

REFUGEE, MIGRATION, DIASPORA

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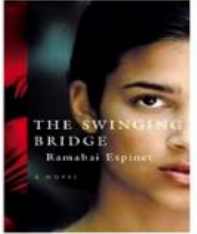
Lecture 52

Lecture 52: The Swinging Bridge

Good morning and welcome back to the lecture series on Refugees, Migration, and Diaspora. So, in continuation with our previous lecture, we were talking about the Coolie diaspora, and today we are going to discuss the novel titled *The Swinging Bridge*. So, *The Swinging Bridge*, originally published by HarperCollins in the year 2003, is written by Ramabai Espinet, who narrates the experiences of the women indentured laborers. So, this mainly focuses on the female experience, or the woman's experience, of indentured labor.

The Swinging Bridge

- Originally published by HarperCollins in the year 2003, *The Swinging Bridge* by Ramabai Espinet narrates the experiences of women indentured labourers.
- The novel is premised on the concept of retrieval of the 'past' memory, and foregrounds the significant role of traumatic memories in healing and reconciling with the ancestral past.
- Judith Misrahi Barak says that the novel deals with two specific types of trauma: 'firstly, gender and culture-specific trauma, in which she highlights the devastating effects of male antagonism towards female sexuality and, secondly, the trauma of displacement, a recurring theme in the literature from the region.'





The Swinging Bridge is premised on the concept of retrieving past memories, and it foregrounds the significant role of traumatic memories in healing and reconciling with the ancestral past. Critic Judith Misrahi-Barak states that the novel deals with two specific types of trauma mainly. Firstly, the gender- and culture-specific trauma, in which Espinet highlights the trauma, the devastating effects of male antagonism toward female sexuality, and then, secondly, the trauma of displacement—a recurring theme in the literature from the region, unquote. So, basically, two layers of hostile experience for the

female indentured laborers—one in terms of their gender and one in terms of their displacement from the

native land. So, Ramabai Espinet herself is an Indo-Caribbean Canadian writer. The Indo-identity of Espinet comes from the history of the arrival of her ancestors from India to the island of Trinidad as indentured laborers. Espinet was born in the year 1948 on the San Fernando Island in Trinidad. Later, she was doubly displaced across the seas to Canada.

Ramabai Espinet: Introducing the Author

- Ramabai Espinet is an Indo-Caribbean-Canadian writer.
- The “Indo” identity of Espinet came from the history of the arrival of her ancestors from India to the island of Trinidad as indentured labourers. Espinet was born in 1948 on the San Fernando island of Trinidad. Later she was doubly displaced across the seas to Canada. In the 1960s, Ramabai’s family immigrated to Canada.
- Her writings on Euro-Creole women are influenced by notable works from writers like Jean Rhys and Phyllis Shand Allfrey. Most works of Espinet are related to her Indo-Caribbean heritage.
- She was also shortlisted for the 2004 Commonwealth Writer’s Prize in the category of Best First Book. Her other notable works include: *Indian Cuisine*, ‘Barred: Trinidad 1987’, *Beyond the Kalapani and Nuclear Seasons*



So, in the 1960s, Ramabai's family immigrated to Canada. Espinet's writings on Euro-Creole women are influenced by notable works from writers such as Jean Rhys and Phyllis Shand-Allfrey. Her works, you know, are mostly related to her Indo-Caribbean heritage. So, Espinet was shortlisted for the 2004 Commonwealth Writers' Prize in the category of Best First Book. So, her other notable works include *Indian Cuisine*, then *Barred*, *Trinidad 1987*, and *Beyond the Kalapani and Nuclear Seasons*.

Ramabai Espinet's novel, *The Swinging Bridge*, raises a very pertinent question, which is as follows. How does an individual represent the story of an Indian indentured woman who had come to Trinidad from India as a runaway woman, most possibly a sex worker, within an exhibition on the history of indenture, which is being built in Trinidad by no one but her own cousin. And this exhibition on the history of indenture will work as a form of precursor to a full-blown museum. This display of indenture, this documentation of indenture, would be used toward the formation,


the fashioning of a full-blown museum. This whole, you know, exhibition is being undertaken by the narrator's cousin named Bess, who is trying to build it in Trinidad. Within this framework, within this structure, how can the narrative of a family member

be placed? Because this sex worker happens to be the cousin of this man who is trying to set it up, the cousin of the man who is trying to set up the museum. So, how is it possible to place or to locate the history of one's own cousin within this museum, who traces a past of sex work, of being a runaway woman?

So, within this grand narrative, within this grand structure, how can one place the narrative of a runaway woman, especially if she is family. Now, the protagonist of the novel, Mona, left for Canada from Trinidad at the age of 10, when she was just in her early teens, she was just a teenager. Mona returns to her home in Trinidad when her terminally ill brother Kello is asking her to go back to her native island and reclaim the property that their ancestors have left behind. So, Mona's return to her native island introduces her to the turbulent past that her ancestors had experienced or encountered. The readers of the novel also travel back in time with Mona, as she goes back to the 19th century India to the British Trinidad, where her ancestors worked as indentured labourers in the sugarcane fields.

Introduction

- Ramabai Espinet's novel *The Swinging Bridge* raises a pertinent question: How does one represent the story of an Indian indentured woman who had come to Trinidad from India as a 'runaway woman'—possibly a *rand* or a sex worker—within an exhibition on the history of indenture that will work as a form of precursor to a full-blown museum that the narrator's cousin, Bess, is trying to build up in Trinidad? (Dhar 31)
- The protagonist of the novel, Mona, left for Canada from Trinidad at the age of ten when she was a teenager. Mona returns to her home in Trinidad, when her terminally ill brother Kello asks her to go back to her native island and reclaim the property that their ancestors left behind.
- Mona's return to her native island introduces her to the turbulent past that her ancestors encountered. The readers of the novel also travel back in time with Mona as she goes back to nineteenth-century India, to the British Trinidad, where her ancestors worked as indentured labourers in the sugarcane fields, and how they ultimately travelled to urban North America.



And then she learns about the trajectory, the journey that ultimately led the family to North America, how the family ultimately traveled to urban North America. She is learning about all this past. So, in Espinet's *The Swinging Bridge*, India emerges as a place which can be perceived only through memory. India is a place of ancestral origin. The distant land can be represented only through nostalgia, emotion and ancestral memory, but devoid of any direct familiarity.

Mona is a fourth generation immigrant who produces the narratives of serial diasporas. Mona's search for India is contingent on retrieving the past of her great grandmother, whose name is Gainder. So, Gainder, her great grandmother who had migrated to the sugar plantations of Trinidad as an indentured labourer, Espinet's novel is based on the

woman subject, the female subject Mona who is from a later generation, a subsequent generation and who investigates the causes and consequences of these odyssey of her for mother Gainder's journey, and she is studying this odyssey, this journey from a feminist perspective.

The saga of Gainder is studied later by Mona from a feminist perspective. Mona is a filmmaker by profession, and thus she tries to retrieve her past by collecting fragments from her great-grandmother Gainder's story and producing a documentary. Critic Himadri Lahiri states that the description of Gainder's odyssey from India to Guyana in *The Swinging Bridge* produces a cog in the churning wheel of memory that revolves between the past and the present and that brings India as a reference point, the space of origin, unquote. Now, this novel is divided into a three-part narrative. Part 1.

Borrowed Time, Part 2, *Manahambre Road*, Part 3, *Caroni Dub*, and these three parts are prefaced by small chapters, each of them titled *Kalapani*. So, as we discussed in our previous lecture, the *Kalapani* refers to the freedom fighters from India who fought in the anti-colonial struggles and were sent to the cellular jail in the Andamans. So, the *Kalapani* chapters travel back to the past to recapture the great-grandmother Gainder's fragmented life. So, in these parts of the book entitled *Kalapani*, India figures directly in these chapters.

Mona receives a fellowship in India to conduct her research, and yet she does not travel, but she validates how her everyday present experiences are intricately bound to her past. So here is an excerpt from the book. Underneath the mask of everyday life lies a swirling sea of memory and desire, of dreams and myth-making. In the separation of these two worlds, we perish.


The bridge between them arches high above us. A raging river held in place by silken ropes, ropes strong as gossamer. Mona states, I quote, 'My foremothers, my own great-grandmother Gainder, crossed the unknown of the *Kalapani*, the black waters that lie between India and the Caribbean,' unquote. So, incidentally, we see that Mona gives universality to the particular journey of her great-grandmother Gainder by drawing on a community sketch or a community biography and addressing, you know, all contemporary women from her grandmother's time, from Gainder's time, as her foremothers. In the first *Kalapani* chapter, titled '*Borrowed Time*,' Mona moves back in time to India in 1829.

The narrative delineates and comments on the social orthodoxy prevailing among the different sections of Indian society at that time. Gainder is born into a poor Brahmin family, and she receives basic education from her father. So, after her father's demise, her marriage is fixed to an older widower with two children. From this situation, we see that Gainder escapes the unwanted marriage and reaches Benares, where widows live. Gainder flees from her marriage and ultimately gets deported from the Garden Ridge Depot in Calcutta to Trinidad.

Espinet, through this story, through this saga and odyssey of Gainder, discusses the problems faced by Indian widows. So it begins with her own great-grandmother, but it starts talking about the foremothers, all the contemporary women from her grandmother's time who were living in India. The widows who lived after the death of their husbands would, in many cases, be mistreated and abandoned by society. According to Espinet's representation, the abject female bodies would often be lured and sexually exploited by the money-hungry *Arkatis*, or the labor recruiters, and ultimately they would be mistreated, exploited, and racially abused in the plantations. However, in this regard, we have to understand this particular representation of Indian widows by the author, by Espinet.

Retrieving the Past

- Espinet, through the story of Gainder, discusses the problems faced by the Indian widows. The widows who lived after the death of their husbands were, in many events, abandoned by the society.
- According to Espinet's representation, the abject female bodies would be lured and sexually violated by money-hungry *arkatis*, and ultimately exploited and racially abused in the plantations.'
- However, such depiction of Hindu widows align with a formulaic imaging of the "vulnerable Hindu widow," who is supposed to be eternally threatened by disgrace, molestation, abduction and conversion by the Muslims, and so needs to be consigned under the paternalistic care of the State. Anxiety around the Hindu widow's body legitimized practices, such as Sati and widow remarriage, to prevent her falling into the hand of the 'Other' community's man and thereby cause degeneration of the Hindu community.



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Such a depiction of the Hindu widow resonates with the formulaic imaging and imagination of the vulnerable Hindu widow, which was not true at all times. It could be true in many cases, but not always. So, there is this formulaic imagination and imaging of the vulnerable Hindu widow with which such a depiction really resonates, and according to this formulaic imagination,

the Hindu widow is supposed to be eternally threatened by disgrace, molestation, abduction, and conversion, mainly by the Muslim community, and so she needs to be

consigned under the paternalistic care of the state. So, anxiety around the Hindu widow's body legitimized practices such as sati and widow remarriage, to prevent her from falling into the hands of the other community's men and thereby causing degeneration of the Hindu community. So, this is a very common trope which comes back again in Espinet's writing: how the Hindu widow is particularly vulnerable to sexual and other forms of exploitation. So, as a young girl, Gainder was fond of singing and dancing, for which she faced a lot of criticism.

Retrieving the Past

- As a young girl, Gainder was fond of singing and dancing, for which she had to face criticism. Even during her stay on the plantation, she would sometimes join dancing on different occasions, much to the dismay of her husband Joshua. Joshua was a converted Christian man working on the plantation of Trinidad. He forbade her from singing and dancing.
- 'While she enjoyed some sense of freedom in the new social context, she found herself imprisoned in the conjugal space' (Lahiri).
- The second part of the novel documents the journey of the Coolie passengers to the plantations. In Gainder's journey to Trinidad, she went through sexual abuse, first on the ship and then on the plantations.
- Espinet narrates Gainder's love story with Jeevan who had once saved her from being exploited by a sailor on the ship. Jeevan had killed the sailor, for which he had to serve imprisonment.



Even during her stay on the plantation, she would sometimes join in dancing on different occasions, much to the dismay of her husband, Joshua. So, Joshua was a converted Christian man working on the plantation in Trinidad. He forbade Gainder from participating in singing and dancing. So, according to Himadri Lahiri in this regard, I quote Lahiri: 'While she enjoyed some sense of freedom in the new social context, she found herself imprisoned in the conjugal space.' The second part of the novel documents the journey of the coolie passengers to the plantations.

In Gainder's journey to Trinidad, she endured sexual abuse first on the ship and then on the plantations. So, in this regard, Espinet narrates Gainder's love story with a man named Jeevan, who once saved her from exploitation by a sailor on the ship. Jeevan killed the sailor, for which he served imprisonment. Then, we see the third and final part of the Kalapani narrative, returning to India and highlighting the problems and treatment faced by women under the looming shadow of patriarchy. This sort of gendered oppression or hierarchy is also reflected in the diaspora. For instance, we see that Joshua, even on the plantations, carries his patriarchal values and does not allow Gainder to participate in songs and dances.

He disapproves of Gainder performing, singing, and dancing. So, these are the same values he carries with him in the diaspora. And we see Espinet discussing the treatment... meted out to the women back in India. The novel excavates the past of Gainder and other female indentured laborers.

The past and present are also distinctly represented through different font styles. The Kalapani sections are structured in italics and deliberately kept separate from the main text. Thus, the semantic or grammatical separation at the language level reflects cultural segregation. Kalapani and its inmates—those who experienced Kalapani—are a distinct populace. They have lost their caste.

They are no longer part of the mainstream Indian population. So, the separation of writing through italicization reflects this social separation, this sociocultural segregation. The italicized parts predominantly represent the historical narratives of the Girmityas, which is very different from the present-day lived experiences of the descendants of these laborers.



So, 'girmit'—to harken back—refers to an agreement, and 'girmityas' are the laborers who signed or consented to these agreements to work as laborers in plantations abroad. So, the narratives of Espinet's 'The Swinging Bridge' deal with the construction of pioneering Indian women's lives in India during colonial times and in the diaspora. These narratives peek into history from a temporal and spatial distance. These narratives speak to history—Indian history—from a temporal and spatial distance, and they build archival or oral repositories of the lives of indentured laborers.


The significance of this novel, 'The Swinging Bridge,' lies in the fact that there exist very few autobiographical or non-fictional works written by the first-generation girmityas or




indentured laborers in the genre of Kalapani narratives. One obvious reason is that the Coolie diaspora comprised mainly uneducated, even illiterate migrants. It took a lot of time for them to acquire education and start writing about their experiences. And in most cases, education came to the subsequent generations.

So they had to really do a good bit of research about their ancestors, about their foremothers and forefathers before we could have education. Something concrete in documentation, in documented form. So, Judith Misrahi-Barak says that the combination and interconnection of space and time in the novel constitute a highly diasporic place-time in which to meander and reinvent the self. The narrative of this novel goes beyond the apparent binariness of time and space. In fact, past versus present, home country versus host country, individual versus community—all these kinds of binaries are evaded here.

Time and Space

- Judith Misrahi-Barak says that 'the combination and interconnection of space and time in the novel constitute a highly diasporic *place-time* in which to meander and reinvent the self.'
- The narrative goes beyond the apparent binary-ness of time and space (past vs present, home country vs host country, individual vs community). The protagonist Mona is forced to travel back in time and space to her native Trinidad as well as India by her dying brother, Kello.
- Her temporary return to Trinidad enables her to open a new space of reconnection: through the untold stories of her ancestors. She feels that she is not "rooted" like her cousin Bess, who has never left Trinidad.
- A questioning of her self intrudes as a disturbing element in her not-so-well-ordered life (Barak).




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The protagonist Mona is forced to travel back in time and space to her native Trinidad as well as to India by her dying brother Kello. She is forced to travel back in time and space, kind of reoccupy, reclaim the time and space that her foremothers have lived by virtue of going back to native Trinidad, as well as learning about the Indian experience. This happens when her dying brother asks her to reclaim their ancestral land. So, her temporary return to Trinidad enables her to open up a new space of reconnection through the untold stories of her ancestors, to be precise, her foremothers.

So, she feels that she is not rooted like her cousin Bess, who has never left Trinidad. She is just coming back to Trinidad to reclaim their ancestral land. It's not the same as never leaving Trinidad. So, a questioning of herself intrudes and intervenes as a disturbing element in her not-so-well-ordered life.

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So, a constant questioning of herself, a constant intervention of herself plays as a disturbing element in her life, which is already not so well ordered. So, there is a dearth of works in the genre of Kalapani, and it remained undiscovered until the 1960s. We see that scholar and critic Vijay Mishra speaks of this individual, Bechu—his name is Bechu—who was discovered in the 1960s. To quote Mishra, 'when the economic historian Alan Adamson found his letters to the editors of English-language newspapers,' unquote. So he, referring to Bechu, was an extraordinarily articulate man in his mid-thirties, one who intervened in the discourse of plantation labor to dismantle its contradictions.

So, Mishra explains how Bechu's intervention His, you know, documentation in the form of letters had an immense impact on the public mind. So, we see that Judith Barak brings to the fore an analysis of these letters that emerge frequently in the narrative of *The Swinging Bridge*. These letters are placed separately from the physical being or the physical existence only in appearance. These letters, however, contribute to bringing the past back to the surface.



The letters are instrumental in making the body present through and beyond its absence, and they give the timeline a highly complex dimension. We cannot have, therefore, a very unilinear narration. Through these letters, we are moving back and forth in time—the bodily presence and the mental presence, the local landscape and the mental scape. You know, they do not always overlap, right.

It renders a very complex dimension, a very layered dimension to the novel itself. This foregrounds and links the body's experience, the body's actual experience of diasporic space, and the perception of self in diasporic time, right. So, the letters are very important in linking the body's experience of diasporic space and the perception of one's self in diasporic time. So, we see that both this collection of letters and visuals are ruptures and junctures in space and time, creating a specific place. And the letters in the novel, the presence of the letters in the novel, function on a very thematic level.

Through these letters, the protagonist, Mona, as well as the readers, can travel back and forth in time. I would like to stop my lecture here today. Let us discuss further in our subsequent lectures. Thank you.

