

***And She Wrote Backwards: Same-Sex Love, Gender and Identity in  
Shani Mootoo's work and her recent Valmiki's Daughter***

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**Abstract:**

This article traces the representation of love, gender and national identity in Shani Mootoo's creative work in general and her most recent novel *Valmiki's Daughter* (2008) in particular. In all her work, Mootoo describes the phenomenon of otherness as a part of the negotiating process of the protagonists' selves. Challenging xenophobia, homophobia and all forms of prejudices the author works with the concept of lesbian and bisexual love, cross-racial relationships in order to write identity and to create a home.

**Keywords:** *Valmiki's Daughter*, poetry, video, storytelling, identity, cosmopolitanism, lesbianism, belonging

Ever since her first novel *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996) was published the Canadian author-cum-multimedia artist Shani Mootoo has become a powerful voice in the postcolonial literary scene. Having started out with the collection of short stories *Out on Main Street & Other Stories* (1993), Mootoo also produced a volume of poetry (2001) as well as a number of videos and paintings which have been shown and exhibited internationally. Her video work includes experimental films such as *English Lesson* (1991), *The Wild Women in the Woods* (1993), *Guerita and Prietitia* (1995, with Kathy High) and *View* (2000). More recently her latest novel *Valmiki's Daughter* (2008) stirs great interest in literary circles transporting the reader on a journey through Trinidad and Canada.

Having left Ireland when she was only three months old and Trinidad at the age of 19, Mootoo herself feels most comfortable being labelled Canadian artist, because to her Canadianness is open to many interpretations. Whereas commonly Canadianness connotes mainly national identity it seems as if Mootoo reads more into this category of national belonging. To her Canadianness seems to offer a greater freedom to successfully imagine homosexual lifeworlds in general and lesbian love in particular. The very idea to step out of one's familial and cultural background without losing one's self is central to the author and her understanding of individuality, gender and selfhood. Consequently,

the quest for a transcultural identity has become a recurring motif in all her creative work.

In *The Predicament of Or*, her collection of poetry, this cosmopolitan, lesbian stance is probably after all most palpably felt. Hence her poem “A Recognition” poetically circumscribes how homosexual identity or better lesbian selfhood is sometimes painfully negotiated against the backdrop of nationality:

“You’re Trinidadian!”

I blurt out loudly, smugly,  
Accusation not, of course, intended.  
“I recognize the accent!”

[...]

Before I have time to ask  
“So where are you from?”  
“What’s your name?”  
“Who’s our mother, where’s your father?”  
she has turned,  
but I hear her say, “I am Canadian,”  
the reply dropped flat,  
mercilessly terse

These are the things I know:  
anonymity, autonomy  
freedom to self-define  
to forget  
to come out  
to escape

sometimes there is (something I understand)  
no room to negotiate (*Predicament of Or*, 84-84)

Here as elsewhere in her work, Shani Mootoo untiringly connects questions concerning gender identity with inquiries of belonging and nationality in order to emphasise a felt need to open up a more autonomous space which often consciously departs from that of the family and the community. In her magic realist novel *Cereus Blooms at Night*, one of the main characters, Tyler, summarizes his longing for autonomy and in the following way:

Over the years I pondered the gender and sex roles that seemed available to people, and the rules that went with them. After much reflection I have come to discern that my desire to leave the shores of Lantanacamara had much to do with wanting to study abroad, but far more with wanting to be somewhere where my “perversion,” which I tried diligently as I could to shake, might be either invisible or of no consequence to people to whom my foreignness was what would be strange. I was preoccupied with trying to understand what was natural and what perverse, and who said so and why. (47-48)

For homosexuals migrancy at times can become a powerful source of creativity, as already so intensely expressed in Gloria Anzaldúa's influential study *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*,<sup>1</sup> to facilitate characters to transgress cultural and social conventions. Yet, such represented border crossing within any piece of literature needs to be well balanced in order to avoid incredibility of characters. This explains why all narrative gestures addressing modern selfhood require authors to equip their characters very carefully.

Shani Mootoo's being in the world also comes vividly alive when her poetic I strikes the readers with “All the Irish I know” or “All the Hindi I know”. Interestingly enough, both poems utilize a very basic language register which implies a limitation with reference to both languages, Irish and Hindi. Mootoo's poetic orchestration of cosmopolitan life world presses for a rethinking of identity and citizenship. It is a claim for the political and social integration of migrants as members of a global community. All in all, Mootoo's poems present a diasporic condition and migrant feeling where one situates the poetic I not only in one but in multiple worlds hence ceaselessly striving for pledging “citizenship, unerring / Loyalty, to this State of Migrancy” (*Predicament of Or*, 81).

Mootoo's previous novels always fabricated imaginary islands such as Lantanacamera in *Cereus Blooms at Night* or Guanagaspar in *He Drown She in the Sea* as fictional backdrops against which the respective story unfolded. These non-specific locations, as the literary critic Vivian M. May suggests, are “particularly useful when writing about the conjoined histories of trauma and exile in diasporic contexts”.<sup>2</sup> There is no doubt that such imaginary geographies offer a great potential to invent new literary world, nonetheless, Mootoo latest family saga *Valmiki's Daughter* is set in San Fernando and Trinidad. Choosing the urban, affluent Indo-Trinidadian middle-class as a narrative backbone, with a particular narrative focus on a generation whose life has still been

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<sup>1</sup> Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. San Francisco: Spinster/Aunt Lute, 1987.

<sup>2</sup> Vivian M. May, “Dislocation and Desire in Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night*,” *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 37,2 Fall (2004): 98.

affected by the bleak horrors of indentured labour,<sup>3</sup> a denial of intimacy between partners<sup>4</sup> and negating of homosexuality,<sup>5</sup> it does not come as a great surprise that this generation readily sacrifices private happiness only to uphold an elite status. This certainly holds true for one of the main protagonists, Dr Valmiki Krishnu, a respected physician, who, despite his flings with numerous women, desperately seeks to hide that he is in fact a closeted homosexual. To him a fulfilling love life seems far beyond his reach. The situation gets intense when his two daughters start growing up and he realises that his eldest daughter Viveka also suffers from the suppression of her homosexual orientation in the closely-knit Indo-Trinidadian community. As Viveka struggles to break free the novel deals with the issues of race, gender and class. This struggle is well represented in an inner monologue in which Viveka reflects on her father's relationship to his friend-cum-lover Saul who usually accompanies Valmiki while going hunting in the woods:

What a weird man he [Valmiki] was, she [Viveka] thought, killing things for sport. He was sort of brave, she supposed, going into the forest as he did. She had met his friend Saul, and of all her parent's friends she was most drawn to him. Well, he wasn't her mother's friend. Why her father didn't bring him around to the house she couldn't understand. She could only put it down to the facts of Saul's race and class. Saul seemed so unassuming, so unlike most of the men in their more regular social circles. Her father really was weird. Brave on the one hand, a coward on the other. (86)

In the context of South Asian (diasporic) literature, the novel's title seems particularly striking probably because it evokes the Indian epic *Ramayana* of which the mythical figure of Valmiki is the author, who became also known as the first poet, or *Adi Kavi*. In the epic Valmiki's story tells us about a personal transformation of an infamous and nameless bandit who robs people to maintain his family. However, after his family refuses to collectively carry the burden of his committed sins, he withdraws in the woods to seek reconciliation and engage in a long meditation in order to purify his soul. When a divine voice declares his penance successful, he is named "Valmiki: one born out of ant-hills".<sup>6</sup> One day when his transformed soul is lacerated at the sight of a wounded bird, hit by a hunter's arrow, triggering a spontaneous utterance which eventually becomes the first *śloka* in Sanskrit literature. As the story goes the same meter was later used to compose the epic *Ramayana*.

<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of South Asian indenture labour and its representation in literature in light of diaspora see Vijay Mishra's "The Diasporic Imaginary: Theorizing the Indian Diaspora." *Textual Practice* 10. 3 (1996): 421–447.

<sup>4</sup> Brinda Metha, *Diasporic (Dis)locations: Indo-Caribbean Women Writers Negotiate the Kali Pani* (Jamaica: U. of the West Indies P, 2004), 186.

<sup>5</sup> Brinda Metha makes the following observation concerning homosexuality in general and lesbian love in particular in Indo-Caribbean political discourse "Lesbian love constitutes a thorny issue in discussions of sexual morality, by either remaining invisible in official discourses or by being openly criminalized by oppressive sexual legislation, in the form, for example, of the 1986 Sexual Offence Bill in Trinidad and Tobago." *Diasporic (Dis)locations*, 202.

<sup>6</sup> Suresh Chandra, *Encyclopaedia of Hindu Gods and Goddesses*. (New Delhi: Saruo & Sons, 1998), 262–263.

Without doubt, Shani Mootoo is aware of Valmiki and what he stands in for in an Indian sub continental context, however, the author suggests that to her the name is not reverberating this specific Indian epic but rather transports a particularly Trinidadian connotation:

“To me Valmiki is a big name, a full name with right amount of syllables; the Valmiki I know is a big fellow, a big, strong, powerful wealthy fellow and the name has an upper class sound in Trinidad, so it is the sound, the right sound for him. But it does not have anything to do with the god Valmiki. Imagine if I had that layer on top of the title, how pedantic that would be. Valmiki is a good sounding name. So when I suggested *Valmiki's Daughter* to my publisher it made total sense. In fact towards the end of writing the book I was able to go back and look at the story from both Valmiki's and Viveka's perspective. The story is not merely about Viveka but Viveka as Valmiki's daughter, and what it means to be a daughter.”<sup>7</sup>

Thus Mootoo is especially interested in silenced family structures which deeply impinge on the character's fictional lives. This also shows in the fact that the novel initially grew out of only one sentence which is now placed in the final part, before the epilogue (see *Valmiki's Daughter*, page 387), as Mootoo herself states: “[...] it was on the north coast of the island, on a strip of sand too slim to label a beach, that he lay on top of her”. “So” came afterwards. The word ‘So’ is a bridge between this part and the earlier one.”

Moreover, the previous line introduces the readers to the scene where Viveka and Trevor have sex on the beach for the first time:

“First time? With a man, I mean?” She nodded, embarrassed. Against such malodorous air it was impossible to moderate her breathing – one panacea, she thought, to the relentless push-push-pushing. When Trevor accidentally slipped out of the small progress he had made – he assured her it wasn't her fault – he had to start all over again. She did as she was told – raised her buttocks off the sand – and he slid one arm under her and brought her up yet higher. (390)

Her sexual experience shapes in Viveka the decision to eventually marry Trevor. Viveka's decision thus marks an end in its own right and it was at this point of the story that Mootoo herself became more interested in tracing the possibilities that lead to Viveka's final decision. The author was thus more concerned to flesh out what her character had to leave behind than going on forwards imagining a life after marriage:

“So I wrote backwards. I thought this is going to be a story which is not just about the society, but about parents and family life. It

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<sup>7</sup> Shani Mootoo's quotes are extracted from an interview conducted by the authors in Frankfurt, Germany on May 20<sup>th</sup> 2010.

would be much more interesting if she was brought up in a family where one of the parents faced a similar dilemma”

This idea of fictionally retracing the steps in a character’s life enables Shani Mootoo to interrogate various personal truths and enlarge them to a broader perspective in order to excavate a larger pattern of truth which cannot be interrogated by her mind. In this way the text draws our attention to realise a human space for social interaction which is devoid of any prejudice. This utopian world to some degree came into existence already much earlier, as for instance in *Cereus Blooms at Night*<sup>8</sup>, and represents Mootoo’s ongoing deep negotiation with discourses of human rights and justice. What we are left with then, is a genuine pledge for universal humanity, which lies at the heart of all of Mootoo’s creative projects.

In one of her early experimental video’s *Wild Woman in the Woods* (1993) Mootoo celebrates the unusual homecoming of Pria, an obviously South Asian butch character, played by Mootoo, who eventually finds a home in a somewhat utopian community of outsiders in the Canadian Rocky Mountains. The video opens with a close-up on a bowl of fruits which is the overture to a ceremonial scene in which Pria worships her gods before she leaves the house to visit a South Asian love interest in the neighbourhood. Whilst Pria first plans take a bunch of flowers to her friend’s house, probably implying a westerner’s gesture, she eventually decides to throw the flowers away before she enters her friend’s home. This decision is underlined with an artificial dropping-sound and a change in the visual frame by means of fading colours. Soon after Pria has arrived at her beautiful friend’s home, the latter tells her about her recent engagement gaily showing off the sparkly diamante ring on her finger. Deeply disappointed Pria leaves the place. In the next sequence, the camera follows Pria on her stroll into the snowy Canadian woods where the young woman accidentally meets another acquaintance who plans to go skiing in the mountains. Whilst the white butch symbolises the white lesbian community, Pria, again remains an outsider. Probably, because of their differing ethnic backgrounds, probably because she believes that she cannot interact on eye level with the butch, symbolised through her not being an experienced skier. Interestingly enough, this understanding of self is soon contested when Pria experiences an epiphany which comes in the guise of sari-dressed Indian goddess, played by ritual performance artist Shauna Beharry, who wears woollen socks and mountain boots. While the protagonist struggles to get closer to the “cross-country-skiing trickster”<sup>9</sup>, who as Shani Mootoo stated, represents Durga, the symbol of feminine power, the young woman ultimately skis alongside her white friend. In this somewhat unreal and

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<sup>8</sup> For a discussion of *Cereus Blooms at Night*, see, for instance, Heather Smyth’s “Sexual Citizenship and Caribbean-Canadian Fiction: Dionne Brand’s *In Another Place, not Here* and Shani Mootoo’s *Cereus Blooms at Night*,” Coral Ann Howell’s “A Shared Queerness: Liminal Identities in Shani Mootoo’s *Cereus Blooms at Night*”, Mary Condé’s “The Flight from Certainty in Shani Mootoo’s *Cereus Blooms at Night*” as well as Roberto Strongman’s “Development of Same-Sex Desire in Caribbean Allegorical Autobiography: Shani Mootoo’s *Cereus Blooms at Night* and Jamaica Kincaid’s *Annie John* and *Lucy*”.

<sup>9</sup> Richard Fung’s term, 167.

dreamlike sequence, Pria in due course manages to overcome her perception of the Canadian wilderness in general and the snowy mountains in particular as forbidden territory.<sup>10</sup> Her journey, however, takes Pria even deeper into the woods and higher into the mountains until she unexpectedly reaches the mountain's top where she joins a community of beautiful strangers who seem to celebrate a cult of outdoor dancing. In *Wild Woman* this cult might be read as symbolising a celebration of hybridity and multiculturalism as well as a celebration of the natural world and unpeopled wilderness (see Fung, 169). It is here, at this particular moment and in this unique place, that the protagonist feels fully accepted and loved for what she really is. This somewhat utopian ending emphasises Mootoo's approach which opens up an autonomous space for individuals as well as opts to think community differently. Richard Fung concludes his analysis of *Wild Woman* as follows:

The image of Pria in the snowy Rockies has more than a psychological resonance [...] By inserting Pria's queer, brown, female body into the iconic national landscape, [the video] disturbs the hegemonic construction of Canada. And in its realization of Durga as a sporty diva, the tape gives us a portable, adaptable mythology that challenges essentialist notions of culture and identity." (168)

Despite the obvious similarities concerning the moulding of topics, Mootoo's latest work seeks to approach these themes in a more realistic tone: "I think *Valmiki's Daughter* has got it quite a lot plainer, it is much more to the point, still a bit too lyrical for me, when I say too lyrical I want to get it even plainer". While storytelling is often connected to rich and flowery imaginary worlds, more recently Mootoo formulates a creative endeavour to think in plain and simple terms in order to get closer to the 'real world'. She attempts to find a more reduced language which already shows not only in the overall creation of the plot of *Valmiki's Daughter* but in particular the fabrication of the fictional setting in San Fernando:

If you stand on one of the triangular traffic islands at the top of Chancery Lane just in front of the San Fernando General Hospital (where the southern arm of the lane becomes Broadway Avenue, and Harris Promenade, with its official and public buildings, and commemorative statues, shoots eastward), you would get the best, most all-encompassing views of the town. You would see that narrower secondary streets emanate from the central hub. Not one is ever straight for long. They angle, curve this way then that, dip or rise, and off them shoot a maze of smaller side streets. (7)

Mootoo's mapping of San Fernando and her detailed description of Trinidadian landscape draws out her intense longing to present her notion of the island as she constantly revisits it in her mind:

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<sup>10</sup> See also Richard Fung's reading of this sequence in his essay "Bodies out of Place: The Videotapes of Shani Mootoo", 166.

“The landscape parts where the events are happening like the San Fernando landscape is extremely blatant, to the point of me almost being tedious. I hope that the ordinary reader will pick it up and inquire, why she is doing this, why she is going on and on and on about this. They read because they want that question answered, they know it will be answered”.

Whilst Mootoo is without doubt a cosmopolitan author, her creative impulse to picture what her characters had to leave behind might represent a diasporic longing. Nonetheless, it would be wrong to read her novel as dwelling in nostalgia, rather her writing departs from the past taking its characters to the present in order to prepare the ground for a critical negotiation of the self in the light of memories and various truths. In an interview with Lynda Hall, Shani Mootoo describes her pleasure gained through writing as follows:

“The first delight in writing, for me, is the invention of stories, situations, events, where I can impose my own vision of how things would be in my ideal world. My ideal world is not void of the lower states of existence, that is, of anger, hellishness, hatred, greed, etcetera. But in my ideal world these states are out-smarted, or given the slip by good, truth, beauty and innocence. Writing itself is a way of giving the slip to the traumatic aspects of my own life-experience. It is a way of re-ordering a world in which many aspects of my own self have been denied or injured.” (110)

By highlighting the fact that stories, events, even the past and the memories can be remembered and reinvented, Mootoo underlines the importance of storytelling as a reconciliatory process. The Canadian sociologist Arthur W. Frank proposed, “stories do not simply describe the self; they are the self’s medium of being”<sup>11</sup>. Frank created the metaphorical figure of ‘wounded storyteller’ whose stories of their own physical illness and suffering have a healing effect for both the storyteller and the listener. In Frank’s opinion, “As wounded, people may be cared for, but as storytellers, they care for others. The ill, and all those who suffer, can also be healers. Their injuries become the source of the potency of their stories [...] Because stories can heal, the wounded healer and wounded storyteller are not separate, but are different aspects of the same figure” (xii). Certainly, also within the plot Mootoo’s novels introduce narrators who come with the qualities of such a wounded healer or a wounded storyteller who within the story world might even work as a nurse or a doctor.

As also cartographies and landscapes are constantly invented and reinvented and therefore not stable but in process, the novel brings home to its reader that the mapping strategy deployed in the text is a verbal and an imaginative one. Yet, the narrative mapping of well-known places as well as the bustling streets of San Fernando triggers chains of

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<sup>11</sup> Frank, Arthur W. *The Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness and Ethics*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1997, 53.

thoughts and images. It is this mimetic concoction of ‘real locations’ and somewhat ‘exotic places’ that fuels the reader’s imagination. As the British postcolonial scholar Graham Huggan has argued, “the process of matching map to text, or text to map, involves the reader in a comparative that may bring to the surface flaws or discrepancies in the process of mimetic representation.”<sup>12</sup> This is how a creative friction emerges emphasising the gap between a mimetic approach to landscape and a fictional reality which do not always fully correspond to each other. Yet, Mootoo feels comfortable evoking a certain uncertainty on the side of the readers because such narrative manoeuvres enable authors to imagine and showcase uncompromised versions of truth. While some artists might shy away from being in such uncomfortable positions, Mootoo feels “comfortable being uncomfortable”<sup>13</sup>. Reinvention and rewriting strategies are thus often utilized narrative tools by Mootoo, however, she does not understand herself as being agenda driven, or an activist fighting for specific societal goal. Through her writing as through any other form of creative expression Mootoo in fact seeks to invent an alternative world:

“I am interested in fixing things and making them beautiful. Suddenly I can see the possibilities in how you can use words and I get trapped in that. I can see the possibilities of fixing the landscape that no longer belongs to me but it is my landscape and I am so surprised when I go back to Trinidad since the landscape has changed so much. I can fix it and I fall into the trap of exoticising my own landscape”.

Mootoo’s approach to the exotic departs from the common notion of a postcolonial exotic, as introduced by Graham Huggan,<sup>14</sup> because her narratives as well as the represented story worlds easily slip through any given categories as well as notorious centre-periphery frameworks. Rather, it might be said that Mootoo’s creativity is rooted in transcultural imagination.<sup>15</sup> Mootoo’s work is confident enough to challenge given norms and social constructs. Through her work she seeks to craft out a space to belong, belonging in the sense of a wholehearted embracing of humanity which is commonly denied to non-normative individuals. All her work is indulged in a sensuousness which evokes myriad tastes, smells, colours, textures and voices. It is her way to fix the imperfections of everyday life, to beautify the primness of social constructions, and to rejoice in one’s being in the world.

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<sup>12</sup> Graham Huggan, *Territorial Disputes: Maps and Mapping Strategies in Contemporary Canadian and Australian Fiction* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1994), 22.

<sup>13</sup> See Shana L Calixte and Tumelo E. Phali’s essay “I’m comfortable being uncomfortable”... Shani Mootoo, our Storyteller of the Month”, Caribbean Tales: A People’s History of the Caribbean Interactive Website, [http://www.caribbeantales.ca/ct\\_newsletter/archives/featured\\_storyteller/1/im\\_comfortable\\_being\\_uncomfortable/](http://www.caribbeantales.ca/ct_newsletter/archives/featured_storyteller/1/im_comfortable_being_uncomfortable/) [accessed 28 May 2010]

<sup>14</sup> Graham Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins* (London: Routledge, 2001)

<sup>15</sup> For a discussion of the postcolonial exotic in Shani Mootoo’s *Cereus Blooms at Night* see Sissy Helfff, “Desired Exotica: Gendered Spaces in Queer West Indian Diasporic Fiction”.

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