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LAKSHMI PERSAUD AND THE AMBIVALENT INDO-CARIBBEAN FEMINIST BILDUNGSROMAN



Elizabeth Jackson

While praising Lakshmi Persaud as a pioneer of Indo-Caribbean women's writing who created original and well-crafted feminine (if not feminist) perspectives of Hindu communities in Trinidad, several critics have called attention to the limitations of her feminist vision. For instance, Brinda Mehta has argued in *Diasporic (Dis) locations: Indo-Caribbean Women Writers Negotiate the Kala Pani* that "their author a product of her middle-class Hindu upbringing with its strict enforcement of female codes of behaviour, Persaud's novels betray a certain caution and tentativeness of expression" (19). In a similar vein, Kenneth Ramchand has observed in his discussion of the young narrator's perspective on male irresponsibility in *Butterfly in the Wind* that "the writer's position seems ambivalent" (232).

Distinguishing the position of the author from that of the narrator and bearing in mind that ambivalence can add depth and nuance to literary fiction, my paper will undertake to analyse further the ambivalence at the heart of Persaud's three coming-of-age novels *Butterfly in the Wind* (1990), *Sastra* (1993), and *Daughters of Empire* (2012). At its most basic level, this ambivalence is generated by the conflicting claims of self and community. However, far from presenting binary choices between conformity and rebellion, these novels portray more subtle and – I contend – more interesting situations for the

protagonists to negotiate. In each text, although the local (Hindu Trinidadian) community is far from idealized, it is depicted with a palpable sense of affection and nostalgia, for its rich and beautiful cultural traditions, for its loving and emotionally supportive families, for its diversity, and – importantly – for its *evolving* nature as gender ideologies change (albeit in limited ways) over a relatively short period of time. Thus these women-centred novels present complex dilemmas for their young protagonists, each of whom values her community and cherishes her cultural heritage but also strives toward autonomy and self-fulfilment.

Originally a European genre, the bildungsroman or coming-of-age novel has traditionally focused on the psychological and moral growth of the protagonist from childhood to adulthood. As its lexical construction suggests, the term bildungsroman originated in Germany, with “Bildung” translated as “education” or “forming”, and “Roman” translated as “novel”. Although the bildungsroman has its roots in German Romanticism, with the publication of *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship* by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe in 1795-96, it quickly developed into a major literary genre throughout Europe and the rest of the world. Some of the best-known coming-of-age novels include Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847), Charles Dickens’s *David Copperfield* (1850) and *Great Expectations* (1861), James Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), and George Lamming’s *In the Castle of My Skin* (1953). In her book *Unbecoming Women: British Women Writers and the Novel of Development*, Susan Fraiman contends that the genre has “define[d] development in emphatically masculine terms” (5). She goes on to argue that women writers have used the genre to “dramatize female development in contradictory ways” and to show “the ‘feminine’ as a site of ideological confusion, struggle, and possibility” (31). It is from this perspective that I approach the coming-of-age novels of Lakshmi Persaud, focusing on the contradictory ways in which they dramatize female

development, as well as the “ideological confusion, struggle, and possibility” at the heart of their interesting ambivalence.

However, it is also important to note that as a Caribbean author, Lakshmi Persaud brings additional dimensions to the ideological issues explored in Fraiman’s study of British women writers. As we shall see, these include issues of “race” and ethnicity, the colonial legacy, cultural and religious differences, migration, and diasporic subjectivity – all of which intersect with gender and social class. It is interesting to note, too, the ways in which Persaud’s novel *Daughters of Empire* “writes back” to the conventions of Jane Austen in tracing the diverging formation and marriage choices of Amira’s three young daughters. In this way, Persaud is self-consciously appropriating and refashioning the traditional female bildungsroman in a postcolonial context.

Notwithstanding the European masculine (if not masculinist) orientation of the traditional coming-of-age novel, a number of critics have noted “the centrality of the bildungsroman in the corpus of Caribbean women’s literature” (Smyth 181), including the early works of Merle Hodge, Michelle Cliff, Jamaica Kincaid, Pauline Melville, and Erna Brodber, among others. Kaisa Ilmonen has further argued that “from the perspective of modern feminist criticism, the traditional European bildungsroman with the female protagonist... offers an unsatisfactory development story. Fulfilling the developmental process means that the heroine ‘softens’ herself into the position of wife and is ready for marriage, which is seen as the sole appropriate outcome.” (70) Ilmonen (problematically) uses *Jane Eyre* as a classic example of a coming-of-age novel in which the protagonist develops into a suitable wife in patriarchal terms and observes that “such ‘softening’ disappears from the novels of [many] Caribbean women writers” (70). From this point of view, Lakshmi Persaud’s novels might be described as conservative or traditional, in the sense that *Sastra* and *Daughters of Empire* culminate in suitable marriages for the young female

protagonists. However, as we shall see, it is difficult to ignore the numerous passages of strikingly direct – some would say polemical – feminist criticism in all three of Persaud’s novels under consideration here, as well as in *Jane Eyre* itself.

From a contemporary perspective, it is easy enough to identify the limitations of Lakshmi Persaud’s feminist vision, particularly in comparison with that of other, more daring Indo-Caribbean women writers like Shani Mootoo. However, it is worth noting that in *Butterfly in the Wind* and *Sastra*, Persaud was looking back at an earlier era in Trinidad (i.e., the 1940s and 1950s) with a palpable sense of nostalgia, mixed with gentle social criticism. In *Daughters of Empire*, a novel tracing the development to maturity of three sisters whose family emigrates from Trinidad to London during the 1970s, Persaud is exploring what Kaisa Ilmonen has described – in a different context – as the individual ways in which these young women “construct identities between cultures” (60). This novel also explores the development of their mother, Amira, in keeping with the views of Rosalind Coward, Rita Felski and others that the protagonists of feminist coming-of-age novels are often adult women.

Certainly it can be argued that Persaud’s feminist criticism is compromised by her uncritical portraits of the positioning of her protagonists in the socioeconomic hierarchy. For instance, while acknowledging the narrator’s “astute perception that women bear the brunt of an economically disadvantaged community” in *Butterfly in the Wind* (144), Mariam Pirbhai has pointed out that:

The alcoholism and attendant patterns of behaviour, such as domestic violence or economic bankruptcy, besieging the male members of the community are shown to affect those employed by [the narrator’s] family, yet the family’s complicity as the well-to-do proprietors of a

local rum shop in these continuing patterns of social dysfunction is never addressed. (144-145)

Another example of what might be described as unreflective class privilege occurs in *Daughters of Empire*, when Amira, the “trailing wife” of a Trinidadian businessman, is adjusting to life in London, where the family has recently moved because of her husband’s employment: “Without the home help she was used to in Trinidad, this domestic environment was new and challenging. Here it was all left to her. Santosh had said airily there was nothing to worry about and left for work.” (16) Although we note the husband’s airy dismissal of domestic concerns since he can delegate them all to his wife, we also note that in Trinidad, Amira had in turn been able to delegate much of the domestic labour to her “home help”. Thus we see a hierarchy of privilege with the man at the top, his wife in the middle, and working-class women at the bottom.

The intersection of gender and class in the division of labour remains similarly unquestioned in *Butterfly in the Wind*. Perhaps the best example of this is the narrator’s description of the social changes affecting elite women in Trinidad during the 1950s and 1960s:

These were times when it became less difficult for an educated young woman to carry on a full-time job and be a good mother and wife. In her own mother (and mother-in-law if she were lucky) there was invariably help in emergencies, while home-help was more readily available and at a price attractive to a young graduate. (156)

The question of whether the home-help’s wages are as attractive to herself as they are to her employer is never considered, and we also note two unquestioned assumptions in this passage. The first is that a woman’s primary role is to “be a good mother and wife”. The second is that even when a wife is in full-time employment, all domestic work and child care remain the exclusive

responsibility of women – mothers, grandmothers, and “home-help”, while fathers are not mentioned in this context. However, at times the narrator’s position is more ambiguous; for instance, towards the end of *Butterfly in the Wind*: “I could see that marriages needed the beautiful cohesion of tender feelings; yet I had noticed that where the wife could neither sew nor cook nor manage a home; and where the husband did not earn much, such marriages rarely developed into something splendid, comforting and worthwhile” (182). Here it is not clear whether these reflections are an endorsement or a criticism of the traditional gendered division of labour, in the sense that a marriage can rarely be successful without adherence to gender norms.

If men’s exemption from domestic responsibility seems to remain unquestioned in Persaud’s novels, so too is their sole ownership of the marital property, even in an ostensibly feminist statement by Kamla’s mother in *Butterfly in the Wind*: “If heaven forbid, she should not be blessed in marriage, it would be better for her to leave *her husband’s home* [my emphasis added] and find a job. That would be preferable to a life of humiliation, cruelty and suffering.” (132) The underlying assumption here is that when a woman is subjected to domestic abuse, it is the victim and not the perpetrator who should have to leave the marital home. Earlier in the novel, the young narrator Kamla has come to decidedly antifeminist conclusions about the importance of a woman maintaining even a deeply unsatisfactory relationship with a man, regardless of the cost to herself. The cook Daya rises every morning at 5:00am to prepare her husband’s meals before putting in a long day’s work in the kitchen of Kamla’s mother. More often than not, Daya’s husband spends her hard-earned wages in the local rum shop. When the seven-year-old Kamla initially tells Daya that she should leave her husband because “he is no good” (39), Daya asks how she can possibly leave a man who has nobody else to look after him. Easily convinced of a woman’s duty to sacrifice herself for her husband, Kamla reports that:

From that day on Daya went up in my estimation. I felt here was a woman struggling so hard to build a home and a relationship with someone who was not appreciative of her. But she held on and, orphan as she was, appreciated more than I could ever have understood then, the importance of having at least one human being, however imperfect, as a close companion. (39)

Thus Kamla's earlier judgment is replaced by a reaffirmation of traditional notions about the compulsory attachment of a woman to a man, no matter how egregiously he exploits her. Although some might question whether the narrator is necessarily endorsing the attitudes she developed as a child, my argument is that she seems to be reinforcing them in her affirmation about companionship, "however imperfect" being "more [important] than I could ever have understood then".

A more subtle – but equally telling – expression of traditional gender ideologies occurs in a passage in *Daughters of Empire* describing a cooking course for young women which also aimed to develop their social skills: "Methods of cooking became methods of communicating with others, how to speak to bring understanding – the tone of voice, the pace of speaking, the words chosen and the length of time spent either appealing, enquiring, entreating or requesting" (51). Here we notice that each of the verbs "appealing, enquiring, entreating or requesting" positions the woman as a supplicant. In this context we would not expect to find words with authoritative or aggressive connotations (such as asserting or demanding), but there is a remarkable absence of even moderately empowering forms of communication, such as stating, declaring, maintaining, upholding, and so on. Thus the choice of words reveals significant – and seemingly unexamined – indications of women's disempowerment.

Alongside such uncritical illustrations of patriarchal ideologies, Persaud's novels also contain several passages of overt feminist criticism, most strikingly with regard to sexual morality and its double standards. From this perspective, Kamla's reflections in *Butterfly in the Wind* on the stories from the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* enjoining women to be chaste and faithful regardless of their husbands' philandering are worth quoting at some length:

As the years rolled on, I could not help thinking that such tales had little effect on men. This may have been because adultery committed by men had a lot going for it, since it was seen as "the way of men", one of the crosses wives had to bear with stoic calmness. That, I felt, was unfair and unjust. And I saw women's acceptance of this not as a result of having a greater capacity to absorb pain or to forgive, as older women believed, but because of their helpless dependence upon their husbands. I was overcome by a deep sorrow for my sex in bondage, and for the real and terrifying predicament biology and custom had placed them in. (99-100)

Another example of direct - and surprisingly trenchant - feminist criticism occurs in the words of Dolly, a minor character in *Sastra* who was made pregnant and abandoned, though she never revealed the identity of the father of her child. Dolly issues a warning to Sastra before taking her own life:

"I believed his words. Try not to believe in anyone, not to care for anyone more than yourself... you have only yourself to fall back on; if you love another more than yourself and he abandons you, you become loved by no one, not even yourself. Learn this from me." (67-68)

Sastra's own struggles are less dramatic but more fully developed in the narrative. As a manifestation of her inner conflict between the claims of the self and the claims of the community, she is torn between her strong desire to marry Rabindranath, the man she loves, and her equally strong desire to please her family by marrying Govind, a genuinely good man (liked by Sastra), whom they have lovingly chosen for her in their sincere belief that he is the best

person to make her happy. Although the conflict between passion and duty in the choice of a husband is a well-worn dilemma in popular fiction from Britain, India, and elsewhere, it is explored in *Sastra* with subtlety and nuance, not least because the claims of both sides are presented as so appealing. The feminist implications of this dilemma are touched on too, albeit in an understated way in the words of an old woman to her daughter-in-law (Govind's mother):

“Do you remember when you got married, no one consulted us about anything; no one asked if we had preferences; in those days we just obeyed quietly. It never came to us to direct our own lives, to do something different from our parents' wishes. We were obedient daughters; later, obedient daughters-in-law and good wives; we tried to be even better mothers than our own. At each stage of our lives we obeyed, we listened to everyone; our own feelings did not matter, so we put them so far away from us that we lost them. Those were our times, Shakuntala, those were very different times.” (154)

Thus the narrative calls attention to the changes in gender dynamics which were affecting even the most traditional Indo-Caribbean families during this era. Indeed, both *Sastra* and *Butterfly in the Wind* portray the 1950s as a time of remarkable advances in educational and professional opportunities for upwardly mobile Indo-Trinidadian women. Crucially, in Persaud's fictional accounts this progress is supported and encouraged by older women who wanted better opportunities for their daughters. For instance, Kamla says of the highly academic St Augustine Girls' High School: “Many of the students came from homes where parents had not had a primary school education; homes with traditional Hindu mothers, conservative women, whose own marriages had been arranged, but who were now giving their daughters a freedom undreamt of in their own childhood” (*Butterfly* 155).

This intergenerational encouragement of female education is part of the broader emphasis in all three novels on the value of mutual support among women. In

Daughters of Empire the network of women who share comfort, advice, encouragement, and practical help with one another includes Amira and her three daughters in London; her sister Ishani and two older, fiercely loyal female friends in Trinidad; and numerous additional female friends, neighbours and mentors (including white British women) in London. These women offer so much support to one another that their relationships are arguably idealized in the narrative, and at times their well-meaning advice seeks to reinforce patriarchal ideologies: “Don’t be too hard on Santosh. A man’s brain is not like ours. It is something we have to learn to live with.” (25) At other times they encourage each other to consider their own needs within the patriarchal setup: “In coming here, Santosh and the girls have benefited, but not you. You sacrificed a career, the part of you that is crying out feels deceived, badly let down. You drank from a bottle labelled Family First and it’s made you feel smaller and smaller.” (171)

In *Daughters of Empire* there is much discussion of the gradual empowerment of women, but the approach to this issue is consistently cautious, as a pragmatic strategy for appeasing conservative men and women. This pragmatically cautious approach is explicitly articulated in the description of the school for teenage girls in the Penal area of Trinidad, run by Lily and Palli, two elderly women with a “passion for betterment” (54). This school, we are told, was “perceived by even the most conservative families and die-hard traditionalists as an up-to-date way of making their daughters ready for an arranged marriage” (54). However:

What no one thought at the time, except Lily, Palli and Ishani, was that the school was sowing the seeds of a quiet revolution. What they learnt would improve the lives of these women by enhancing their ability to think, solve problems and make their case. But in order to win the blessings of a conservative, paternalistic society, Ishani’s

recommendation of the school to parents had emphasized the domestic skills that would be acquired. (54-55).

Attending this school during the summer vacation, Amira had noticed that many of her fellow students had arrived “with a hushed submission to authority. They had learnt to be careful not to give offense at any time” (55). While the details of how the enhancement of domestic skills can lead to the empowerment of women are left somewhat vague, the narrator observes that as time had moved on, “past pupils had begun sending their children to the increasing number of secondary schools in the country areas and during the vacation to Lily’s and Palli’s courses” (55). Thus we infer that although these young Indo-Trinidadian women are offered an academic education in order to prepare them for professional careers, they are also trained in cookery and other domestic skills on the assumption that household chores remain an exclusively female responsibility.

Indeed, there are such interesting ambivalences around the issue of domesticity, particularly in *Daughters of Empire*, that several passages are worth quoting at some length:

Now, plunged into its unending flow, she concluded that there was no such thing as unskilled domestic work. The simplest act needed a skilled hand and thinking through. (33)

Each day she saw something saying: *Just you look at me, you must see that I need cleaning...* There was the eternal tidying and dusting and wiping over and over again. And each day there were meals – preparation, cooking, cleaning up, and then all over again. Repetitive, dull; she longed for escape. (34)

Amira knew that home was a sanctuary for the human spirit. It held together the essential goodness of living in the minutiae of life. So why was it perceived as insignificant, even by those who laboured at it daily? “I’m just a housewife,” mothers said when you met them. She

had never replied, "You are the pivot of your family's well-being, a good mother, housewife and neighbour. You are adept at a dozen skills at least." (34)

Relocated to London, without the (female) "home help" she had enjoyed in Trinidad, Amira is reflecting here, apparently for the first time in her life, on the questions around domesticity. However, a woman with a more developed feminist consciousness would know that the home is usually constructed as a sanctuary for the *male* spirit (not the "human" spirit), and that for most women throughout the world it is a space of unending labour. She would also know that the reason why housework has traditionally been devalued (even by women themselves) is that it is work that has traditionally been done by women. Although she now understands the value of domestic work, the skills involved, and the constant demands, Amira never questions the idea that women should remain – as she puts it – the pivot of their families' well-being with exclusive responsibility for the domestic sphere. Instead, she adds outside activities to her domestic chores. In a letter to her sister Ishani in Trinidad, she explains why she is attending art history courses: "The truth is I found full-time domesticity was making me afraid of the world outside the house... I was losing the art of thinking outside my family and myself." (125-126) Although the limitations of a life devoted exclusively to domesticity are clearly articulated, it is never explained why Amira does not continue the fulfilling teaching career she had enjoyed in Trinidad, particularly after her daughters have become acclimated to their schools and their lives in the London suburb. The unstated explanation might be that even with full-time employment outside the home, all of the domestic responsibility would remain Amira's alone, and unlike in Trinidad, she cannot simply outsource the chores to cheap (female) labour on a teacher's salary. Again, the gendered division of labour remains unquestioned.

In her discussion of *Butterfly in the Wind* and *Sastra*, Brinda Mehta notes that “even though the female protagonists in the two novels try to assert their independence within severe societal limitations, their ultimate emancipation from such inhibitions is realized when they emigrate” (19). However, as we have seen, *Daughters of Empire* consistently points to the ways in which emigration can be a disempowering experience for women in patriarchal households. At a particularly trying time, Amira articulates her frustrations to her husband Santosh, apparently without effect:

“Our culture traps women. When a family emigrates, as soon as the man gets a reasonable job, he has nothing more to think about. But the wife is expected to create the same home life for the family, the same foods, the same assurances and loving care they had in the old country... The responsibility is an unbearable burden, yet women silently carry on.” (36)

Amira’s observations here illustrate the argument that “diasporic situations can sometimes intensify the idea of men as negotiators with the external world and women as custodians of traditional culture within the home” (Jackson 105). Although she is shown to be well aware of the shift in power that their emigration had generated, Amira’s reflections on this issue consist of rather despairing questions without answers:

But what alternative did she have? Had marriage become too costly for women like herself? Was not a new generation of women fighting bravely for opportunities equal to men’s? If everyone in a family couldn’t benefit equally, was it inevitable whose well-being would be at the top of the list, and whose at the bottom? (40)

In this context, we can compare the situation of a married woman like Amira with that of a single woman like her Indian friend Kamla Devi who writes to her: “London is where I belong. It is the freedom for women, *especially single*

women [my emphasis], that makes it the place for me.” (58) In these ways, marriage is envisioned as an inherently inegalitarian institution.

However, at times the inequalities within the marital relationship are contested by the female characters, in their thoughts and even in their speech. For instance, Ishani thinks resentfully that “some men want you around all the time, just to pour their tea” (125), and Amira observes that “women were now far more forthright than they’d ever been. Much remained to be done, for as [she] herself had learnt, no one, including males, gave up power willingly.” (55) This idea is further developed in a discussion with visiting neighbours in which we see the young Anjali (one of Amira’s daughters) directly challenging patriarchal ideologies:

Jack cleared his throat and said that women had to be more patient than men. They were the ones who brought up children. “It is the natural state.”

“It is not natural,” said Anjali, as she helped Nick to another kachourie. “Women were without the means to become independent of fathers or husbands. People who are dependent on others have to have more patience, they simply have no choice.” (220)

Despite the feminist sentiments that Anjali articulates in this passage, we note that she is still dutifully serving food to the men. Although all three of Anjali’s daughters grow up to marry suitable young men, the choices are theirs, and the youngest, Vidya, chooses to marry a white British man. Significantly, at Mark and Vidya’s wedding, “they vowed to love and cherish each other, but not to obey” (326). Thus the narrative gestures toward more egalitarian marital relationships in the future for the younger generation.

Despite the overt – but still cautious and ambivalent – engagement with feminist issues in *Daughters of Empire*, it might be *Butterfly in the Wind* which

offers the most far-reaching critique of traditional power structures. It has often been argued that education is key to women's empowerment and indeed, equality of opportunity for men and women of all backgrounds, but *Butterfly in the Wind* raises some important issues about the uses and abuses of education in the Caribbean context. Set in 1940s and 1950s Trinidad, this coming-of-age novel offers a unique female perspective of the often antagonistic interplay between the protagonist's orthodox Hindu upbringing and a European colonial education. Education is presented as one of the catalysts of social, cultural, and political change in the novel, but it is also recognized as an instrument of control by the colonial authorities. According to Kamla, the narrator-protagonist, school was "a time for learning by rote" (52). It was a time when "reasons for things were not given", a time for the imposition of "ideas, concepts, formulae" so that "we could neither assess nor give meanings to things" (52). But if this colonial education was engaged in establishing authority and suppressing the ability to think critically and independently, so too was the traditional education handed down through the elders, the institutions, the festivals, the rituals, and the ruling values within the Hindu community. As Kenneth Ramchand has argued, "it is part of the book's implicit critique that it sees little difference in effect and intention between a colonial education and the traditional shaping to which the Hindu female especially is subject" (229).

It is my contention that the exposure to multiple belief systems enables Kamla to develop a degree of critical distance from both. As a girl from a traditional Hindu family, she naturally approaches the Christian indoctrination she receives at school with a degree of scepticism, and crucially, she carries this same scepticism into her attitudes toward gender ideologies within her own community. We have seen, for instance, that in discussing the sacred Hindu texts with her mother, Kamla argues explicitly against male privilege,

questioning the moral lessons on female conduct to be found in the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. Kamla becomes resistant to *both* colonial ideologies *and* traditional Hindu ideologies by being simultaneously exposed to the two systems of thought during her formative years. Arguably, it was the juxtaposition of two different ideologies which encouraged her general scepticism, and without this double exposure, she might have simply accepted what she was taught to believe by one or the other. This suggests that patriarchal control over women is facilitated by isolating them within their respective communities, and it follows that an effective method of resistance could be cross-cultural collaboration among women of different backgrounds.

Notwithstanding the limitations of Persaud's feminist vision, particularly with regard to issues of class and male privilege, her novels point at times to surprisingly insightful parallels between different systems of power and authority. Unlike many other Caribbean women writers, she does not dwell on dramatic issues like domestic violence and sexual abuse; instead she focuses insightfully on more subtle forms of gender inequality which profoundly affect the day-to-day lives of women. As I have been arguing, her approach is ambivalent and at times inconsistent, but so too are the questions and issues with which she grapples in her fiction. Clearly, Lakshmi Persaud has extended the scope of the ideological issues explored in Susan Fraiman's study of coming-of-age novels by British women writers. Persaud has not only shown "the 'feminine' as a site of ideological confusion, struggle, and possibility" (31) but also insisted on its intersection with issues of cultural difference in Caribbean (and Caribbean diasporic) contexts.

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