SHANI MOOTOO'S CEREUS BLOOMS AT NIGHT:
A STUDY OF DYSFUNCTIONALISM AND IDENTITY CRISIS

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Abstract

This paper is focused on the novel, 'Cereus Blooms at Night' in which Shani Mooto explores themes of utmost disgust—incest, extra-marital affair, child abuse, sexual violence among others. The author dismantles conventional image of 'family' and redefines the term. Her novel is an instance how the traditional family structure at times becomes an imposed concept that often fails to survive the coercion of caliginous reality—forced transnationalism being one of them. While she is distrustful of the traditional family structure, she expresses faith in a relationship of empathy and communion. This paper is committed to the study of disgust and dysfunctionalism in the novel that comprises the 'third space'. The 'third space' which is a construct aimed to accommodate the diasporic 'other' is not always a happy concept. The diasporic individual's lives are often interspersed with the attributes typical of a transnational life—identity crisis and rootlessness. Mootoo's novel explores the collapse of an individual who is not at peace with his/herself due to his/her inability to construe a formidable identity for him/herself. The characters in her novel are in a constant state of confusion and lack a sense of originality. This state of perpetual confusion steadily leads all the characters towards self-destruction. While the inevitable self-destruction is complete, the author explores a sanguine aspect of the 'third space' which constitutes people who are relegated to the status of 'marginalized' due to their obscure life-stories. Being in this newly formed locale, the people find empathy and company in each other in a world of their own which is never understood by the 'mainstream' society.

Keywords *Indo-Caribbean, diaspora novel, immigrant writing, dysfucntionalism, identity crisis*

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Immigrant writing serves as an empirical proof to the authors' experiences and encounters in the new country to which they migrated in search of a better and secure life but only meets with instability and insecurity. Canadian government with its multicultural policies assures one of human rights, cultural preservation thus exemplifying itself as a true internationalist. But the immigrants do not enjoy this utopic version of Canadian life. Their lives are often accompanied with a cultural loss and identity conflict that both torments and preserves them. The immigrants' knowledge and his/her family background and cultural identity percolate directly into their own perception of themselves. Shani Mootoo from Trinidad demonstrates the lived-experiences of their daily lives in the country. She reflects a nostalgia for the home they have left behind and a lack of sense of belonging with the new country, yet continue to live there itself. This also makes the immigrants 'no-where's man'. Their ethnic origins also permeate in their experiences. While the experience of one is different from the other in terms of their ethnic

origin, gender identity, physical features, financial stability, sexual orientation, access to education and jobs and reasons for their migration, the commonness is derived in the portrayal of isolation, deprivation and alienation. What becomes particularly relevant in their experiences is that not only do they have to justify their identity construction to the host society; they often have to come to terms with their new identity among themselves which is often violated. A significant aspect of this body of writing is that they defy a linear and conventional pattern. The narrative and generic style stand out; exhibiting a variety that conforms to the variety of experiences they meet. The origin of the author adds a dynamic flavour to the research. Having origins that are historically, geographically and culturally entwined together immigrant writings display a commonality that is geographically destined to share the immigrants' problems among each other in an entirely new country like Canada.

Shani Mootoo represents an individual who is a second-generation immigrant and in constant struggle with Canadian society, and finds it alienating. Her writings symbolize all that multiculturalism stands in opposition to—racism, stereotyping and ethnocentrism etc.

In Mootoo, however, there is no hope or desire to go back to the Caribbeans which she considers no less hostile and India is definitely no home, only a memory. In the case of Indo-Caribbeans, it is not the return migration that bothers them as much as a constant dilemma as to what is their 'homeland'. Though it had been quite a few generations since the Indians had migrated to the Caribbeans, the sense of self was lost somewhere in between. Their nostalgia reflects a lesser degree of desire to return back, since the Caribbeans too often do not provide them with the 'home' they crave for. The homelessness is too profound in them. The Caribbean landscape lives in them through vague memories; it offers neither security, nor steadiness. The concept of 'home' is again shattered though multiple abrasions. The constant migrations, change in the patterns of home, psychological trauma of separations have left them as no-where's man. As Brinda Mehta puts it, "The foundation of home was constructed on a tenuous contradiction whereby home was simultaneously the site of … repression and of self-affirmation. Home was thus a contradictory space…..and a site of dilemma for Indo-Caribbean" (Mehta 2004:133). They crave for the 'home' they never had, they never knew; still not sure how much security it can provide them and again the landscape they knew was not the ideal place to be. These complex differences between the two groups are echoed repeatedly in their experiences as her texts will exemplify. The idea of 'space' becomes very important—be a coffee shop (as in 'Out on Main Street'), or even imagined ones—be it a religious one (as in 'Sushila's Bhakti').

This paper is committed to the analysis of a novel based on the Indo-Caribbean family system and their lives after migrating to Canada. It explores the dysfucntionalism that characterizes much of a diasporic identity that borders on the edge of mainstream and marginalized societies. Mootoo's novel, *Cereus Blooms At Night* is an example of such a dysfunctional family who is forever in tryst but never at peace with its multiple layers of identity. The novel investigates the duality of an immigrant life in the new country. The difference between memory and reality is distorted with nostalgic remnants and this creates a different world not understood by the 'mainstream'.

CARIBBEAN DIASPORA IN CANADA

Contrary to common perception, the Caribbean diaspora in Canada is a much heterogeneous group. The Canadian government merges all immigrants from the Caribbean islands together into a singular group for statistical convenience. This statistical convenience comes at a cost—

Caribbean immigrants are all supposed to be all coming from Jamaica neglecting the multiplicity of identity (Plaza 2004). The Statistics Canada Report of 1992 record that 37.9 per cent of Caribbean population in Canada is of Jamaican origin and the residual population comes from different origins. These generalizations are a result of categorizing the group on the basis of external physical appearances of the immigrants--skin color, body build, hair color etc. This type of analogy ignores other tangible characteristics like regional habits, country of origin, nationality, diction and dialects. The problem becomes more pronounced in the case of the Indo-Caribbeans who bear some genetic resemblance to the South Asians and because of this resemblance they are classified under the group of South Asians like Sri Lanka, India and Pakistan etc. It can be inferred from existing research that there are considerable similarities between the South Asian diaspora and Indo-Caribbeans but to merge them with this group is an injustice to the population. They themselves refuse such a simplistic merger (Itwaru 2000). They encounter a difficult situation where the creation of an "imagined (Caribbean) community" becomes impossible. The difficulty in the construction of a concrete identity construes a hegemonic 'otherness' at the very entry of the newcomer's life in Canada and continues to recur in their settlement experiences.

After maintaining a long history of stringent immigration policy that was extended to only European white immigrants, Canada has recently liberalized its policies and allowed the entry of immigrants from all over the world including the Caribbean islands. The majority of Caribbean immigrants arrived in the country in the early 60s and late 70s. Caribbean islands remain one of the primary countries from where immigrants come into Canada. This section of the population constitutes part of a group called 'visible minorities' as officially recognized in the Employment Equity Act 1995.

HISTORY OF CARIBBEAN IMMIGRATION TO CANADA

The Indo-Caribbeans tell of the living history of forced migration during the colonial rule garbed under the title of 'indentured labor'. Indo-Caribbean immigration into the Caribbean islands were people from India coming into the Caribbean islands to work themselves out of debt, to free themselves of the atrocities of British colonialism, to provide for their families, or to at times to escape the rigid norms of a traditional Hindu life. Even if many of these people originally wanted to return back to India they eventually settled there for a variety of reasons. The descendants of these people would migrate to Canada and other countries when the socio-political condition on the islands deteriorated to an extent where peaceful habitation became impossible for them. These people are known as "twice migrants". They may be referred to as the Indo-Caribbeans, though it is not an officially recognized status. Perhaps the most significant part of modern Caribbean history is molded by political competition and conflict between the two main ethnic groups that was born out of this mass migration--Afro Caribbean and Indo Caribbean communities. This brief history is necessary to make sense of the transnational legacies of the Caribbean islands.

The cusp contemporary transnational Caribbean attitude is informed by a social behavior known as "culture of migration", as described by Elizabeth Thomas-Hope (1992). This culture of developed in the background of a prolonged history of perpetual oppression and struggle. Economically too, there was a decline in the sugar production and plantation agriculture which had till date served as a steady source of employment for the Caribbean population in Canada. Due to the decline in the sugar plantation the traditional mode of livelihood of the Caribbean people was hampered causing them to move abroad. Thus, Caribbean culture is featured by a

ruptured sense of self that finds it difficult to have a unitary structure of the identity. While speaking about Caribbean identity, Stuart Hall says, 'Culture Identity and Diaspora': "what we share is precisely the experience of a profound discontinuity: the peoples dragged into slavery, transportation, colonization, migration, came predominantly from Africa" (Williams and Chrisman 1994: 395).

DIASPORIC WRITING

The origin of the authors plays a crucial role in understanding the diasporic literature. Shani Mootoo is an Indo-Caribbean whose roots go back India and the consciousness of this root is mirrored in some of her works often emphasizing the cultural alienation.

Shani Mootoo was born in 1957 in Ireland to parents of Indo-Caribbean origin. She spent her childhood in Trinidad and later shifted to Vancouver in Canada. She is an acclaimed film director, painter and writer of international repute. Her novel, *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996) describes a completely dysfunctional Indo-Caribbean family living in an imaginary town in the Caribbean islands before moving to Canada. A forceful migration with little or no time to settle down in the new land disrupts the identity of the individual/family to a grave extent and the family never recovers from the disruption. The novel highlights the experience of a single family that steadily moves towards self-destruction.

Mootoo exponentially deals with themes like extra-marital affair, incest, religious affiliations of an individual among others which are often of utmost social gravity and often of utmost disgust. It also exposes the darkest inner secrets of a dysfunctional family desperately trying to stay together merely because they cannot explore means of escape.

The novel interweaves the lives of two people who live on the periphery of 'mainstream' society—Mala Ramchandin and Tyler. Mala Ramchandin is the descendent of a family with roots in India. Her mother abandoned the family and eloped with her girlfriend, while her father had sexually abused both Mala and her sister, Asha. Mala had also been betrayed and deserted by her love interest, Ambrose at a moment she needed him the most. A sustained history of dysfunctional family, child abuse, and sexual violence, physical and mental torture finally pushes her to the edge leading to a complete psychological breakdown, driving her insane. Her loneliness increases when her younger sister escapes from home and was never heard of again. Tyler narrates the story of Mala Ramchandin, whom he takes care of at the Paradise Alms House, in an apparent effort to reach out to Asha and ask her to return to Mala.

The chronological narration helps the author tell the dysfunctional and disconnected life story of the Ramchandin family. Mootoo, in her first novel, describes the Caribbean experiences in an unconnected land and records the geo-cultural traits of the islands. According to John Corr: "Because of these transnational character experiences and relationships and Mootoo's own transnational history, the novel's deep exploration of a violently destroyed home space, as well as other situation of social and physical exile, can be read as constituting a distinctively diasporic project" (Corr 2005:68-69).

The non-linear storyline shuffles between the past and the present, signifying the crisis that the individual faces with regard to his/her identity. The individual undergoes perpetual dilemma as to the construction of family and its identity. It is a horrifying situation where the sanctity of

family structure is threatened by annihilation, primarily due to social and economic conflicts. The frequent changes in disparate familial situations results in permanent defamiliarization of an individual's own identity. The past becomes obscure and unconnected; the present too remains obscure and unrelated.

The second part of the story begins with Chandin's family life. With the passage of time, Chandin has lost interest in the sophisticated Christian life and the desire to revert to his original identity came back to him because it was the only thing that renders him some originality, but unfortunately it was too late: "...he often felt chained to both the church and Thoroughly, and impotent to reverse the path his life has taken since the day the Reverend made that trip to his parents' quarters... His body began to accede to its inherited nature. A faint echo of his father's curvature developed....He gradually extricated himself from the Thoroughly family"(Mootoo 1998:52-53). It is symptomatic of the immigrants' life in which s/he had once been attracted to the promises of a foreign land but met with shattered dreams. Yet s/he is unable to go back to the life s/he had left behind in his own country. At this point the author points out the second identity displacement of the Indo-Caribbeans—that of religion—an often contested but integral part of forming a conventional identity. Poverty, insecurity and emigration caused not only geographical translocation but also changes in 'religious identity'. The Christian missionaries carried out widespread religious conversion in while ensuring financial security—"A white man who set up school and church for Indians" (29). The Hindus were the minority on the islands, and the majorities were the Christians followed by Muslims. Chandin's religious conversion is an example of such a change in 'religious identity' which though once attracted him but later distanced him from his own self. However, this forceful conversion could not ensure a complete faith and loyalty towards the new religion.

Chandin's feelings for Lavinia reached a point of obsession where he saw Sarah, Lavinia's Indian friend in school, as a potential opponent to Lavinia's attention for him. Chandin, however, found consolation in the fact that Lavinia did not show discrimination towards Indians[1], an identity Chandin was obviously ashamed of: "The only thing that pleased Chandin about the friendship was that it indicated Lavinia was not prejudiced against people like himself. A friendship with Sarah, to Chandin's mind, would encourage her to become comfortable with the Indians, and so with him" (35). This statement is reflexive of the conflicted self-typical of a diasporic individual who is rootless and not at peace with his/her own identity—both social and individual.

Chandin's rootlessness becomes a tragic reality. This reveals a caliginous aspect of being in the 'third space' that Homi Bhabha is so fond of. Neither does he think of his original family as his own, nor can accept his adoptive family as his true family. It is also the sad initial point where one loses control of his own life and identity as in the case of Chandin. This identity crisis is a recurrent theme among the diasporic individuals and very common amongst the Indo-Caribbeans who are always relegated to the status of a minority in the land of their settlement—both in the Caribbean islands and Canada.

ALTERNATE IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION
Tyler's gender identity, which is a source of confusion to him and also always keeps him away

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[1] In this case, the term, 'Indians' refer to the Caribbean people of Indian origin.

from 'mainstream' society, is another instance of an individual standing on the social periphery. Mala Ramchandin, whose disreputable and mysterious past makes her ineligible to be a part of 'normal' society, The hostility expressed by the 'mainstream' society pushes them towards each other, eventually building up a world of their own forming the 'third space'. Within this space in they develop a relation of empathy in each other's company--Tyler sympathizes with Mala's situation and cares for her when everyone else on the home refuses to engage with her; Mala also in tranquility helps Tyler discover his identity in a society which is prejudiced against him. Annie Lee opines that: "Tyler exhibits a clear sense of diasporic Otherness. As a native Lantanacamara and a new comer to the town of Paradise, Tyler states that he was, is, and may always be an 'outsider'"(Lee 2005:6).

The daily hatred and violence at home had become so commonplace for Mala that when she faces it outside in society, it does not appear anything out of the ordinary for her: "With an outstretched he (Walter) poked a chest with each word. When the chest was that of Pohpoh, Asha or Boyie he used his palm and pushed hard to unbalance them. Pohpoh winced with each blow but registered no antagonism on her face, a skill she developed at home" (90). Here, home becomes a site for exploitation and deprivation failing to provide security thus dismantling the traditional image of 'home'. The consequent deprivation increases until the unnatural nature of social behavior becomes mundane rendering the entire existence of an individual completely dysfunctional.

The scene where Asha, Mala and Boyie are playing with other neighboring children, instantiates social discrimination and stereotyping thereby signifies the difficulty in integration. The fact that these are children makes it an even more tragic reality. The other children isolate Pohpoh and Asha, while making fun of them and even venture to cause physical violence on Asha. Social and familial isolation abnormality germinate a psychological isolation which in turn is incapable of building a sense of belonging with one's home and family: "Walter saw (Pohpoh) coming, jumped up and stepped outside his group to pick up a stick. With an exaggerated gesture he drew a line between them and Pohpoh. 'This is my side, you can't cross it!' (92-93). The line between the two sides becomes more pronounced with time. Thus the two parties are equally responsible for creating a rift—while one draws the line; the other maintains it.

The author expresses a deep distrust in both the traditional and the amalgamated family system. She almost clearly says that living under the same roof cannot be the only key to a robust family. Rather, a strong sense of familial-ness in coming together in a spirit of compassion and sensitivity can be the foundation of a concrete relationship. Shani Mootoo, being a diasporic Indo-Caribbean writer in Canada cares very little for the conventional family system. She emphasizes the moot point that even though the Indo-Caribbean may not have a strong sense of belonging to somewhere may not very strong but there is always hope of building new relationships in a new environment.

CONCLUSION

Colonization has unleashed widespread population dispersal all over the world. Caribbean islands were, by no means, an exception. People were forcefully brought from Africa to serve as slaves on the islands. The indigenous population like Caribs and Arawaks were brutally killed at war or died of diseases. With the spread of colonization, slavery increased and the need for

cheap labor was greatly felt. People were brought in large numbers from Africa, with or without family and forced to toil hard on the islands. These people could never return back to Africa and their descendants continued to remain on the islands and soon comprised majority of the Caribbean population—the Afro-Caribbeans. However, with industrialization, a shift was made from cheap labor to machinery. This shift reduced the need for slaves. The Enlightenment period also saw the slavery system as inhuman and slave uprisings in various parts of the world ultimately led to the abolition of slavery in 1833. Yet, colonization and resistance to colonization were at its prime in the nineteenth century. While slavery was no longer officially operative, people were brought in as indentured labor to work on the Caribbean sugar plantations. This included people from India who in addition to unemployment were also in search of escape from the grasp of colonization and the rigid norms of a hierarchical society. Many of these people never returned to India and settled on the islands, got married there and remained there for generations. They formed the second prominent group on the islands—the Indo-Caribbean community.

Religion and family system bore the worst brunt of migration leading to a volatile sense of identity. Conversion to Christianity was commonly practiced on the islands, and it went on to become the primary religion. However, people from the generation of the migrants preferred to practice their own religion like Hinduism, Islam etc. The second generation and the ones after often benefitted from the missionaries whose aim was the spread of Christianity. It led to rifts between generations of the same family and a confused sense of the self and who one should be loyal to—their origin or their benefactor. Family system underwent turmoil at several levels. The first migration from home caused a distance between families, and was worse for those who never returned. These people married into the local population and formed families there. Thus the population became a cultural amalgamation of the native country of origin and that of the islands. Attempts to keep in touch with families back home were made, but it was a difficult initiative since the means of communication were limited. The geographic distance was huge and the isolated location of the islands made communication with the outside world erratic. The second migration to Canada during the twentieth century did not help things get any better. This movement was also the result of a different kind of force— poverty and isolation on the islands and the need for a better life that foreign countries seem to provide.

Thus, the settlement experience of the Indo-Caribbeans has to be understood in the larger context of prolonged dysfunctionalism at various levels—social, political, familial and individual. Particularly relevant in this context is the constant shuffling between identities. The diasporic shifts are accompanied by many contrasting realities like changes in religious and social loyalties which often results in widening the distances between families and in between generations. Shani Mootoo, being a Canadian immigrant writer of Trinidadian origin, explores this compelling reality in the lives of the Indo-Caribbean immigrants. Her choice of a fictional town, to express the diasporic otherness of the immigrants, as the setting of her novel reveals how the Indo-Caribbeans find the concept of home robust nowhere. The author explores repugnant themes like incest, sexual abuse and homophobia to reveal the darkest secrets of human nature which comes to the surface due to an abnormality of circumstances. Transnationalism serves as a device that causes a disruption in normal life and causes identity crisis. The lives of the Indo-Caribbeans go through constant shifts and changes and they find themselves always a minority in any diasporic situation--be it the first migration from India, or

the second migration to Canada. They are further disadvantaged of being pathetic victims of cultural erosion in regard to their language, religion and identity. The family system is shattered completely under this erosion. Even after immigrating to new land, they fail to reconstruct this system because of a hostile 'mainstream' society. The minority always face substantial problems in the new land—indifference to the new land, a feeling of isolation, social and cultural repression. Frank Birbalsingh observes: "Essentially, it is the anxiety of living as a minority group within a majority population, and the work of these younger writers is notable for their skin color and culture. Indo-Caribbeans are separated by language and culture from other Indian immigrants" (Birbalsingh 2004:132). The identity of the diasporic individual is expressed in the characters of the novel who redefine the notion of being normal and the concept of mainstream is changed while prejudice against the 'Other' is vehemently challenged through themes of disgust and dysfunctionalism in the 'third space'.

The research does not aim to generalize the settlement experiences of the Indo- Caribbeans through a set of stories and novels; however diasporic writing does bear the assertions of the immigrants in the new land. It is redolent with the cross-border experiences of the native land and the host country. It also implies the imagined return to a homeland (Safran 1991) left behind with many immigrants wanting to create a small socio-cultural identity of their own, often within the home fronts; or by wanting to return to their native land as is often the case of Caribbean immigrants in Canada. Diasporic writings record the daily experiences of the immigrants and their everyday dilemma as to what is home and what is not. Therefore, diasporic writing can serve as an entry-point into the experiences of the immigrants. The diasporic identity is expressed in other characters of the novel who redefine the notion of being normal. The concept of mainstream is changed and prejudice against the 'Other' is vehemently challenged. The duality of an immigrant life in the new country is at the center of Mootoo's investigation in her collection of short stories where she attempts to come to terms with the fleeting identity of the Indo-Caribbeans.

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