The Postcolonial and Creolisation: Mapping India from the Caribbean in E. Moutoussamy’s *Chacha et Sosso* and V.S Naipaul’s *A House for Mr. Biswas*

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In his definition of the postcolonial, Robert C. Young observes that “postcolonial theory has been created from the political insights and experience that were developed in the course of colonial resistance to western rule and cultural dominance, primarily during the course of the anti-colonial struggles of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries” which were characterised by “creativity, a spirit of innovation and a desire to combine universal ideas of social justice with the realities of local cultures and their particular conditions” (2009, 14; emphasis added). Yet, this epistemic frame could reproduce some of the binaries postcolonial theory set out to undermine or even lead to a misconstruction of the critique of Eurocentrism as anti-European discourse; this is what Senegalese philosopher Souleymane Bachir Diagne radically rejects as “epistemological nativism” (Amselle and Diagne 2018, 136; my translation). Consequently, attempts at “rerouting the postcolonial” (Wilson 2010) have turned to “new geographical territory such as ‘the Arab world,’ China, the Indian Ocean, the European Arctic, Palestine and the Balkans” (Wilson 2016, 2). More recent studies have focused on “the growing field of post-Soviet postcolonial/post-imperial studies, and the still fledgling field of post-Ottoman postcolonial/post-imperial studies” (Albrecht 2020, 13). As such, while for several decades now some scholars have presented postcolonial theory as “an exhausted paradigm” (Yaeger 2007), the latest research confirms postcolonial studies’ “capacity to plunge into the depths, to evacuate, recuperate, re-canonize, and to present its new hearings/bearings within the academy” (Wilson 2016, xii; emphasis added).
Yet, if attempts at transforming the field of postcolonial studies through new critical perspectives and thematic focuses have contributed to its vitality, these new Protean forms could lead to a “postcolonial universalism” devoid of interpretative and heuristic force (Boehmer and Chaudhuri 2011, 6). Indeed, while postcolonial criticism has tirelessly attacked the Eurocentrism of “universalism,” postcolonial theory has also been accused of subsuming within a universalising discourse postcolonial experiences that are felt differently across the world (Clavaron 2015, 8). That is why the editors of the Indian Postcolonial encourage critics to “(re-)map and re-inflect the postcolonial field through other regional locations or national and pan-nationalistic formations, depending upon the historical shifts that govern an intellectual project at any given moment” (Boehmer and Chaudhuri 2011, 6).

Inspired by Boehmer and Chaudhuri, I contend that “the continuing heuristic power of postcolonialism’s central critical tropes” such as “cultural translation” and “marginality” “grow[s] […] when they are transposed back into specific postcolonial conditions” (2011, 3; original emphasis). The two critics offer to “review the premises of postcolonial studies through the prism of India, locating its contents and assumptions in the midst of Indian manifestations of the field” (2011, 4). While their book operates “a radical geopolitical shift away from Euro-American dominance” and explores the idea of an Indian postnation, it does not include geocultural areas marked by Indian indenture (Wilson 2016, 2). I do so by mapping the Indian postcolonial from its manifestations in the Francophone and Anglophone Caribbean. I thus consider the postcolonial within a regional and transoceanic frame that interrelates two formerly colonised regions: the Indian subcontinent and the Caribbean archipelago. This paradigmatic shift invalidates the binary centre/periphery by examining the construction of Indianness primarily from the perspective of the multiply marginal(ised) Indo-Caribbean communities of Anglophone and Francophone islands – namely Trinidad and Guadeloupe.

These islands’ very different (post-)colonial history and political status preclude their affiliation to a single or specific metropolitan centre or motherland. While Trinidad gained independence from the British Crown in 1962, it remains symbolically and ideologically tied to the former colonial centre as a member of the Commonwealth. On the other hand, Guadeloupe has been a French Overseas Department since 1946. Yet these postcolonial/post-imperial relations are complexified by the relatively recent interest that Indo-Caribbean communities have developed for subcontinental India, a trend also encouraged by India to expand its fast-growing international market. In the socio-cultural sphere, these evolutions have made it possible to shed more light on the traumatic history and memory of indenture which had been neglected in the Francophone Caribbean compared with the attention given to slavery. This article moves away from French and English former colonial centres but also from subcontinental India to examine how India is reimagined by two descendants of Indian indentured labour born decades after the end of indentureship: Anglophone Trinidadian V.S Naipaul (1932-2018) and Francophone Guadeloupean Ernest Moutoussamy (born in 1947). The plurilingual and relational methodology I adopt is based on an understanding of Caribbean space as an imaginary diasporic and metasporic space:

we can construct more complex spaces that bring together Africa, India, France, according to the modalities of diaspora or metaspora, or indeed the modalities of the imaginary. Thus the structure of a country cannot be considered uniquely in a
Gayatri Spivak insightfully warned that “postcolonial studies [...] can become an alibi” for a specific political or historicist agenda if not placed within a “general frame” that might be understood as a comparatist frame (1999, 1). That is why I have created a conversation among Francophone and Anglophone writers and postcolonial theorists. This perspective can repurpose what has negatively been referred to as “postcolonial universalism.” Diagne finds in translation the best illustration of “the postcolonial universal” which for him is “lateral”: “the universal is not any more the prerogative of a language, it is to be experimented and maybe ‘acquired’ through the lateral process of translation. The postcolonial universal [...] is precisely that: lateral” (2013, 16). The postcolonial universal is not unilinear, exclusive and vertical but it travels between particular peoples, cultures and languages, with no absolute reference point against which they are judged and measured. This article suggests that the postcolonial universal is also relational and rhizomatic, that its routes crisscross, connect landmasses and oceans, islands and continents. I elaborate on the notion of the “rhizomatic postcolonial universal” by examining how the Indian postcolonial is re-inflected in the Caribbean archipelago through the prism of creolisation theory.

I study two (post)indenture/kala pani narratives (Mehta 2010, 1; Mehta 2015), widely known and critiqued A House for Mr Biswas (1961) and Moutoussamy’s third novel Chacha et Sosso (1994) which has only been published in French so far. In particular, I analyse how the Indian understandings of caste, home and the nation (especially with the trope of Mother India/Bharat Mata), which I interpret as local inflections of the postcolonial main critical trope of marginality, are culturally translated and creolised in the plurilingual, multicultural and multi-ethnic archipelago of the Caribbean.

Unsettling caste and atavistic representations of Hindu traditions through the kala pani trope

When using the term “postcolonial,” I refer to postcolonial theory which is “[...] about the relations between ideas and practices: relations of harmony, relations of conflict, generative relations between different peoples and their cultures” (Young 2009, 24; emphasis added). In other words, the “postcolonial” is flexible, evolving and relational. Thus, I argue that its heuristic force is the most evident when the postcolonial is examined through creolisation theory as it is defined by Glissant: “Creolization requires the heterogeneous elements put into relation ‘intervalorise’ themselves: that is to say, there must be no degradation or diminution of the being, either from outside or within, in this contact and intermixing. [...] creolization is unforeseeable, whereas one can calculate in advance the effects of hybridity” (Glissant 1995, 8). For Glissant creolisation is characterised by the relational, the unpredictable and the new. Critics have sometimes opposed Glissant’s relational poetics to the postcolonial (Chamoiseau 2008). However, reading postcolonial theory through creolisation can help understand how the postcolonial as a relational discourse constantly generates newness.

For instance, Lorna Burns demonstrated the “significance” of creolisation “for contemporary postcolonial theory” in her essay which challenges Peter Hallward’s critique of Glissant and of postcolonialism’s singularising tendency (2009, 99). For Hallward, “[m]uch of what passes for specific in recent postcolonial writing and
criticism should rather be interpreted as singular or singularizing” and this tendency has led “to an explicitly deterritorialising discourse [...] a discourse so fragmented, so hybrid, as to deny its constituent elements any sustainable specificity at all” (2001, 22).

His point of contention is that postcolonial theory tends to be grounded in philosophies of immanence or single-substance and as such “all that is specific and particular aims to dissolve in unity with the undifferentiated reality” (Burns 2009, 105). However, Burns argues that while Glissant’s theory of creolisation intersects with European philosophies of immanence, it is also specific because creolisation is the “generation of something wholly new” (100). She also offers an alternative approach to the “singular” based on Derek Attridge’s revisioning of the “singular” as the “new” (2004). For Burns, this “newness” is born of the singular/unique encounter between the known and the unknown, or one culture and another (2009, 110–11). Singularity thus enacts the moment when a particular culture develops familiarity with another, a process that never creates complete understanding, absorption or erasure of the other but that is mutually transformative. One can best define this process as creolisation. In other words, singularity and specificity are not exclusive but complementary as creolisation encompasses the singular/unique encounters of specific cultures and histories whose dynamic relations structure the whole/totality or totalité-monde, which Glissant substitutes to the more stable and static term “universe” (Glissant 1993; 1997). Thus, by reading the postcolonial through the prism of creolisation, one can understand the specific as part and parcel of the singular, i.e., the new. In this reframing, singularity or newness emerges when postcolonial critical tropes are studied both specifically and relationally. That is why I read here the Indian (post)colonial theme of caste both in Anglophone and Francophone literatures and contexts.

Caste is a topos of (post)indenture narratives in which it is diffracted and reimagined through the central Hindu trope of the kala pani. Crossing the kala pani (“black waters”) implied transgressing Hindu sacred texts such as the Laws of Manu: “Kala pani taboos originate from a central stricture within the Indian Hindu caste system in which travel overseas is equated with social annihilation, reversible only by performing lengthy and very costly acts of repentance” (Phukan 2022, 23). The transatlantic odyssey meant risking caste and gender miscegenation and, for most indentured labourers who could not pay the purification rites, journeying across the seas implied cutting oneself off irrevocably from an orderly social world. Additionally, “it was used by colonial masters and their second-order mediators [...] as ‘a structure of feeling’ to reinforce the hopelessness of their [the indentured labourers’] situation as bonded coolies once they had left their homeland. In other words, the kala pani was both existential and a code for surveillance, a reminder of the coolies’ wretched state” (Mishra 2021, 20). This trope continued to inflect Indian identity in the Caribbean and Hinduism shaped greatly (post)indenture experiences (Roopnarine 2003). However, the kala pani trope was also repurposed by the indentured workers, not all of whom lamented the break away from the caste system. In fact, during the crossing, new identities were forged by transgressing the “organising principle” of caste as the indentured migrants became “different from the people back in India” (Ebr.-Vally 2001, 178).

Written several decades apart in different historical, socio-cultural and political contexts, the two novels examined here offer contrasting perspectives on caste and on Hindu culture. Set in the first half of the twentieth century in pre-independence Trinidad, Naipaul’s novel satirises East Indian Trinidadians’ failed attempts at integrating within rapidly modernising and urbanising Trinidad while clinging to
cumbersome Hindu traditions. The narrative follows the life of Mohun Biswas till his death. The protagonist was admittedly modelled after Naipaul’s father. Born in rural Trinidad to Brahmin East Indian indentured labourers, Mr. Biswas spends his whole life trying to escape the traditions followed by his in-laws, the Tulis, to become a successful house owner. The narrative portrays all attempts at preserving a seemingly authentic and pure Hindu cultural heritage as pointless mimicry. For instance, the Tulis’ claim at being true preservers of Hindu culture is questioned by their blind belief in the wisdom of Owad, Pundit Tulsi’s son freshly returned from London, whose mere words lead the family to abruptly reject and scorn Indians from India:

The whole house had fallen under Owad’s spell [...]. And in one afternoon the family reverence for India had been shattered: Owad disliked all Indians from India. They were a disgrace to Trinidad Indians; they were arrogant, sly and lecherous; they pronounced English in a peculiar way; they were slow and unintelligent and were given degrees only out of charity; they were unreliable with money; in England they went around with nurses and other women of the lower classes and were frequently involved in scandals; they cooked Indian food badly (the only true Indian meals Owad had in England were the meals he had cooked himself); their Hindi was strange (Owad had repeatedly caught them out in solecisms); their ritual was debased; the moment they got to England they ate meat and drank to prove their modernity (a brahmin boy had offered Owad curried corn beef for lunch); and, incomprehensibly, they looked down on colonial Indians. [...] they [the Tulsi sisters] grew grave as they realized their responsibilities as the last representatives of Hindu culture. (Naipaul 1961, 539)

Hindu social stratification appears as a prevailing definer of Caribbean Indianness in this passage, and when it comes to food and religion, Brahminic rules seem to be the markers of “authentic” Hindu culture. However, this illusory authenticity is thwarted by Tulsidom’s permeability to western influence:

Rather than Hanuman House typifying Indian traditional culture, the Tulsi children go to Christian missionary schools, the husbands of Tulsi’s daughters live with the wife’s family (instead of bringing the daughters to their own family as is customary in India) and there is an absurd mixture of Westernization and ritualism. (King 2003, 48)

Caste hierarchy is invalidated early in the novel when a low caste Hindu converted to Presbyterianism mocks the impoverished and less educated Biswas family’s lack of knowledge on colonial legal procedures:

“How you people want to get on, eh?” Lal had been converted to Presbyterianism from a low Hindu caste and held all unconverted Hindus in contempt. As part of this contempt he spoke to them in broken English. “Tomorrow I want you to bring your buth certificate. You hear?” [...] “You people don’t even know how to born, it look like.” (Naipaul 1961, 42–43)

Lal embodies the accommodationist Westernised Indo-Trinidadian middle class of the time (Mehta 2001, 113). This episode illustrates the fact that given their marginalisation within an Afro-dominated Trinidadian society, East Indians felt they could only Westernise to integrate (Fernandez 2002, 27–28). The traditional significance of caste is further transformed as the term refers, towards the end of the novel, to a well-to-do fringe of East Indians Owad rapidly turns to after distancing himself from his role as the Tulsi family head: “Owad spent more time away from home. He mixed with his medical colleagues, a new caste separate from the society from which it had been released” (Naipaul 1961, 572). While the word “caste” is associated here with a new East Indian Trinidadian elite, the island’s capital-driven elite also included creolised Trinidadians who had adopted and benefited from Western codes, values and
standards. That is why the novel’s perspective on creolisation and cultural hybridity has often been perceived as negative:

Naipaul’s reluctance to see his and his community’s condition of hybridity in a positive way stems from the unique history that he belongs to. He is not able to celebrate the developing creole culture of the Caribbean like African-Caribbean writers such as Lamming and Edward Kamau Brathwaite. (Nadan 2008, 77)

East Indian girmityas (indentured labourers) and their descendants struggled to integrate since the former arrived in an already hierarchised society where white colonists and Afro-Trinidadians occupied well-defined positions. Indentureship lasted in Trinidad for around seventy years (1845-1917), a period during which an estimated 144,000 Indian indentured workers were brought to the island (Laurence 1994, 120–22; Singaravelou 1987, 136–39). The years leading up to Trinidad’s independence offered a glimmer of Afro-Indian interracial fraternity as some Indians joined the anticolonial Black Power movement in the late 1960s and the 1970s. Yet “the island’s promising interracial social movement ultimately failed and effectively marked the rising authority of Afro-Caribbean consciousness across the West Indies” as “the movement was not able to successfully address issues specific to Indians that lingered from the indenture period” (Phukan 2022, 38). Some critics have also attributed the movement’s failure to East Indians’ inability to empathise with its struggles (Mahabir 1996, 288; Nicholls 1971, 447). As such, Afro-Trinidadians continued to dominate politics afterwards even though East Indian Trinidadians make up a large part of the population. And it was not until the mid-1990s that an East Indian Trinidadian became Prime Minister for the first time, with Basdeo Panday holding office from 1995 to 2001.

Naipaul’s reluctance towards hybridisation and creolisation is no doubt related to the “legacy of exclusion” which characterises the aesthetics and discourse of creolisation given that in the Caribbean the term “creole” has excluded Asians for a long time (Puri 2004, 65). This legacy needs to be taken into account when arguing for a re-inflection of the Indian postcolonial through creolisation. The Martiniquan Creolistes gestured towards an inclusion of East Asians within the Créolité movement in Eloge de la créolité/In Praise of Creoleness. Yet, as suggested by its all-inclusive tagline “Neither Europeans, nor Africans, nor Asians, we proclaim ourselves Creoles” (Bernabé, Chamoiseau, and Confiant 1989, 75), this movement tended to subsume the particularity of the listed cultures under universalising terms. More problematic still was the fact that Créolité would be asserted through a thrice-emphasised negation for “how does one praise that condition of newness that it is meant to characterize, when the highest praise that one can accord it is initiated as a three-fold evacuation rather than a plenitude?” and “is this tripartite pact of evacuation consensual between, and equally executed by, all parties involved?” (Kabir 2020, 177). Finally, Créolité did not manage to showcase East Indians’ continuing role in shaping Caribbean identities and cultures. Similarly, in the Anglophone Caribbean, the concept of douglarisation did not escape the burden of the term “dougla” which remained associated with bastardisation in “national discourses on citizenship by both Indians and blacks” (Kanhai 1999, 13).

While neither the French Créolité nor the Anglophone douglarisation satisfactorily included the marginalised East Indian presence, the cultural project of Indianité, which deeply impacts Ernest Moutoussamy’s fiction and nonfiction, presents East Indian cultural patrimony as an integral part of the racial and cultural diversity of the French Antilles. The concept was first introduced during the early 1970s by Martiniquan scholar Gilbert Francis Ponaman (qtd. in Mohammed 2017, 221). Then Laurent Farrugia
compared Indianité to Négritude and defined it as a step towards more cross-cultural dialogues and towards Antillanité (1975). Yet even Antillanité ultimately “ha[d] a tendency to pay more attention to the African diaspora” (Mohammed 2017, 221). Indianité gained more critical force with Moutoussamy’s essay La Guadeloupe et son Indianité (1987) in which the author defines Indianité as: “an expression of attachment to India, its values, its culture. [...] a message of recognition, the fruit of a heritage. [...] a cultural and historical breath that transcends the boundaries of races and countries” (23; my translation). For Moutoussamy, Indianité is not a closed-off concept but it marks “unity in diversity” (1987, 13; original emphasis; my translation). Moutoussamy is an Indo-Guadeloupean writer and politician who has written about thirty books including thirteen collections of poems, seven novels, political essays and historical accounts on Guadeloupean society, culture and politics and on Indo-Guadeloupeans. His third novel Chacha et Sosso (1994) is set in the 1930s in the Desvarieux Quarters (on the outskirts of the then large village of Saint-François). The story follows a young unmarried Indo-Guadeloupean, Prakash, who adopts two little girls who have been orphaned, Ushas (Chacha) of East Indian descent and Solitude (Sosso) of African descent. The novel recounts these characters’ search for an adoptive mother for the girls.

Contrary to Naipaul’s novel in which Hinduism and caste issues are foregrounded by Mr. Biswas’s Brahmin origins, in Moutoussamy’s narrative, the question of caste is sidelined. The concept of purity is reframed from the standpoint of the female character, Mireille, Prakash’s mother. Mireille’s caste is not mentioned but she firmly opposes her son’s adoption of Ushas and Solitude by claiming that the girls would dilute the blood she had fiercely protected so far:

from Pondicherry to Desvarieux, dreams always aborted... The Aurelie one day tore me away from my mother, from my land, from my homeland. I cannot forget... My blood has crossed three oceans and has not been diluted... this blood is the only thing that still ties me to India... I do not want it to be soiled... (Moutoussamy 1994, 30; my translation)

Despite her transoceanic journey to Guadeloupe, Mireille strongly asserts her connection with the distant Indian motherland. In fact, “the tarnishing of her bloodline would signify a disruption in the imaginary link she created between herself and India” (Mohammed 2017, 227–28). However, this rootedness is challenged by the failure of memory or language made apparent in the repetition of three dots that betray hesitation and uncertainty. As blood symbolises lineage and filial origins, Mireille’s rejection of the girls reflects the belief in an Indian atavistic culture and identity or what Glissant termed “root-identity” as opposed to “relation-identity” (Glissant 1990, 157–58; my translation). Moutoussamy’s novel addresses the issue of cultural purity only to deconstruct it. Mireille’s perspective remains marginal, and the character who primarily embodies the preservation and transmission of Indian cultural heritage is a village elderly vatialou, Gopi.

Throughout the novel, Gopi supports Prakash’s adoption of the girls. As the last Tamil priest of the village, he plays the part of a storyteller. His stories draw inspiration from great Indian epics and from Martiniquan Louis Delgrès’s resistance to colonial oppression. As Mohammed points out “His interest in both sets of histories [...] highlights the narrative’s aim to situate the East Indian diaspora’s historicity in relation to Guadeloupe’s history at large, and to underscore that the former is also a notable component of the latter” (2017, 230). Gopi’s equal inclusion of slavery and
indenture suggests that East Indians and Africans are fraternally bound in the fight against colonial exploitation. Thus, the Indianness that the novel depicts is porous to other cultures while the one embodied by Naipaul’s protagonists strives to remain self-enclosed.

In *A House for Mr. Biswas* and *Chacha et Sosso*, the East Indians’ presence and their cultural impact on Caribbean society are associated with Hinduism, which despite the subversive potential of the *kala pani* crossing, remains a defining trait of the indentured labourers’ and their descendants’ identities. Nonetheless, in Naipaul’s novel Hindu protagonists’ failed attempts at reclaiming a seemingly atavistic Indian culture leads to isolation and stagnation whereas Moutoussamy’s narrative relocates and reshapes Indian culture within the creolised mix of the island. Consequently, the two novels differ in their representation of another central trope of Indian (post)colonial discourse, “Mother India,” whose meaning is re-inflected within the context of the Caribbean.

From an essentialised motherland to a creolised homing

India was symbolically framed as “Mother India” (*Bharat Mata*) by late nineteenth-century Indian nationalists who primarily convoked Hindu myths. This imagining of the nation galvanised anti-colonial sentiment and saw the rise of a Hindu nationalist movement. In the context of the Caribbean East Indian diaspora, India is recast as a distant motherland that can only be imaginatively reinvented by the indentured workers and their descendants given the traumatic transplantation of the coolies. Such reconstructions can lead to an essentialisation of Indian identity and culture as well as the exclusion of all the transformations brought by the transoceanic journey and the arrival to a new (is)land. The denial of such changes is illustrated in Moutoussamy’s novel in Mireille’s speech (quoted earlier) in which blood purity is seen as a protection against acculturation and Indian culture is subsequently constructed as homogeneous and exclusive. In Naipaul’s novel, through the Tulsis’ propensity to ritualise any significant family event, India is reinvented principally from a Brahminic perspective. Commenting on diasporic East Indians’ imaginary returns to Mother India, Bragard observes a tension between the assertion of an impossible return and the simultaneous inevitable desire to identify with an “original” or “authentic” continental culture (2008, 125). Yet, East Indian Trinidadians – as embodied by the Tulsis – do not merely try to emulate Indian rites, dress, food, etc. They might attempt to recreate India by asserting their superiority over Indians from India. Ultimately, the Tulsis’ impossible claim to being the last preservers of authentic Indian culture highlights the porosity of cultures and their continuous metamorphosis.

Mauritian poet and critic Khal Torabully also observed that imaginative returns to the Indian motherland can lead to the creation an overly laudable and essentialised culture. That is why he imagined the poetics of Coolitude to foreground the *kala pani* voyage as a foundational site for cross-cultural transgressions, transformations and redefinitions (Torabully 1992; Carter and Torabully 2002). Coolitude poetics gave the marginalised coolie space on the (post-)indenture plantation scape. It also opened a transoceanic heuristic frame connecting the Indian Ocean with the Atlantic, the *kala pani* and the Middle Passage. Yet, Coolitude did not account for transformations that
occurred upon and after arrival (Kabir 2020, 181). Consequently, my analysis privileges Glissant’s theory of creolisation as well as *Indianité* which together can best help examine the part played by East Indian indentured labour and post-indenture generations in (post)plantation cross-cultural exchanges.

In Moutoussamy’s novel, nostalgia for the distant Indian motherland is supplanted by an organic rooting in the creolised multi-ethnic and plurilingual Caribbean island. In lengthy poetic descriptions of the interactions between Prakash and the island, the latter appears as a warm and caring mother who welcomes Prakash and replaces his biological mother, the proponent of an atavistic Indian culture, as soon as he is born:

> Her sap sings in his veins. [...] When his mother expelled him in the face of life, it was she who welcomed him [...]. Her hibiscus flowers, eternal drops of blood from her wounded virginity, have never left her beloved lover’s hands bare. [...] She is also the mother of his little girls [...]. The girls released in her savannah know that they can count on her to water their young years. Cé maman Doudou a tout moun! (Moutoussamy 1994, 23–24; my translation)

At times a nurturing mother, at times a voluptuous lover, the island replaces distant India without denying the part of Indianness that informs it. This new filiation is marked by the fusion of sap and blood, but also by the use of the affective term “doudou” in an exclamative sentence in Guadeloupean Creole. A new rooting within Guadeloupean landscape and society might seemingly lead to another essentialisation of culture. Cultural essentialisation does pervade some of Moutoussamy’s works. For instance, his collection of poetry *À la recherche de l’Inde perdue* (2004) reinvents India as mostly Vedic (Outar 2004). But his novel’s multiple focalisation dissociates the advocates of an atavistic culture and those who perform creolised Indianness.

Aesthetically, the novel genre has been favoured in postcolonial literatures for its ability to articulate individual and personal memory and history with History and thus to become a counter-hegemonic discourse. Moutoussamy’s novel offers such an articulation as it accommodates varied and sometimes conflictual perspectives on the Indo-Guadeloupean community and its interactions with other groups. As the quest for filiation is located within a creolising society, the organic link between the East Indian protagonist and the land remains rhizomatically connected to multiple peoples and cultures. This is illustrated in the Creole exclamation “Cé maman Doudou a tout moun!” (Moutoussamy 1994, 24) in which the phrase “tout moun” “evokes the contemporary world as it is in its diversity, its plurality and its chaos” (Clavaron 2015, 50). This phrase inspired Glissant’s philosophy of the “*tout-monde*”/ “whole-world” which challenges binary representations of the world and Eurocentric universalism (1993; 1997).

In *Chacha et Sosso*, the island appears to be a microcosm of the “whole-world” which is irrigated by cultural exchanges and creolisation and open to constant transformation. This is best shown in the concluding episode of the novel in which the island-scape is framed as a site of regeneration and rebirth. The island is struck by a violent cyclone that devastates the Desvarieux Quarters. Prakash tragically dies before finding an adoptive mother for his daughters. Yet, the novel ends on a hopeful note as the motherless girls are welcomed by two female protagonists Prakash had previously courted; the African Angéla adopts Ushas (of East Indian descent) while the East Indian Palatia adopts Solitude (of African descent) in a symbolic crisscrossing, reflecting intimate intertwining of the two communities and of slavery and indenture. The newfound mothers are embodiments of the island which welcomes all peoples
regardless of their origins. The island and the two adoptive mothers further coalesce in the closing lines of the novel as the adoption gives birth to flower buds:

With Ushas, daughter of Angela, and Solitude, daughter of Palatia, Prakash’s dream was able to come true. His island, with the sound of the matalom, in the shade of the breadfruit tree and the vêpêlê, made the buds of the next century grow on his grave. If he did not arrive at the harbour of his hopes, he left with the certainty that the konwoua, the mayolè, the semblanni and the kotompavie were not yet buried, that the yellow of the mandja, the green of the malanga and the red of the roucou could still colour the dawn and give strength and courage. (Moutoussamy 1994, 137; emphasis added; my translation)

The “buds” bear the promise of a harmonious, inclusive and syncretic Guadeloupean landscape. This is expressed linguistically in the combination of French with creolised French and Indian words. References to Indian cultural elements – the drum (the matalom), the neem tree (the vêpêlê from the Tamil vēppilai), food and spices (the mandja or curcuma longa from the Tamil mañjaḷ), (para)religious rites and processions (the semblanni and kotompavie) – are intricately linked with allusions to African culture – the mayolè (a combat sport inherited from slavery) – and to typically Antillean culture – the malanga (a root vegetable from the Antilles which is also found in African regions).

In comparison, Naipaul’s novel does not explore creolisation explicitly. However, imaginary recreations of Mother India are profoundly immanent and rooted in the characters’ daily life, neighbourhood and immediate environment. For example, the Tulsi elders keep thinking about returning to India and only see Arwacas, and by extension Trinidad, as a temporary place. But their vision is undermined through Mr. Biswas’ scepticism which points out that the filiation they imaginatively create with the subcontinent can paradoxically only function in Trinidad:

the Tulis had never considered themselves settled in Arwacas or even Trinidad. It was no more than a stage in the journey that had begun when Pundit Tulsi left India [...]. Mr Biswas didn’t take such talk seriously. The old men would never see India again. And he could not imagine the Tulis anywhere else except at Arwacas. Separate from their house, and lands, they would be separate from the labourers, tenants and friends who respected them for their piety and the memory of Pundit Tulsi; their Hindu status would be worthless and, as had happened during their descent on the house in Port of Spain, they would be only exotic. (Naipaul 1961, 390)

Outside of Trinidad, the pride the Tulsis take in their Brahminic status would no long produce the desired effect, they would be out-of-place and “exotic.” This passage shows that the imaginary representation of the Indian motherland is in fact not essentialised (Fernandez 2022, 34). On the contrary, it is an immanent construct that could open onto negotiated transformations and new configurations, in other words to creolisation. For Fernandez this understanding of home is radically different from Western representations – which would usually interpret diasporic reconstruction of home as nostalgic longing for a lost and irretrievable place of origin. Instead, Fernandez reads the novel’s metaphorical use of home as “homing desire,” a concept which Brah employs to characterise diasporic space. It is not a desire for home, first because not all diasporas nostalgically wish to return to a lost motherland, secondly because they may feel at home somewhere without declaring this place home (Brah 1996, 194). When reading Naipaul’s novel as an example of “homing desire,” Fernandez concludes that:

The collapse of the many houses featuring in the novel contains the message that home is a matter of negotiations—in which all the communities of the island are implicated and which all fail with respect to different aspects—and tolerance. It is
not a matter of establishing a fixed and essentialist notion of identity, nor is it
based on the colonial culture, or the ancestral one. (2022, 38)

I would argue that if the novel does not examine interracial negotiations at length or
portray transcultural exchanges, it nevertheless hints that they are necessary for “out-
of-placeness” to give way to “feeling-at-home.” What is more, understanding the novel
as an illustration of the typically diasporic “homing desire” confirms that kala pani
crossings should not always be associated with loss (of home, caste, culture).

Additionally, the premises of creolisation appear in the final pages of the novel through
the female character of Savi, Mr. Biswas’s daughter. A comparative reading of
Moutoussamy’s and Naipaul’s novels highlights how, just like young Chacha and Sosso,
Savi blooms like a bud which could integrate fully into the creole society her father
remained marginal to after the latter’s death:

Savi got a job, at a bigger salary than Mr. Biswas could ever have got; and events
organized themselves so neatly that Savi began to work as Mr. Biswas ceased to be
paid. Mr. Biswas wrote to Anand: “How can you not believe in God after this?” It
was a letter full of delights. He was enjoying Savi’s company; she had learned to
drive and they went on little excursions; it was wonderful how intelligent she had
grown. He had got a Butterfly orchid. The shade was flowering again; wasn’t it
strange that a tree which grew so quickly could produce flowers with such a sweet
scent? (Naipaul 1961, 589)
The feminisation of nature is a common trope of postcolonial Caribbean literature and
here Mr. Biswas’s pride and delight in seeing Savi and his Butterfly orchid blossom at
the same time leaves no doubt as to the connection between the young woman and
nature. Despite the novel’s overall pessimism, the epilogue gives a glimpse of hope for
the Indo-Trinidadians born and raised on the island. Savi embodies bright prospects for
the generations to come as her success overshadows the failures of both old and young
male figures, Mr. Biswas and his son Anand (the latter gets a scholarship to study in
England but is soon overcome by hysteria there). As in Moutoussamy’s novel, the female figure and nature harmoniously combine as the novel climaxes in blooming
rebirth for “the tree which eventually grows true and straight, and produces fragrant
flowers, is Savi herself, and it is her unexpected blossoming that crowns Biswas’ life
with success” (Ormerod 1967, 602). In foregrounding the link between Savi and the
island, the novel places the Indo-Trinidadian post-indenture community within a
specifically Caribbean construction of home, Brah’s “homing desire,” “where feelings of
rootedness ensue from the mundane and the unexpected of daily practice [...]. It signifies
the social and psychic geography of space that is experienced in terms of a
neighbourhood or a hometown” (Brah 1996, 4; emphasis added). Far from implying
fixity and immobility, the female figure’s privileged connection with the island scape
and nature, which is reminiscent of Moutoussamy’s male and female protagonists’
closeness to nature, indicate her openness to changes, transformations and renewals
which are defining traits of creolisation.

Postcolonial theory and creolisation could appear to be diametrically opposed. Yet,
given that creolisation is an open-ended process of becoming “with differing elements
now coalescing, now separating, now being assimilated, now resisting, now counter-
resisting in a dynamic contradictory relationship that produce[s] agony but also new
life” (Nettleford 2003, xvi), reading the postcolonial as a form of creolised discourse
emphasises its infinite potential to transform, evolve and renew itself. As Burns argues:
“The postcolonial [...] is, like all creolized forms, specific to a particular context but not
specified by it: in other words, it displays the ability to move beyond the current limit of discourse, to become-singular” (2009, 115). Indeed, the postcolonial’s ongoing heuristic force derives from the field’s ability to dialogue with a diversity of other disciplines and its capacity to articulate the particular (or specific) and the total or global.

Undoubtedly, the postcolonial should not be stretched so thin over multiple disciplines, discourses or socio-cultural areas as to lose all its heuristic potential. Instead, a postcolonial critical analysis should remain relational and bring together multiple cultures and languages while remaining specifically located. The postcolonial can thus be both a locally rooted and a deterritorialised discourse that “produces a decentred, diasporic or ‘global’ rewriting of earlier, nation-centred imperial grand narratives” (Hall 1996, 247). The “global” defined by Hall is close to Glissant’s *totalité-monde* which assesses how the global and the local mutually reorganise and reshape each other through the transverse relations of what Gilroy calls the “diasporic” (1994). That is why this article turned to the Caribbean diaspora to map the Indian postcolonial and argued that global postcolonial tropes like marginality and cultural translation – which in continental India could relate to issues of caste, the nation, uprooting – were re-inflected and redefined in a post-indenture Caribbean diasporic context shaped by the Hindu trope of the *kala pani*.

My focus on French postcolonial theorist Édouard Glissant also participates in the decentred reading that postcolonial studies should keep encouraging. If postcolonial studies initially struggled to integrate into the French academia due to their Anglophone bias, over the past years, postcolonial and decolonial schools have been accused of contributing to the ethnicisation of the political debate in France by assigning universalism to a given racial (white) group (Amselle 2011, 53). As such, French and Francophone postcolonial research has been regarded with increasing suspicion and its political relevance has come under question. Yet, Glissant’s creolisation theory has been used and transformed across various disciplines and geocultural areas including through recent forays in archipelagic studies, island studies and transcultural studies (Pugh 2013; Ette 2016). By turning to his relational poetics, I aimed to highlight the dialogue between Francophone and Anglophone postcolonial theory while recalling Glissant’s contribution to French postcolonial theory as well as the prominent French critics who inspired him, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (Clavaron 2015, 12). This genealogy points to postcolonial theory’s flexibility and openness, which contribute to the field’s continuing relevance.

Lastly by bringing into conversation an internationally renowned Anglophone Caribbean writer with a prolific yet little known Francophone counterpart, I shed light on a still multiply marginalised literature. The centralising power of a few Parisian publishing houses means that literatures from the French overseas departments have limited visibility when published locally or by less prestigious continental publishers. It is no surprise then that, except for a very few who have been awarded literary prizes, whose work might have been translated into English and who also usually affiliate with Afro-Caribbean identity," these writers would be unknown to the Anglophone world. Even within the Francophone academia which turns to Caribbean literatures, East Indian Caribbean writers remain understudied. In a world in which “the postcolonial novel could become a consumer good like any other” (Clavaron 2005, 55), it seems all the more important to increase relational methodologies and critical readings of
literatures that effectively reflect the creolising world we inhabit, for it is only by deploying such analytical and epistemic frames that hierarchies and hegemonies can be subverted.

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**NOTES**

1. “[...] l’expression de l’attachement à l’Inde, de ses valeurs, de sa culture. [...] un message de reconnaissance, le fruit d’un héritage. [...] un souffle culturel et historique qui transcende les frontières de races et de pays.”

2. “unité dans la diversité.”

3. Ernest Moutoussamy was the mayor of Saint-François from 1989 to 2008. He also served as deputy of Guadeloupe in the French National Assembly from 1981 to 2002.

4. “de Pondichéry à Desvarieux, des rêves toujours avortés... L’Aurélie un jour m’arracha à ma mère, à ma terre, à ma patrie. Je ne peux pas oublier... Mon sang a traversé trois océans et ne s’est pas dilué... ce sang est le seul bien qui m’attache encore à l’Inde... Je ne veux pas qu’il soit souillé...”

5. “identité-racine”; “identité-relation.”
6. The word vatialou is a creolised form of the Tamil vātțiyyār which means teacher, instructor, family priest.

7. “Sa sève chante dans ses veines. [...] Quand sa mère l’a expulsé au visage de la vie, c’est elle qui l’a accueilli [...]. Ses fleurs d’hibiscus, éternelles gouttes de sang de sa virginité blessée, n’ont jamais laissé nues ses mains d’amant bien-aimé. [...] Elle est aussi la maman de ses fillettes [...]. Les gamines lâchées dans sa savane savent qu’elles peuvent compter sur elle pour arroser leurs jeunes années. Cé maman Doudou a tout moun !”

8. “Avec Ushas fille d’Angéla, Solitude fille de Palatia, le rêve de Prakash put se réaliser malgré tout. Son île au son du matalom, à l’ombre de l’arbre à pain et du vêpêlê, fit pousser sur sa tombe les bourgeois du prochain siècle. S’il n’arriva pas au port de ses espérances, il s’en alla avec la certitude que le konwoua, le mayolê, le semblanni, le kotompavie n’étaient pas encore ensevelis, que le jaune du mandja, le vert du malanga et le rouge du roucou pouvaient toujours colorer l’aurore et donner force et courage.” (my emphasis)

9. Maryse Condé was awarded the Nobel prize in 2018 and has been translated in about twenty languages. Other French Antilleans who have enjoyed worldwide readership are usually also known for their political engagement or/and their critical work (Césaire, Glissant, Confiant, Chamoiseau for instance).

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**ABSTRACTS**

The demise of postcolonial studies has been predicted for years, yet the field still produces abundant research output and creatively engages with historical and contemporary forms of colonialism and imperialism. This article reads two (post)indenture novels by Francophone and Anglophone Indo-Caribbean writers through Edouard Glissant’s theory of creolisation to shift away from a subcontinental understanding of the Indian postcolonial and adopt a diasporic and metasporic perspective that undermines the tension between the singular, the specific and the universal. I argue that postcolonial theory is a form of creolised discourse whose heuristic force is best deployed through critical research that re-inflects locally postcolonial theory’s major tropes such as marginality and cultural translation. To illustrate this point, this article interrelates the local/specific and the universal/global in a close textual reading which redefines the Indian topoi of caste and Mother India through the Caribbean reinvention of the kala pani trope.

**INDEX**

**Keywords:** postcolonial, creolisation, indenture, V.S. Naipaul, Ernest Moutoussamy

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