

## The Trinidadian *deewani*: Longing and Belonging in Peggy Mohan's *Jabajin*<sup>1</sup>

Nivedita Misra

The University of the West Indies, Trinidad and Tobago

In a Hindi poem, "Trinidad," the poet Kedarnath Singh describes his meeting with East Indians in Trinidad at a conference on diaspora.<sup>2</sup> He says that he recognises certain ephemeral qualities like looks and inflection in voice in the East Indian man sitting next to him. However, he is surprised that he has no remembrance of the immigrants who left the shores of India more than a hundred years ago (75-80). The surprise conveys the expectations of the diaspora and the "motherland" inhabitants. Just as the East Indian diaspora remembers India (though most of them have never visited India), they also expect Indians to remember those who have left India generations ago. The poem begins with reliving the first moments of the East Indians' arrival on the island. However, the poet says the conversation was brief because the diaspora lacks clarity about geographical details of the homeland and the poet curtly dismisses the diasporic Indian (85-91). The poet then ruminates over whether he too is 'a Diaspora' since he too is "forgetting/ Something or the other daily" (111-112). The poet rather cleverly questions the role of memories in diasporic discourse, since loss of memories is natural and remembrance is an attempt to impose meaning upon a constructed discourse, historical or otherwise. By aligning his loss of childhood memories with those of the diaspora, the poet offers a pathway for analysing diaspora-motherland relations away from sentimentality and overreaching investment in any theory of loss and disenchantment. Further, the poem invests in the present moment rather than in the past or future:

So am I also a Diaspora?  
Somewhere in my own time frame in some Trinidad  
A strange non-resident! (117-119)

By displacing the dilemma of the East Indian onto himself, the poet makes a case for seeing anew the relations between motherland and this older diaspora. He displaces the East-West oppositional narrative by emphasising the South-South relations placing India, Trinidad, Indians and Trinidadians in a dynamic open space that is connected in the present.<sup>3</sup>

Kedarnath Singh is a noted Hindi poet who, like the East Indians, belongs to the Eastern Uttar Pradesh (UP)-Bihar belt from where most indentured labourers made their journeys to the sugar estates in Trinidad between the years 1845 and 1917. The poet now lives in Delhi and highlights how migration and upward mobility have led to a

loss of native Bhojpuri language, and even Hindi, with the privileging of English. Thus, even though Singh has not migrated to another country, his internal migration opens up spaces where he can empathise with the East Indians' loss of memories and language. Singh's creative response to the loss of memories and language aids in analysing Peggy Mohan's *Jahajin*, a novel that deals with the creative regeneration of memories as a foundation for moving on in life. The novel offers an implicit critique of the Western Enlightenment philosophy of progress in which *moving on* is privileged over *moving forward* along a developmental plane.

*Jahajin* features a diversity of actors who reproduce memory narratives that are transmitted, negotiated and contested across spaces and generations. The novel links the loss of memories to the loss of Bhojpuri in Trinidad since language is the vehicle for transmission of memories. The narrator's project in the novel is to reconstruct the past by recording the trials and tribulations of the earlier generations in Bhojpuri to ensure continuity. The political perspective harps on the pioneering spirit, sacrifice, and hardships of the indentured labourers, while personal stories by the East Indians are stories of triumph, survival, and success.<sup>4</sup> The contrast between the so-called official and unofficial narratives hinges upon the perspective either of political exclusion or of personal triumph.<sup>5</sup> The novelist also uses a folktale, *Rani Saranga ke Kheesa*,<sup>6</sup> to link the two strands of loss of memories and language to the history of indenture.

The novel has four women protagonists, namely, the narrator Deeda, Sunnariya, and Saranga, whose life stories are intricately connected yet run parallel to each other. Saranga is a character from a folktale and her search for love is projected as a background to study the life-choices of the other three protagonists. Each narrative complements the other because they are situated in different temporal and spatial planes. Deeda is a first-generation East Indian immigrant who narrates why she left the shores of India for the uncertainties of the indentured world of Trinidad. Sunnariya is the great-great-grandmother of the narrator, who accompanied Deeda on her first voyage to Trinidad on account of a completely different set of reasons. The narrator weaves their life stories around her own need to find her identity and love. The four tales are inter-connected thematically with the use of folktale and first-person accounts to recreate the history of the East Indians in Trinidad.

Abigail Ward applies Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory to read the novel. Hirsch conceptualises postmemory as applicable, though not restricted, to Jewish memories of the holocaust. The holocaust left millions of Jewish descendants traumatised even though they had not directly witnessed the events themselves. Ward conceptualises and encompasses the indenture history of the East Indians within this European concept of memory and time, reading the protagonist's struggle as a state of physical and emotional stasis reflective of the Indian diaspora's search for a "a strong identification with what happened ... inscribing them into one's own life story ... giving way to vicarious victimhood" (278-9). Comparing

indentureship to enslavement and its trauma, Ward's reading presents the narrator as haunted by the past. Though it is true that the physical conditions of indenture were similar to slavery, indenture also differed in important aspects. It was based upon the 'voluntary' consent of the Indians;<sup>7</sup> it was time-bound; return passages were promised; children below the age of twelve stayed with accompanying parents; and children above the age of twelve were independent workers earning their own wages. It is equally true that many Indians were duped into coming to the sugar estates; timelines were not honoured as indenture periods increased; return passages were not given; and children were made to work for long hours in inhumane conditions. There is no single narrative and post-indenture Trinidad saw the circulation of various discourses that came to dominate the East Indian political and social imaginary including the one quoted by Ward. Ward cites singular lines from Mohan's novel such as "We had come a long way. We were not going to be dragged back down" (95), and "The curse had to end" (200) to reflect on how the past haunts the characters' present.

However, Ward's documentation is selective and is accompanied by a failure to interrogate her secondary sources. She builds her argument by highlighting that first-generation East Indian writers have not *revisited* indenture and Mohan is a second-generation writer who has imaginatively revisited the past. She quotes Bragard (271) and Ramraj (282) to say that East Indian writers have effectively avoided an engagement with indenture. However, Vijay Mishra, an Indo-Fijian descendant of Indian indentured labourers in Fiji, has examined V.S. Naipaul through the lens of trauma. He assigns the trauma of that first journey an intrinsic role in the diasporic poetics and imaginary that allows Naipaul to be seen as a postcolonial writer. Moreover, Sam Selvon and V.S. Naipaul have imaginatively revisited the past since their texts are replete with East Indian characters dealing with everyday realities in Trinidad. Naipaul himself travels to India though it is true that none of his characters travel back to India from Trinidad. They are happy in the "familiar temporariness" of Trinidad (Naipaul 194). Secondly, Ward quotes K.D. Upadhyaya and Marianne D. Soares Ramesar to argue that the story of Saranga is atypical of the UP-Bihar region in highlighting women pioneers. However, Indian culture and folktales are replete with strong women characters, and scholarship has documented the popularity of such characters in the folklore tradition, even while recognising the patriarchal nature of Indian society in general.<sup>8</sup>

The problem with Ward's use of postmemory as a conceptual framework is that she turns the metaphor of active search into passive submission to trauma. The attempt to impose a western European concept onto a non-western historical account is beset with problems. The way memory operates in everyday life is distinct from its theorisation in strict timelines of the past, present, and future. In Ward's application, there is a sense of the passing of time with Deeda and indenture history as the past, the narrator's struggle between staying in Trinidad and going away as the present, and the Carnival as an epiphany for building "future circuits of transracial and transcultural

understanding” (Ward 276) that resolves the East Indians’ sense of exclusion from the national discourse in Trinidad. Further, Ward says that the narrator identifies “more and more closely with her indentured great-great-grandmother” (272). I argue that the narrator recognises her genealogy but refuses to be trapped by her heredity. More importantly, the novel does not end with the narrator enjoying the Carnival. A close reading of the novel reveals that Deeda and the narrator constantly weave their tales around new timelines and circumstances, drawing strength from a pattern that they individually derive from the central story of Saranga. The narrator navigates herself free from familial and societal expectations through active translation of the tale of Saranga and Deeda’s narrative from Bhojpuri into English. Translation becomes a mode of engaging with past, present, and future with the present governing the interpretation of the past and the future.

*Jahajin* begins with the narrator recording the life of Deeda, one of the few immigrants still alive on the island of Trinidad. Deeda narrates in the first person her wilful enrolment into indentureship because her life in India was hard hit by famine. A woman *arkatiniya* (recruiter) not only promised work but also gave an advance through which Deeda bought silver bracelets. This security of money and employment brought a ring of finality to her decision. As she reached the Garden Reach Depot, the family of Mukoon Singh, his two sons and his daughter, Sunnariya, met her. Travelling aboard the *Godavari*, all the indentured Indians were made to walk the deck and eat together. The sense of moving away from things known to them coupled with the dangers at sea helped the shipmates bond together for generations to come, in what is called the *Jahaji-Bhai* and *Jahajin*<sup>9</sup> experience. Along with Mukoon Singh and Janaki-didi’s families, Deeda enrolled herself at the Esperanda Estate. Deeda describes her hard life on the estate and how Mukoon Singh and various others converted to Christianity through the Canadian missionaries. She tells of how she developed feelings for Mukoon Singh while looking after him, subsequent to an epileptic seizure. However, any possibility of a relationship between Deeda and Mukoon Singh is brought to an abrupt close because a Creole overseer molests Sunnariya and Mukoon Singh kills him. Over the next few years, Sunnariya’s marriage is arranged with Janaki-didi’s son while Mukoon Singh becomes a cult hero, having taken revenge for his family’s honour. The narrator tells us that Mukoon Singh lived in hiding for the next two years before the colonial government and the Church worked out a deal for his repatriation to India. The Christian ceremony of Sunnariya’s marriage marks the surrender of Mukoon Singh. When he comes to bless his daughter, he asks Deeda if she wants to accompany him back to India.

However, Deeda refuses to return for a completely different set of reasons than recorded indenture history would have us believe. Deeda says that she did not want to lose control over her “wheel” of life by going back to India (172). Deeda realised the importance of having control over one’s life when she saw the White Captain of the *Godavari* steer the ship through the storm. This could also stretch back to the Hindu concept of the wheel of time. Deeda feels that she was a

free woman in Trinidad, writing her own destiny, unlike in India where traditions and caste bind the individual. In addition, Deeda feels that on return to India, caste differences between Mukoon Singh and herself would create difficulties and turn them into social outcasts. This is a telling moment in the story because Deeda believes that she has control over the wheel of life in Trinidad (although under indenture) while she will have none in India. Mohan elsewhere writes that for most indentured labourers travel within the provinces in search of labour was nothing new. It was the crossing of the river in Calcutta that made them realise how this indenture was different from other contracts. The crossing of the river was only the first but definitive step in crossing the “kala pani.” Deeda feels empowered in escaping a traditional household. Her journey provides her with self confidence and reliance on her skills for survival in unknown circumstances.

Even at the time that Sunnariya is molested and Mukoon Singh insists that Sunnariya be engaged and married to a fellow worker, Deeda tries to convince Sunnariya that this was not India, that Sunnariya was an independent worker not under any obligation even to her father and that she should not consent to a loveless marriage. Deeda tells her that she should rely on her destiny and search for someone who would make her happy. However, Sunnariya is convinced that she must follow her father’s instructions. She refuses to take control of her wheel of life.

The narrator is personally associated with Deeda’s narrative because Sunnariya is the narrator’s great-great-grandmother. Nalini Mohabir points out that most research in/on the Caribbean begins with the researcher exploring his/her own parentage through a family member’s memories (114). The narrator of *Jahajin* subscribes to the same when she also acknowledges the help of her grandmother in transcribing the tapes. The narrator informs us that Sunnariya’s freedom papers came after eleven years and five months; Deeda’s came a little later. The information only reiterates how the terms of indenture were frequently changed to favour the British employers. The narrator finishes Sunnariya’s story by giving an account of her death during the fifth childbirth. Indentureship and its lasting effects are depicted through how life turns out for Sunnariya’s family. Sunnariya’s husband turns into an alcoholic and Nana, the eldest son, takes over the running of the family. The narrator’s grandmother, Aije, Nana’s eldest child, has a luckless marriage at the age of fourteen. The point is made that Nana supported Aije in her decision to divorce and that the children were free to disassociate themselves from any recognition of their paternal grandfather, including his name. The privileging of freedom from overbearing relationships over caste or traditions was possible only in the context of indenture in Trinidad. Though the novel does not provide direct information on how different Deeda’s life turned out to be, we do get to know that she was content because she always felt in control.

There are many parallels between Deeda’s and the narrator’s quest for love. The novel presents the narrator at a crossroads, where she needs to decide whether she wants to stay in Trinidad, live the

American dream etched for her by her family or follow her heart to India, which, though the land of her ancestors, is not connected to anything she personally knows. Hence, the novel is a forward-looking enterprise that invests in the past only to move forward. The narrator feels that she must define her relationship with Trinidad before she can finish her Ph.D. This takes the form of exploring Trinidad with Fyzie, a fellow Trinidadian who introduces her to the mixed life of the larger Trinidadian population. Fyzie takes her on ‘limes,’<sup>10</sup> riding pillion on his motorcycle and helps prepare and participate in the Carnival float. She has a couple of blackout nights when she is brought home unconscious. On these occasions, the family reproaches her for unacceptable behaviour. Her relationship with Fyzie lacks expectations yet it also lacks commitment. Her rebellious streak is balanced by the stoic nature of Fyzie’s “skylark” attitude (184).<sup>11</sup> He neither participates nor shows any interest in her work. He makes no attempt to distract her or to get her to speak. He is just there. Even when it becomes clear that she would be leaving Trinidad, he does not assert himself but lets her go with a simple open invitation, “jus’ come” (222).

Midway through the novel, the narrator receives a travel grant to India. She seizes this opportunity to escape from the drudgery of staying in Trinidad that seems to be sucking her into idling. In a chapter titled “Anda Sikhaawe Baccha,” or the egg teaches the chick, she writes how Dylan, her cousin, forces her to acknowledge before the family her struggle to choose between Fyzie and Nishant, a graduate from India studying with her at the University of Michigan—in other words, to choose between Trinidad and India. It is important to point out here that the narrator’s travel to India is not to seek out roots or her family connections, because her Nana, who had been receiving letters from India, had upon a premonition destroyed all these letters because he did not want his progeny to travel *back* to India. The narrator’s research in Bhojpuri language becomes the reason for her travel to India and she carries Deeda’s voice with her on tapes.

The narrator *travels back* to India with the story of Saranga in Bhojpuri. Rani Saranga’s *Kheesa*, as Deeda narrates it, is a combination of myth, folklore and contemporary interpretations. The story begins in the folklore mode with a pair of male and female monkeys. The female monkey jumps into the river and is transformed into a human. She meets a prince who wishes to marry her but she promises to marry him only after twelve years during which time she looks for her monkey. She finds him with a *kalandar*<sup>12</sup> who makes him dance for a living. She buys him and keeps him in her palace built by the Prince. However, the monkey is melancholic and one day commits suicide. The lady orders a sandalwood pyre built for him and then jumps into his pyre and dies. This is the prelude to the main story of Saranga and Sada Birij.

The resumption of Saranga’s *kheesa* is with the rebirth of the two lovers as Sada Birij, a prince, and Saranga, the daughter of the Nagar Seth (the merchant of the town). The two fall in love at a very young age and while Saranga’s parents fix her marriage with someone from

their own community, the prince is sent out to collect taxes through the three days of marriage ceremonies. Saranga leaves a trail for Sada Birij to follow. Despite the odds, Sada Birij finds her and takes the help of a *sadhu* (hermit) who uses magic to get Saranga back. As they sleep on the roadside, a prince sees them, falls in love with Saranga and carries her off on his elephant. In a déjà vu moment, Saranga asks the prince for a twelve-year waiting period to which he agrees and builds her a Shiv temple. Sada Birij wanders onto the construction site where Saranga tells him to bide time. At the end, she gets an *udan khatola* (air-born cot) made from sandalwood and asks the prince to send his sister, for she is now ready to go to him. The sister arrives and the three of them set out on the *udan khatola* to safely reach their home. As the story unfolds, similarities with the other women narrators become clear.

Traditionally, the *kheesa* is narrated over a number of nights with the narrator nursing the curiosity of his/her listeners. However, here the narrator breaks the narrative to impute that the story is secondary to her real project, which is to record Deeda's life in Bhojpuri. The breaks in the story emphasise the painstaking nature of transcription and translation because the language is slowly fading in Trinidad. The narrator makes the point that Bhojpuri travelled across the seas and is thus a more international language than Hindi, the predominant language in India. This is also borne out by Kedarnath Singh's Hindi poem titled "Bhojpuri":

Come visit me some time  
and I'll have you hear  
the sound of a conch-shell resting on my window  
in which murmur softly  
the seven seas. (Singh 2014, 104-5)

Singh makes the point that Bhojpuri travelled across the seas during the colonial period and can be heard in far-away places like Trinidad. However, the narrator also notes that Trinidadian Bhojpuri is linguistically different from the Bhojpuri spoken in India, and she is working to find the connections and the reasons behind the difference in the two dialects. In her Acknowledgements and elsewhere, the novelist Mohan says that Trinidadian Bhojpuri has a distinctive grammar different from Hindi and Bhojpuri in India, and therefore, it is important that Bhojpuri is preserved in Trinidad, if not as a living language then as a historical artefact. In a newspaper article, Mohan notes: "a new variety of Bhojpuri came to life in Trinidad, at a time when Bhojpuri in India was still a fragmented scattering of village dialects. So in a sense, Trinidad led the way: in India Bhojpuri is only now beginning to standardise as a major regional language of literature, media and political discourse" (sic) (Mohan 2012). A telling example of this standardisation of the language is when Sunnariya, as an assistant *khelauni* (child minder), begins to speak Bhojpuri in her interaction with young children. However, later, the older generation saw Bhojpuri as a mark of backwardness and encouraged their children to learn Creole and English for purposes of upward social mobility.<sup>13</sup>

This led to a slow death of the language in Trinidad since the children were never encouraged to learn Bhojpuri. Sunnariya, too, insisted that her children only learn English.

Yet, in Mohan's novel, the dying language provides the living connection to India because it is the narrator's role as a translator that gets her a travel grant to India and allows her to escape her immediate circumstances in Trinidad. This connection and reverse travel is an important aspect of the novel. The narrator becomes the torch-bearer of Bhojpuri language who also tolls its death in Trinidad. Upon her travel back to the Bhojpuri heartland in India, around the townships of Patna, Faizabad and Basti, she finds that children know Bhojpuri more as a language for songs and stories than a language of everyday. Though Bhojpuri is popularly spoken in the Basti and Faizabad areas, most people, including children, read and write Hindi as their primary language.

Kedarnath Singh also talks of the similarity yet difference between Bhojpuri and Hindi in modern-day India in a poem titled "Home and Country":

Hindi is my country  
Bhojpuri my home....  
I have been looking to find  
One in the other. (Singh 2014, 103)

Singh makes the point that he has to adopt Hindi as the medium of conversation with a larger audience. Just as in Trinidad, loss of Bhojpuri in India is related to the desire for upward mobility.<sup>14</sup> Mohan notes that "[s]imply put, people in North India who live like the Trinidadian middle class increasingly live their lives not in Bhojpuri, and not in Hindi, but in English" (Mohan 2012). English is seen as a passport to success at the expense of Hindi and local languages. The only people who are still naturally conversant in Bhojpuri are the lower-caste sweepers, cooks, and painters in the hotel. The Brahmins and the upper castes have slowly moved on to Hindi.

Hence, the role of language in marking the present relations between diaspora and original homeland is limited because diaspora and homeland communities converse with each other in English. Education in the standardized languages of English and Hindi is a major contributor to the loss of Bhojpuri as the lingua franca amongst the indentured and amongst the Indians that the narrator meets on her visit to the Basti area. However, the past is more easily accessible in Bhojpuri. The narrator notes that Deeda found it easier to narrate Saranga's *kheesa* in Bhojpuri. Hence, she feels that what had happened in Trinidad long ago, at least two generations ago, is happening now in India. Mohan reflects that Trinidadian society is way ahead of Indian society, at least the village society in India. She feels that Trinidad has grown at a much faster pace than villages in India because of the pioneering spirit of the indentured women labourers. In the present, while there is little effort to rejuvenate Bhojpuri in Trinidad, in India one sees an upsurge in Bhojpuri theatre, cinema, and music.



However, rather than highlighting the disconnection between the two countries and their inhabitants, Mohan invests in the rejuvenation of the folk and the local. The interaction with Indians in India helps the narrator to understand the pressures and challenges of living in an aspirational society. She also becomes less critical of why the adult populations in Trinidad discouraged their children from learning the Bhojpuri language. This brings into focus the dynamic nature of time and human interaction. The meeting between the diaspora and mainland inhabitants brings the recognition that though the mainland may have forgotten its diaspora, they have to confront them in the contemporary world as superiors, if not equals. The narrator of *Jahajin* gives a befitting reply to the Brahmin linguists in India by forcing them to recognise her learning despite her lower-caste status. This is similar to the meeting between the diasporic and homeland Indians in Singh's poem quoted at the beginning of this paper. As Mohan notes:

Ours is not a relationship forever frozen in time, where we can only connect by returning to our earlier state as undemanding relics, bound to keep an old language and culture safe and warm, while the rest of the world moves on. No, our connection is something alive and open-ended, as we walk alongside long-lost siblings who stayed behind. ("Garden Reach Depot")

Hence, the narrator underplays any sense of achievement by bringing the novel to a close with finding Deeda's husband, with whom she shares the last part of Rani Saranga's *kheesa* in Deeda's voice on the tapes.

The story of Saranga made me remember an old song from a black and white Hindi movie called "Saranga, teri yaad mein," or "Saranga, in your remembrance," sung by Mukesh.<sup>15</sup> I searched for and viewed the film online. The film *Saranga* (1960) is a contemporary version of the folktale that speaks to caste and class differences between two lovers. The elements that speak strongly of the *kheesa* are the names and the tone of the film. Two young people, Raj Kumar Sada Birij, the son of the Amrawati Raja and Saranga, the daughter of the Nagar Seth, fall in love. However, a conniving stepmother brings in another suitor while the king gives his word that Sada Birij will not marry Saranga due to differences in caste and social ranking. Through various twists and turns, the two lovers realise that they will never be able to meet. The king must keep his word. The town's people pressure Saranga to marry within her community. Saranga agrees but drinks poison. The movie ends tragically with the two lovers united in death. There is a scene where Sada Birij, distraught with grief, hears Saranga's name but realises it is somebody's pet animal. He is branded "Deewana" and sings "Haan deewana hoon main."<sup>16</sup> The film version is important because it attests to the re-creative value of the folklore.

Deeda's imaginative retelling of the *kheesa* is evident when one compares it to the film version. Deeda is Saranga because all *jahajins* are similar, just like all the women in the town are known as Saranga. However, Deeda's version employs a more romantic tone, underplaying the struggle and keeping up the chase for Saranga to its

ultimate happy ending. If one compares her version to her own life, we see how Deeda's marriage and childbearing had seemingly sealed her fate when she decides to come to Trinidad. Irrespective of the circumstances, she embarks on an adventure and meets her prince charming in Mukoon Singh. She is attracted by his manly demeanour on the ship and his command over others. However, Mukoon Singh's vulnerability is exposed when he has an epileptic seizure in the fields. The relationship between the two, though muted, keeps other men away. Deeda is thankful for those years because she felt protected. The important difference from the *kheesa* is when she gets an opportunity to follow her heart in Mukoon Singh's offer of going back to India, but maintains her control on the wheel of life, steering it away from another storm of emotions. Just as Saranga takes control over life in the final instance, Deeda takes control over her fate by choosing to remain in Trinidad, sacrificing love for independence. The filmmaker and Deeda look to resolve social structures in the path of love: Deeda conceptualizes success through maintaining control over where she goes or does not go while the filmmaker's vision is darker since he loses control by making the lovers succumb to social pressures. The film, in a way, attests to Deeda's reasons for not returning to India where she knew social pressures would drive her apart from Mukoon Singh.

*Jahajin* works against a theoretical approach to understanding indenture and its after-effects on diasporic memory. The folktale becomes the vehicle through which women narrators make sense of their lives though relying on luck and control over the wheel of life. We also see that Deeda does not tell the story of Saranga as is. Hence, the indentured are, like Sada Birij and Saranga, destined to be *Deewanas* and *Deewanis* in search of love and life and their longing is a sign of their diasporicity—an inevitable condition of living in the Caribbean. Saranga is a *deewani* defining love for herself and privileging love over traditions and even marriage. Saranga in the more conservative film version prefers death to defilement through marriage. Deeda chooses to break the bonds of caste and marriage and, having crossed the river like the female monkey, refuses to return to her earlier state. Sunnariya's quiet acceptance of traditions is also a blind repositioning of faith in fate and chance. The narrator, unlike all her predecessors, follows her heart to India. The narrator is sometimes Saranga, torn between her love for a monkey and a prince who offers her twelve years to think about marriage. At times, she is Deeda who remembers that she must prepare tea for Mukoon Singh though tired after a hard day at work. She is Sunnariya who finds herself under the gaze of a white overseer in a high-end club. She must fight, decide, and live to tell the tale, just like Deeda. The novel does not end on fulfilment of the quest but upon the completion of a task at hand, giving a twist to the ending with no moral or social repercussions.

Yet, one must ponder why the narrator chooses to come to India to finish her story. The culmination of Saranga's tale by playing the last bits of the story in front of Deeda's husband in the Basti-Gorakhpur area also marks the end of the narrator's quest to choose her future life

partner. The ending in India is not as neat when one considers that Saranga flies away in the *udan khatola* with Sada Birij and the prince's sister. Why the sister of the Prince? Is Sada Birij the monkey who refuses to take the plunge when Saranga jumps into the river in their previous birth? Isn't Sada Birij the prince in the new tale? Somewhere along the lines of transcription and translation between Deeda and the narrator, the tale seems to have made a change in the narrative point of view. Though it is not obvious, the narrator seems to have become the new Saranga who chooses to maintain her control on the wheel of life by going to India and choosing Nishant, the Indian boy, over Fyzie, the Trinidadian free spirit. The reader catches a glimpse of this when Dylan and Sheila, her friend, both quiz the narrator on the fate of the monkey. Is Fyzie the monkey who refuses to take the plunge? Is Fyzie the Prince who is willing to wait for her for twelve odd years for her to "jus' come"? The confusion is compounded because the narrator never says that she has decided to leave Trinidad forever. The open-ended narrative along with the possibility of either suitor being the prince or the monkey leaves the reader perplexed in a happy way. The reader must decide what role the prince's sister plays in the tale. Does she smooth out the narrator's transition to a life in India? This is also coupled with the infinite possibilities of the narrator maintaining control and finding love like Saranga in Deeda's version, remaining lovelorn like Deeda herself, or driving her boat into the storm like Sunnariya.

Hence, to return to the question of memories and their function in diaspora discourse, one realises that Mohan carefully makes history accessible through the first-person narrative of Deeda. She also makes Bhojpuri a living language by increasing its use through the novel. The narrator preserves the first few lines of Deeda's narrative in Bhojpuri to ensure that the reader gets a taste of the original language. However, we see a development in the confidence of the narrator as she begins chapters with Deeda's narrative without the use of the framing narrative and even uses chapter headings in Bhojpuri in the latter part of the novel. Such strategies help her project her history and language over and above the use of standardized English and the writing of History in and from the West.

Mohan's use of India also stands out since it is not a geographical space locked in time but a socio-political space that faces its own challenges. While the narrator makes statements that project her superiority over those in Indian villages, she is equally aware of the inequalities that govern these realities. Such a reading goes against the more traditional reading of seeing the diaspora struggle against the "mother" culture and constantly battling a sense of alienation both from the "mother" and the "adopted" country. Moreover, the differences from "mother" culture are not looked upon as stumbling blocks. This re-enforces the socio-cultural differences in development giving space to each culture as distinct. Mohan's clever use of folklore illustrates how cultures are open to accommodation and change and how easily one adapts to one's new environs. Just as in the poem by Kedarnath Singh, Mohan is less judgmental and open for interaction. If

the novel spoke about one-way travel, it would have perhaps remained mired in the discourse of alienation with the central character being a misfit; however, by bridging two generations and opening channels for two-way travel and dialogue, the novel opens the way to see diasporic relations in a new light. Indians and Trinidadians need to see each other not as extensions of each other but as individuals living in shared space and time.

Mohan presents a balanced view of indenture history, present circumstances, and the role of memories, and uses cultural resources at hand to rejuvenate and come to terms with the violence of past memories. Deeda characterises the finality of that first journey for a majority of the East Indians. The novel emphasises that their offspring have been given values that reflect the aspirations of the Caribbean populations. The narrator makes the point that her parents had somehow conveyed that Trinidad was a transitory place from where they needed to go out to achieve success, preferably through education. However, that in no way affects the narrator's decision to go to India, which does not mark a return but an exploration of a new space, a new beginning. As the narrator realises, destiny calls her to make choices, to become the Saranga of her own tale. Perhaps we are all Sarangas, always searching for something that is beyond our reach.

## Notes

1. I am grateful to Prof. Harish Trivedi for introducing Prof. Kedarnath Singh's poetry to me. An earlier version of this paper was presented at "The Indian Diaspora: Identities, Trajectories and Transnationalities" Commemorative Conference at UWI, St. Augustine, Trinidad and Tobago, held from May 12-16, 2015.
2. My translation of "Trinidad" appears in the Appendix. The poem was originally published by Kedarnath Singh in Hindi in the anthology, *Pratinidhi Kavitaye*, 55-60.
3. This paper develops the idea advocated by Tejaswini Nilanjana about the need to revise South-South global relations as a way of decentering the West. Amitav Ghosh has further explored the South-South relations as part of a larger flow of global capital in his *Ibis* Trilogy.
4. The term "indentured labourer" is used to specifically refer to those who were indentured and are still alive. "East Indians" is an ethnic term used to refer to the descendants of the Indian indentured labourers. I have chosen to work with the term East Indian given the specifics of my interest here to see continuity and change in the diaspora. Other terms that situate the East Indians within the national discourse of Trinidad and Tobago include Indo-Trinidadians and Trinbagonians.

5. For a variety of discourses fashioned by the Indo-Trinidadians within Trinidad, see Brereton.

6. *Kheesa* or *kissa* in Hindi is a reference to folktales popular in certain regions. It could refer to a story, fable, yarn, tale, or anecdote.

7. There is much debate about the voluntary nature of indenture since the Indians did not know what it actually meant. Most claimed, later, to have been duped into going to Trinidad. However, the fact remains that they were presented before a magistrate and made to attest the written agreement.

8. See Appadurai, Korom, and Mills; Flueckiger; Mills, Claus, and Diamonds; and Thorner and Krishnaraj for detailed examples of strong women characters in Indian folklore.

9. *Jahaji-Bhai* and *Jahajin*, literally meaning shipmates, is a common reference used among East Indians to denote their common lineage from the first journey across the Indian and Atlantic oceans. The Jahaji and Jahajin experience are held valid across differences in age, caste, class, ships, and waves of indentured arrivals and is a term of endearment and recognition of common prejudices and struggles amongst all East Indians.

10. “Limes” is a local Trinidadian word used for meeting with friends.

11. “Skylark” is a local Trinidadian word used for doing nothing.

12. Also, spelt *Qalandar*; it refers to street performers who train animals to entertain impromptu audiences at street corners. This is not to be confused with the practitioners of the Sufi stream of thought.

13. For further study, see Mohan, “Trinidad Bhojpuri”; Kumar Mahabir and Sita Mahabir; and N. Jayaram.

14. Singh in another poem titled “Hindi in JNU” marks this struggle not just between languages but also between cultures and ways of life.

15. Hindi songs are a dynamic register of connections between India and its diaspora. This particular song, more valuable from a musical rather than cinematic point of view, was very popular and is a remnant of the days when radio was more popular than television in the 1970s.

16. *Deewana* (male) or *deewani* (female) has connotations of someone in love for the sake of love recognising no barriers and allowing them to drift through life without anchorage.

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## Appendix

Kedarnath Singh, trans. Nivedita Misra

### Trinidad

Meeting them

Was like watching the making of salt in the sea

A body

Was meeting its skin in that meeting 4

Lying in between us was a *namaskar* (folded-hands/ greeting)

Which was silent in its millions of echoes of sayings

Unsure of its own sounds

And hands were thinking 8

Whether to meet or not meet

Because those people

They had lost a lot

Their grandparents had landed 12

On the flat Caribbean sea-sand

With the smell of the first cigarette on the island

And the creak of the last leather shoe

I felt—as if I had met them before 16

But this found no assurance either in my eyes

Nor in my mind

But the truth was in its favour

Yes...yes...yes...the sea was repeating/asserting 20

Jigging the memory of the mountains

Not winning

That evening one fisherman

Had again not returned from the deep sea 24

One more person had been lost from the island

And one more star had increased in the skies!

But nobody had any  
Complaints from the sea 28  
Because he was the most aged citizen of the island  
In his long white furling beard  
Most respected

He was 32  
That is why from all ten directions  
The island was full  
And when they did not come from anywhere else  
Then from the stones on the beach 36  
And from the eyes of the whale fish  
Little light  
And lost boats  
And unsaid/confused/unclear thoughts 40  
Found a way

And there was a light fragrance  
That was spread over the whole island  
Even in the dust on the road 44  
And in the sound of the birds  
But it did not come either from their houses  
Or from the grove of coconut trees  
Or from the steam of cooking fish 48  
Or in the surf of the sea  
But it used to always come  
From the direction of the sea  
As if sifting from the bloody jaws 52  
Of the surf and the shark

And when she used to come  
They used to become restless  
And often they left 56  
To that old ageing sea  
Because it was their thought—  
That that bearded sea  
Knew everything 60  
That he—he alone knew  
That out of all the spread out particles of the sea sand  
Which was that particle  
That held the closed marks of the anchor of that first ship 64  
And those spots of the blood  
That had fallen from the back of the forefathers  
On the first lashings

Those leashes were no longer there 68  
At least they were not visible  
Only the sound of their silent fall



That they used to mistakenly call the sound of sea wind And used to close The doors to their homes	72
Are they people without memories? Looking into the deep sad eyes of a Caribbean man sitting next to me I thought I felt—some vapour From Bihar's back lands Is still left And there was a special lilt in his voice Reflective of the scales Of some lost faraway Bhojpuri tune That in that whole crowd I And only I was listening	76 80 84
He told me his ancestors were from Udaipur That is somewhere in Bihar But cutting his talk short When I said slowly—Udaipur is not in Bihar But in Rajasthan He became sad As if weapon less!	88
I felt sad In his map of things I had created a mess In reality that map Of the restless man surrounded by an island Was his own creation— Where Ganga was flowing In Delhi And Banares was somewhere in the north of Himalayas And Maharashtra was the name Of some character from the Mahabharata And Kerala was a city That could be somewhere in Bengal!	92 96 100 104
Are these people really without memories? Now my own memory asked me Ruthlessly If they are without memories Then who am I? Even I am forgetting Something or the other daily And what I am forgetting Are not merely the leaves of a neem tree Or the drop of Mahua I am forgetting All that I am forgetting	108 112 116

So am I also a Diaspora?  
Somewhere in my own time frame in some Trinidad  
A strange non-resident!

I accept 120  
On that small island in that big conference hall  
When I first heard the word 'Diaspora'  
I had felt fear on the sound of the word  
Like dinosaurs had come back 124  
Once again

And I learnt this later  
When my beddings had been tied  
And I was standing alone 128  
In front of that screaming screeching sea  
Those memories  
Take their revenge in this way—  
Sometimes like the spots of blood 132  
Invisible/ lost in the particles of sand  
Sometimes in conference halls  
Becoming dinosaurs!

