justin Niles. She was raised on Anguilla, where she began her educational journey and taught for 10 years before pursuing a Bachelor's degree in English at the University of the Virgin Islands, and graduated in May of 2004. She then went on to pursue a Master of Arts degree at the University of Puerto Rico, Mayaguez campus where she worked as a graduate teaching assistant. Upon the completion of her Master's degree in English Education, she sought employment with the Government of the U.S Virgin Islands as a secondary school teacher of English and English as a Second Language. Additionally, she worked part time at the University of the Virgin Islands between 2013 and 2015, as an adjunct member of faculty teaching English Composition in the College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences. She acquired her PhD in Anglophone Caribbean Literatures and Languages at the University of Puerto Rico, Rio Piedras in 2018. She is also certified as a Secondary Educator of English by the Virgin Islands Board of Education until 2023. Simultaneously, Dr. Smith composes poems and writes plays and short stories in her spare time. She is currently working on her first novel entitled: "Breaker of Night Silence." As a Caribbeanist, Feminist thinker and researcher, she wishes to write and publish scholarly articles and papers that address the gender question, Caribbean identity formation and the struggles of marginalized peoples of color. Currently, she is employed as a full time Assistant Professor of English at the Orville Kean Campus of the University of the Virgin Islands. Her vision for her students is to enable them to become equipped to grapple with the increasing challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Likewise, her desire is for them to become lifelong learners and catalysts for helping to make the world society a safer, more just, and better place, in which to live.