Indian Identity and Religion in Caribbean Literature:
SHIKWÁ/Complaint

Abrahim H. Khan
University of Toronto

SUMMARY: This essay discuss the connection between identity formation and religion with respect to the diasporic people from India to the Caribbean. Literature by their descendants mirrors Indian identity according to one set of religious symbols and implicitly assumes that Indian identity is intelligible for both Hindus and Muslims by the same set of religious symbols. The essay contends that the boundaries of social interaction and patterns of behavior with respect to daily life reflected in the literature misses the complex relation between religion and identity and tends to marginalize non-Hindus among Indians in the Caribbean area. It addresses these matters by problematizing the idea of Indian identity from two dimensions: its meaning complex and mediation of it through religious symbols.

RESUMÈ: Cet essai traite du rapport entre la formation de l'identité indienne et la religion chez les Indiens de la diaspora aux Caraïbes. Les oeuvres écrites par les descendants des migrants reflètent leur identité indienne à travers un ensemble de symboles religieux; elles présupposent que l'identité indienne est directement intelligible pour les deux groupes —Hindous et Musulmans— par le biais de cet ensemble de symboles religieux. Deux idées essentielles sont proposées: 1) La description des frontières au niveau des interactions sociales et des modèles de comportement dans la vie quotidienne ne reflète pas la complexité des relations entre religion et identité 2) Il en resulte une marginalisation des non-Hindous parmi les Indiens. La question est abordée par la problématique de l'identité indienne selon deux perspectives: la complexité de ses significations et la médiation de cette identité au moyen de symboles religieux.

Among diasporic peoples in the Caribbean, the urge to survive and improve their lot economically, socially and politically and thus to secure their future in the host country can thwart attention from considering a factor that is significant for that security: the relation between identity and religion. This seems to the case with those from India to the Caribbean and their descendants in the New World. Current literature mirroring the boundaries of their intimate social interaction and their patterns of behavior in daily life hardly seems to take into account the complicated relation between Indian identity and religion. The boundaries and patterns are defined partly by religion and may not appear obvious because the indivisibility between the religious and the social in ordinary life is very marked for Hindus as well as for Muslims. The problematizing of Indian identity undertaken brings into focus the role of religion in identity formation for the Indian community, and discloses a flaw in the mirror and perhaps a hegemonic tendency in the literature: it marginalizes Indians whose religio-cultural particularities are different from the ones that writers select or tend to employ. In this way, the discussion intimates that literature touching in some way on religion and life of Indians in the Caribbean has

devolved on it a responsibility to strive for a balanced representation of characteristic religious sensitivities.

That is, the idea of Indian identity is one of the markers of the cultural unconscious[1] in contemporary Caribbean literature. It is associated with values and conventions of thinking which the literature reflects. Together, they imply an assumption[2] that ignores important differences in the particularities of socio-ethnic experience of groups expressing East-Indianness[3] in the Caribbean region. The literature gives no hint that Indian identity is itself a complex and problematic idea, at least on a theoretical level, let alone the relation between it and religion. Instead, it gives the semblance of being inclusive of differences in the East Indian population. At bottom, however, its representation is flawed and thus provides impetus for the following *shikwá*[4]/complaint: The literature is misleading for those readers, whether inside or outside the Indo-Caribbean region, wanting to learn and reflect about how they become persons in affirming Indian identity with respect to their religious tradition, and about the world of the Indo-Caribbean community with its religious differences and social similarities.

This essay, elaborating the complaint, problematizes Indian identity in the Caribbean from two dimensions. One of these is the meaning complex of the idea which consists in various shades that are dialectically related. But, the assumption and conventions of thinking to which the cultural unconscious in literature demonstrates obedience take Indian identity to have a single shade, or narrow meaning, one delineated in terms of a specific religious tradition. The literature, in this respect, makes hegemonic one shade in the meaning complex and thus marginalizes non-Hindus within the East Indian population. To clarify its different shades we begin by tracing preoccupation with East-Indianness and hence lay out aspects relative to the complaint.

The emergence of and preoccupation with the idea of East-Indianness in the

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[1] My use of the notion *cultural unconscious* is inspired by A. Harrichand Itwaru and N. Ksonzek, *Closed Entrances*, Toronto, 1994, p. 9.

[2] To state the assumption clearly, to mediate understanding of Indian identity in the Caribbean through Hindu symbols and rituals is to span personhood formation for both Hindus and Muslims in the region.

[3] The term *East Indian*, with its cognate, is Eurocentric. Its employment in this essay is more for editorial reasons, to assist Euro-centric readers, and not necessarily to represent the descendants of people form India in the Caribbean. They understand themselves as Indians, children from the land of Bharat. In cases where some might make reference to themselves as East-Indians, it is simply a matter of them employing a terminology acquired as part of their colonial past. No hard and fast distinction is intended here in the use of *Indian* and *East-Indian* other than that explained above.

[4] The use of this term (Arabic-Urdu) here is inspired by the title of one of the poems by the Indo-Muslim poet, Muhammad Iqbal (1875-1938), *Shikwa* with its answer *Jawáb-i-Skikwa*. This poem is a complaint to God about the Islamic world falling on hard times through corruption and about the demise of Muslim community world wide when as a people the Muslims were the ones who spread the message of the unity of Godhead and liberated mankind from slavery. Now God seems to have abandoned them.

Caribbean correlates with at least four factors. One is the impact made by the arrival from India of the first 365 indentured laborers to Guyana in May, 1838, then a British colony. Coming on the eve of the abolition of slavery in the colonies, they were a relief to planters fearing labor shortage. From hindsight, however, they proved to be more than that, to be the advanced group of a people who would revolutionize that colony, influence its socio-economic progress, and introduce to the Caribbean the Indian factor in the equation of economics, ethnicity, and governance. They were designated as East Indians to distinguish them also from aboriginals referred to as Amerindians[5].

At one level they were conspicuous by having proved suitable for the work force. Earlier indentured laborers from Madeira, China, and Sierra Leone were found to be unsatisfactory. The adaptability of the late arrivals to working the land made them a distinctive people to planters and colonial administrators since the recruitment policy resulted from 1840s to 1917 in a continuous stream of indentured workers from India to the Caribbean. Most went to Guyana, Trinidad, Jamaica, St. Lucia, and Grenada through recruitment as part of the British colonial policy[6]. Though some went also to Surinam and Gaudelope, today their descendants are quite a sizable portion of the population in Guyana and Trinidad, approximately 51% and 41% respectively[7]. At another level, their distinctiveness was derived from their conspicuousness as a people: their social customs, food habits, dress, language, and geographic origin[8]. These made them recognizable as a people to planters, colonial administrators, and others who came earlier to labor on the plantations.

A second factor relates to how they saw themselves, in contrast to how others perceived them. They were a people who understood themselves as being different from

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[5] See the study by M. A. Rauf, *Indian Village in Guyana*, Leiden, 1974, p. 26.

[6] For the estimated number of Indian laborers to the colonies whether British, French, Dutch, or Danish see the figures presentes in B. Mangru, *Benevolent Neutrality*, London, 1987. Accordingly, the two recipients in the Caribbean with the largest numbers are Guyana with 88.000 and Trinidad with 51, 000, followed by Guadelope, Jamaica and Martinique with 13. 500, 11.000, and 10.000 respectively. In fact, when immigration ended 239.000 had immigrated to Guyana, and 134.000 to Trinidad, 78.000 to Gaudelope and Martinique, and 33.000 to Jamaica according to figures cited by D. Bisnauth, *History of Religions in the Caribbean*, Kingston, 1993, pp. 140f. The numbers were actually larger but were reduced by a flu epidemic in early 1900. One writer estimates the total Indian population in the Caribbean region to be over 1. 200.000. See: Harry Ramnath, *India Came West*, Trinidad, 1976, p. 7. This writer provides glimpses of the Indian community or what has happened to Indians socially and culturally in countries of the Caribbean.

[7] In the 1990 census data for Trinidad figures for the pollution is 560. 934. Of those 40.27 % are East Indians. With respect to religion, 23.8% of the population are Hindus and 5.8% Muslims according to the *Europa Yearbook*, 1997 for South America, Central America and the Caribbean. A similar breakdown for Guyana was not available in the book.

[8] Distinctiveness of East Indians, along these lines, in the host environment is noted also by K. Haraksingh, "Control an Indian Resistance among Indian Workers: A Study of Labor on the Sugar Plantations of Trinidad 1875-1917" in *India in the Caribbean*, edited by D. Dabydeen and Brinsley Samaroo, Warwick, 1987, p. 64.

others in the colonies since they, the first generation, had a sense of returning home, to the motherland. At the end of their five year contract 60 immigrants from the original batch of 396 opted for another stint in the colony. Many more died from disease, malnutrition, and hardships imposed by management. The remaining 236 chose to return to India largely because of the inability of plantation management to understand their customs or traditional way of life[9]. With subsequent arrivals, when contracts terminated, many returned to India but a majority chose to remain.

Thus, East-Indianness came to mean a way of life that is unique to people from India, in contrast to people from China, Madeira, Europe, and Africa which also supplied indentured workers. Indian identity, whether understood by arrivals from India or by others in the colonies, meant a sharing in the mores and folkways of the people in India. People belonging to the collectivity of East Indians showed in their social behavior a sameness with people from India. That sameness was reinforced with each new wave of indentured workers that arrived until 1917, the end of indentureship.

Psychologically, however, the arrivals longed for the day that they would return to mother India, a longing that was engendered by historical memory of ethnic and place origin. This historical memory distinguished them also from their kinsfolk in India. The latter neither crossed *kala pani* (the dark water of the ocean) nor had to negotiate with or to confront people lacking an understanding of their customs and traditional ways of life[10], nor to experience the enigma of arrival in a new territory with a social make up that would later issue in a multi-ethnic society.

A third factor is the loss of the sense of return to motherland. For later generations in the colonies the idea of being East-Indian or having Indian identity was gradually acquiring another shade of meaning. That is, in its meaning complex the notion of an arrival replaced that of a return to mother India. Arriving at the motherland to experience first hand what was described narratively and approximated through the use of symbols and rituals now became associated with the idea. And as the pressures that issue from the politics of forming nation states out of colonies slowly increased, the desire to arrive, to go to India, tended to fluctuate among some. India became more of an idyllic idea, inspiring hope by connecting them with values of an ancient tradition[11]. Thus, as homeland India receded in the memory of those born in the Caribbean, as it became more of an imaginary land, the sense of East Indian identity was increasing in shades. Clearly, for some it came to mean having a way of life heavily influenced by ancestors who came originally from India, a land of ancient tradition and values. That

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[9] For the statistics and an account of the early arrivals see Mangru, *op. cit.*, p. 42 and Rauf, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

[10] For more information on this experiment with East Indian labor as indentured immigrants and the first batch of arrivals see: *idem*, p. 26.

[11] This is reflected in Guyana by Indian intellectuals wanting and giving self expression, such as Peter Ruhoman. See C. Seecheran, *India and the Shaping of the Indo-Guyanese Imagination 189s-1920s,* Leeds, 1993, pp. 19, 20, 35, 66 and B. Samaroo, "The Indian Connection," in *India in the Caribbean,* p. 46.

influence was further strengthened for later generations by visits[12] of emissaries and missionaries from India.

The idea or meaning complex of Indian identity was further modified by a fourth factor, active agency. Later generation began actively to take initiative and to assume responsibility for the institutionalizing of their own psycho-social and ethnic formation. By the time of India's independence in 1947, descendants of East-Indians in the Caribbean had organized themselves along religious lines[13]: Hindus, Muslims, and Christians. To be sure, some were secularists, but these different distinctions among them meant little to those of non-Indian ancestry. The differences mattered not at all when race was introduced as a factor in the right to rule or to govern nation states which have a significant presence of Indians as in Guyana and Trinidad. They were frequently treated as one ethnic group by non-Indians and this in turn contributed to emphasizing further[14] their common experience and historical memory in the face of ethno-racial tensions that arose.

In light of their initiatives to institutionalize their own psycho-social formation, for some Indian identity came to mean a claim of those who see themselves as continuing in the tradition of their foreparents from India. For some others it meant also being in between places, between India and the nation state in which they were located by birth or had adopted. Still, a few others hardly bothered with maintaining connectedness to the motherland and considered themselves to assume an identity not manifestly recognizable as Indian in any way. Thus, more towards the close of the colonial period, Indian identity had come to mean also a distancing between people of Indian ancestry in the colonies and those in India. The sense of sameness implied by *Indian identity* had become distant or played down. This new shade of meaning, distancing, is best illustrated by two Caribbean writers of Indian ancestry.

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[12] The Reverend C. F. Andrews is one such visitor between 1922-1929. For more information on others as well as talk among Indians in Guyana about forming an Indian Colony there see: Seecharan, pp. 31, 38, 41, 45, 47, 50, 51, 55, and for Trinidad see: Samaroo, *op. cit.*, pp. 44, 45, 46, 47, 49, 51, 52.

[13] This formation began in Guyana as early as 1922, the year of the founding of The Hindu Society, following the founding of the British Guiana East Indian Cricket Association in 1916, as cited by Seecharan, pp. 46f. For Trinidad, see: Samaroo, pp. 47-49, and Kelvin Singh, *Race and Class Struggles in a Colonial State Trinidad 1917-1945*, Calgary, 1994, pp. 11, 50-52 where reference is made to an Indian middle-class intelligentsia and political leadership. Surinam had 20% of its Indian population Muslims, and 10% Christians, based on a total of 46.000 Indians in 1939. Different religious groups among them had already emerged. That total figure increased to 142.00 in 1971 from a total population of 385.000 as cited by Sandew Hira, "The Evolution Of The Social, Economic And Political Position Of The East Indians In Surinam, 1873-1870" in *India in the Caribbean*, pp. 197, 200.

[14] The emphasis was already present, to judge from the 1920s discussion of constitutional issues in Trinidad, for example. See Kelvin Singh, pp. 48f, 56, 58, 61f. Note also that the division is manifest in labor strikes where Indians are being played off against Africans as part of a white elite strategy (p. 31). Singh notes, too, that the phenotypically and cultural distinctiveness of the East Indians «from other major ethnic groups accentuated race consciousness as the basis for political mobilization for most of the period» he was studying, pp. 223f.

To V. S. Naipaul, in 1962, India was an area of darkness. By 1977, he saw it as a wounded civilization. He wrote:

> India is for me a difficult country, It isn't my home; and yet I cannot reject it or be indifferent to it; I cannot travel only for the sights. I am at once too close and too far... It has taken much time to come to terms with the strangeness of India, to define what separates me from the country; and to understand how far the *Indian attitudes of someone like myself, a member of a small and* remote community in the New World, have diverged from the attitudes of people to whom India is still whole[15].

In this acknowledgement by Naipaul we find not sameness but a sense of estrangement, distancing between himself and the reality called India. In fact Naipaul may have correctly considered himself as being member of another people, but many of Indian descent in the region do not share that thinking of extreme otherness.

Sam Selvon, his fellow countryman, in 1979 intimates also to the sense of distancing from India in a story which he reported to be based on fact. It was about an East Indian from Trinidad who could not get a room to live because the English landlord did not want West Indians, but only bona fide Indians from the banks of the Ganges[16]. Selvon then followed the narrative with his own experience of applying for a job and working in the Indian High Commission Office in London. He was told that the job required one to be an Indian and that he was not one because he was born in Trinidad. After circumventing that obstacle and getting the job, he was then under suspicion because of his westernized attitudes. He noted, too, between him and his fellow office workers a difference in mentality and temperament. While English for them was a second language, it was for him his only language. He ate food that was different from theirs, the curry and dhal puri that he knew in Trinidad was unlike what he could find in London[17].

Not all of East Indian ancestry in the Caribbean share the sentiments expressed by these two cosmopolitan East Indian writers, Naipaul and Selvon. Many have not and will never set foot abroad. But the sentiments are worth noting in becoming acquainted with the complexity of the idea of Indian identity nurtured in a particular geographical region which until recent years was quite distant from India. The idea is made even more complex by the descendants having to work out their relationship to others in a larger collectivity that is defined by the presence of plural/ethnic societies or multiracial diversity.

Preoccupation with the idea of Indian identity became more pronounced in circumstances where the descendants of East Indian indentured immigrants actively sought to share political power or scarce economic resources, or where such sharing is

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[15] V. S. Naipaul, *India: A Wounded Civilization*, New York, 1976, p. ix.

[16] S. Selvon, "Three Into One Can't Go - East Indian, Trinidadian, Westindian" in *India In The Caribbean*, p. 16.

[17] *Idem*, pp. 17f.

couched in terms of race or ethnicity. Their initiatives as active agents taking responsibility for instutionalization processes and community formation had a conditioning effect on the meaning of Indian identity. Its meaning increased in complexity. In post-colonial societies, that meaning was being worked out also in relation to socio-economic and political precedents of the past and pressures of the present in the Caribbean region.

Thus far, we have identified some of the different shades in the meaning complex of Indian identity as influenced by four factors. Some shades are in competition with each other, dialectically related, and add to the complexity of Indian identity, or at least to the emergence of and preoccupation with East Indianness in the Caribbean. The different shades alluded to and the possibilities for emerging ones do not feature in the cultural unconscious that the literature obeys in representing Indian identity. Instead, the literature confines itself to a narrow meaning or single shade which we make manifest here from a different perspective to which we now turn.

This new perspective is the second dimension which moves us closer to the heart of the *shikwá*/complaint and sheds further light on the complexity of the idea. It goes unrecognized by contemporary Caribbean literature, and even by well intentioned East Indians in the population. Perhaps, it is because they as readers presuppose that the literature is inclusive of all groups of East-Indians in the region. This second dimension is mediation of identity. That is, the literature mediates its understanding of Indian identity through symbols and rituals that are indicative of a Hindu tradition only.

Accordingly, the literature proceeds on the assumption that Indian identity is intelligible to both Hindus and Muslims through the same set of symbols. It shows obedience to the assumption that all Indians in the Caribbean are cultural Hindus at the least. It predicates East Indianness on a Hindu view of life, relates Indian identity to thinking in terms of symbols that correlate with a Hindu mythic tradition. Indians outside a Hindu tradition seem oblivious to the assumption. Perhaps, they eschew either seeing it as a challenge, or mediating their own understanding of Indian identity through literary means to the extent that fellow Indians with Hindu names or background are doing.

Thus, a possible third dimension in problematizing Indian identity in the Caribbean is to consider the paucity of Muslim fiction writers. It is not clear whether it correlates with having a different vision of human life, or with a psyche damaged through repercussions of the political rupturing in 1947 of India and resulting in her Muslim population looking to Pakistan, a place of which Indo-Muslims in the Caribbean have no memory. This phenomenon of paucity of Muslim writers is remarkable, since the Caribbean did not experience to the same degree as India did, a collective damaging of the Indian psyche. To pursue this dimension would move us away from the *shikwá*/complaint, which is based on what the literature reflects largely.

The Indian indentured population in the Caribbean included Muslims, a group of people that see themselves as having a form of live distinctively different from that of Hindus. Historical reports and records attest to that difference. In Trinidad, 1884, the celebration of *tadhja*, a Shi'ite Muslim festival, broke into riots as a form of resistance

to an existence that kept Indians at the fringe of the society[18]. Today, that festival is etched in the national consciousness of the country[19]. Guyana in 1869, however, had taken steps to prevent similar situations by passing an ordinance to regulate festivals and processions of East Indians, and consequently the festival is no longer observed there[20]. To cite further evidence, in 1870, a Royal Commission to Guyana reported one Hindu temple. But twenty years later in that colony the Surgeon-Major Comins reported 29 mosques and 33 Hindu temples. At the close of indenture period, 1917, the numbers had increased to 46 and 43 respectively[21]. And, by 1907 Trinidad had its first Muslim religious leader or Kazi. In fact, by the 1930s Muslims in Guyana, Trinidad and Surinam were organized into national jamaats or associations. Today, Guyana and Trinidad, each with very large East Indian populations in the hemisphere, has respectively 9% and 6% Muslims[22]. Clearly then, within the Indian population in the Caribbean exists an identifiable and significantly large and different group[23] of people, Muslims. They understand and live out their existence at a psycho-social level in distinctively different terms from those who are Hindus.

A monograph study of an Indian village in Guyana with respect to continuity and change, done in the 1970s, confirms this difference at the psycho-social level. The study notes that *recitation of the Quran* has become one of the means of social integration and sustains relationships based on reciprocity and mutual obligation[24]. Muslims account for 13.9% of the total village population or 16% of those who are East

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[18] B. Samaroo, "Two Abolitions" , in *India in the Caribbean*, p. 33. The records for immigrants from Calcutta to Guyana in 1892 show there were 558 Muslims, and 4 Christians out of 4. 723. The majority were either from the low class or from the agricultural sector. This data is from TABLE II in Dale Bisnauth, *op. cit.*, p. 155. Bisnauth notes also that *tadlah* (Muslim festival) was celebrated as early as 1850s in South Trinidad and that in Guyana by 1884 its celebration led to violent clashes with Hindus celebrating Dasserah at the same time, p. 159.

[19] See the essay by G. Thais, "Contested meanings and the politics of authenticity: The *Hosay* in Trinidad", in *Islam, globalization, and postmodernity*, edited by Akbar S. Ahmed and Hastings Donnan, London, 1994, in particular pp. 52-55.

[20] B. Mangru, "Tadjah in British Guiana" in *Indo-Caribbean Resistance*, edited by Frank Birbalsingh, Toronto, 1993, p. 17.

[21] P. Ruhomon, *Centenary History of the East Indians in British Guiana, 1838-1938*, Georgetown, 1946, p. 251.

[22] Cited by the *Canadian Global Almanac*, 1997 for each country. The 1980 census for Guyana shows a population of 758, 619. The 1990 census for Trinidad indicates a population of 1, 272, 385. The East Indian population in each country are 51.0% and 40.0% respectively. Ralph Premdas cites a population of 850.000 people. See his *Ethnic Conflict and Development: The Case of Guyana*, Aldershot, 1995, p. 12.

[23] Haraksingh, p. 76 notes this of East Indians on sugar plantations of Trinidad, 1875-1917.

[24] See: Rauf, *op. cit*, p. 100.

Indian in the village. For them, the study continues:

> Weekly congregations in the mosque at noon for Juma (Friday)
> prayers are fairly well attended .... and function as a regular
> channel, of face to face contact. Matters of communal interest are
> discussed and decisions are made as group. Announcements of
> sickness, death, marriages... are made at the alter by the *miaji*
> (minister) and elicit group response and participation. Attached
> to the mosque is a Madrassah where Moslem children receive
> lessons in the reading of the Quran, methods of prayer, and in
> Moslem conduct of life[25].

Contemporary Caribbean literature, to the extent that it is representative of the
substance and movements of the Indian world, is exclusive in its perception. A
relatively recent short piece[26] on Indo-Guyanese resistance recalls from among
successful Indians in Guyana only those with Hindu names. In more sustained
treatments, the writings of V. S. Naipaul and of Arnold Itwaru, for example, are
indicative of this flawed perception, the latter more so than the former. In *Mystic
Masseur*, the Indian world that Naipaul presents shows no evidence through names of
characters or places or action to suggest the presence of Muslims. Village life as defined
by one's interaction with others excludes recognition of Muslims. However, Naipaul's
A House for Mr Biswas provides a glimpse, a rather stingy and jaundiced one of F. Z.
Ghany. He is registrar of births, denoted as a Muslim who is distrustful of Hindus. What
is interesting about Naipaul's representation in the work is that the substance and
movement of life for a prominent Trinidadian family of East Indian descent (Biswas)
includes a single encounter with a Muslim in a population that has 6% approximately,
and in a context[27] where East Indians have a strong affinity for each other. Indian
identity, in short, is represented in terms of practices and customs that are exclusively
Hindu: hawans, pujas, yagya, the Gita, and personal names recalling deities from Hindu
mythology or pantheon.

Itwaru's work of fiction *Shanti*, set in Guyana, is about village life seen
through the movements or changes in the life of a primary school girl, maturing
intellectually and sexually. That which is sacred or customarily Hindu/Indian in her
becomes violated. In all of this, she encounters no one who is Muslim, whether in
village or city. Her identity is not maintained or marked off vis-a-vis a Muslim
character, and it is as if the work is not conscious of a Muslim-Hindu boundary as a
problem in defining the Shanti's identity. Perhaps such a boundary is not recognized as
problematic in the formation of personhood among those in the colonies schooled in

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[25] Rauf, *op. cit.* p. 55.

[26] D. Dabydeen, "Indo-Guyanese Resistance", in *Indo-Caribbean Resistance*, edited
by Frank Birbalsingh Toronto, 1993, p. 32.

[27] This Hindu-Muslim affinity is evident also from the study by G. Thaiss, "Contested
meanings and the politics of authenticity: The *Hosay* in Trinidad", in *Islam, globalization, and
Postmodernity*, pp. 49, 52f.

Hindu tradition. There is, however, one mention of a Muslim personal name, Wazir. But the author leaves no cognizance of the fact that Wazir's East Indianness might be defined by a different set of symbols from those which have shaped Shanti's personhood or East-Indianness. Of course, it is interesting that Wazir is not a voice in the fiction, that he is not developed as a minor character similar to some non-Indians in the fiction. He appears as just one more in hoi poli, nothing distinctive in his personhood or self-identity.

These cited examples suggest also that the relation between Indian identity and symbols require a sensitivity to which the literature is not yet alive. That is, communal symbols serve as a means of social integration of members as well as a means for acquiring and affirming identity or personhood, especially when they are religious symbols. They have an impact on vision of life, dispositions, and traits in shaping, nurturing and strengthening. This, however, is one level of personhood or identity - designated here as fact of identity. At this level, identity correlates with the use of symbols and social behavior that are publicly observable and mesh with recognized communal practices.

There is second level[28] which the literature misses - the sense of identity. The emphasis for sense of identity is on how one sees the world, experiences selfhood. It involves subjective and psychological matters, the quality of awareness in which one is engaged, a psychological reordering of that quality. It is developed through social practices —symbols and rituals— that are tied to the fact of identity. That is, sense of identity involves meanings, expectations, and understanding that form personhood and is acquired by participating in a communal form of life. Together, the two levels of identity provide a framework for orienting thought, behavior, and feelings for resisting disorder in relating onself to the world.

Hindus and Muslims participate in forms of life that employ different algebra of symbols and rituals. Indeed, they share the same cultural world —one referred to as Indian and designated by similar preferences for food, language, music, motion pictures, ancestral costumes—. These designators represent the material aspect of their shared cultural world, the fact of identity. But integral to the foundation of that world there is a psycho-social aspect which is different for Muslims. This later aspect, the sense of identity, involves one in subjectively appropriating the symbols in accordance with the algebra to which one subscribes[29].

Stated differently, a Hindu mediates understanding of identity through puja,

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[28] For a sustained discussion of the two levels or types of identity see Rom Harré, "Personal Being as Empirical Unity," in *Self & Identity*, edited by Daniel Kolak and Raymond Martin , New York, 1991, pp. 366-370. See also my publication "Identity, Personhood and Religion in the Caribbean Context" *David Rockefellar Center for Latin American Studies, Working papers on Latin America*, Harvard University, Paper No. 96/97-8, pp. 9-11.

[29] This sense of identity is best illustrated by a Muslim in Trinidad who is a Shila *talzivah* builder. He refused an offer to build one at a time that's not Muharram, claiming that if he were to accept it would be a mockery of what he believed about *talzivah* in his heart and soul. There are others, non-Muslims participating in the Muharram ritual, who see it as a fete or carnival time in Trinidad. These clearly display *fact of identity*. For an account an analysis of the festival in Trinidad see: Thaiss, *op. cit.*, pp- 54f.

hawan, yagya, khata. He/she invokes through recitations from the Gita and the Ramayana mantras and chants. These involves the names of Vishnu, Krishna, Rama, Shiva and their consorts Radha, Sita, Devi or Sarasvati. They are embedded in a mental landscape that shapes the emotions, feelings, and will and limned, for example, by Rama in Ayhodya, Krishna in Vrindaban, Shiva at Mount Kailasa parting the waters of the Ganges, Sita in the forest, Hanuman with a piece of the mountain from Sri Lanka. They are algebraically connected to correlate with the four ashramas or life stages that characterize the Hindu life cycle. The thinking of the literature by East Indian writers from the Caribbean region reflects varying extents[30] of mediation of self-identity through this particular set of symbols.

A Muslim on the other hand mediates understanding of personal identity through observing the five pillars of Islam —creed, prayers, alms, fasting, and Hajj—. He/she gives further substance to personal life through Quranic recitations or *Kitab* reading[31], through celebrations of festivals that are very different from those by Hindus[32]. His/her mental landscape includes also Mecca and Medina, and is one in which Prophet Muhammad is the Exemplar of human conduct, of the fullness of humanity. The algebra for a Muslim life is the five pillars. They are really strategies in the formation of personhood or self-identity.

The living out of that life is captured by Wilfred Cantwell Smith, Canadian scholar of religion and student of Islam in poignant experience that he relates while travelling in the Himalayas. Smith encountered an old, humble and poor Muslim fruit-seller weighing out a *sir* (two pounds) of oranges by using on his balance three small stones as weight. After watching him make occasional sales, Smith queried him about his honesty of the weight. The fruit-seller replied with a verse from the Quran: «Lo! He

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[30] See for example, V. S. Naipaul, *A House for Mr. Biswas*, Middlesex, 1969, pp. 283, 289, 457f. See also his *The Mystic Masseur*, Middlesex, 1957, pp 94, 163, 186, and The *Enigma of Arrival*, New York, 1986, pp. 347-350. This latter reference is evidently an autobiographical narrativo. But it reflects the thinking to which I allude and, furthermore, Naipaulls recognition of the role of history and sacred world in the formation of identity (p. 353). The skikwà/complaint is that the literatura considers a history and sacred world relative to the Hindu tradition only in its unconscious representation of East-Indianness. Another example is Lakshmi Persaud, *Butterfly In The Wind*, Leeds, 1990, pp. 43, 104, 144. However, this work recognizes a boundary between a Muslim and Hindu form of life (pp. 92-94), but is bent on depicting the latter. Contrastingly, Ramabai Espinetls discusses the Indo-Caribbean woman solely in terms that suggest a Hindu form of life. See her essay in *Indo-Caribbean Resistance, op. cit.*, pp. 42-61. All these writers unconsciously think of East Indian identity by means of symbols drawn primarily for the Hindu tradition.

[31] The reading has become a practice, sometimes referred to as Qurlàn sharif (The Glorious Qurlàn) done in the home of a devout Muslims by other devout Muslims and at which family and friends are invited, vermicelli and milk is prepared as a treat and served with food for guests. See also note 14 above, and Bisnauth, p. 160.

[32] There is complaint in Trinidad of the Hosay festival acquiring Hindu practices. This complaint by Shila Muslims, some of whom have a problem with being Indian and Muslim is a Trinidad context, is an indication of Muslims understanding the substance of their life, the pattern by which they live, as being different form that for Hindus. See: Thaiss, *op. cit.*, pp. 52f.

over all things is watching[33]». No glimpse of any of the Muslim experience or the difference that it makes is caught in the treatment that the literature accords Indian identity. Instead, the literature presents matters as though there is one set of symbols and algebra available for making human life bearable for those whose ancestors came from India, for the shaping of Indian identity.

In this respect then, contemporary Caribbean literature is hegemonic in its presentation of Indian identity. It presents the East Indian population as a homogenous socio-religious community which is sensitive to only one set of symbols —those of the Hindu tradition—. It takes the algebra of symbols for Hinduism as the one that determines the distinctive ethnic values to be transmitted to the next generation and that defines for its members East-Indianness communally or individually. In presenting East-Indianness according to one religious paradigm for human life, the literature is in fact giving a lopsidedly treatment of Indian identity, and marginalizing other forms of human life in which personhood is nurtured in the Indo-Caribbean community.

Finally, the complex and problematic nature of Indian identity for those of Indian ancestry in the Caribbean can also be underscored form a semantic point of view. That is, the word Indian in the phrase *Indian identity* is a place term or concept. For the first generation of indentured workers from India, the term referred to a place or location that is home. For their descendants in the New World, it acquired a semantic depth beyond concern with reference to territoriality. India exists also in their minds as a mental abstraction. To be Indian is to have that abstraction imbued with emotions to the point of influencing one's life action[34].

Thus, the meaning given to this place term *India* comes to include a personal subjective understanding, inter-connected with certain images. While for Hindus India is also the land of Rama and Sita, Krishna and Radha, for Muslims it is more than the land of Rama and Krishna. It is also that of Kabir, of pirs and murshids, of village shrines accomodating worshipping Hindus and Muslims[35]. In short, the idea of India includes also living the injunctions of the Quran in land of Rama and Sita, of Krishna and Radha, in the context of the practice of bkakti. This meaning of the place term reverberates in the mental landscape of Indo-Muslims in the Caribbean. That is, *Indian* comes to mean also a bhakti form of Islam[36], living out Quranic injunctions while

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[33] Wilfrid Cantwell Smith, *Questiond of Religious Truth*, New York, 1967, p. 89.

[34] For a discussion of how place and region are components of individual and group identity see J. Nicholas Entrikin, *The Betweennes of Place*, Baltimore, 1991, pp. 54-56. Clem Seecharan illustrates the connection between the two for East Indians in Guyana, Seecharan, pp. 22, 43-47, 53, 56, and the lecture by Pandit Parmanand Saraswat in Appendix VII, or pp. 73-75.

[35] D. Pinault, *The Shiites*, New York, 1992, pp. 61f, 160f. alludes to this Hindu-Muslim syncretism in Hyderabad, India.

[36] Bisnauth (p. 157) is cognizant of this development which requires further investigation form the perspectiva of *religionswissenshaft*. Some of this development is linked to the interaction of Islam and Hinduism in Bengal from the 16th and 17th centurias. In fact, under the rule of Akbar (1556-1605), Indian Islam acquired a distinctive coloration, for Akbar encouraged among Hindus, Muslims, and Parsees a level of cooperation that stimulated Islamic art. For Akbarfs ideas and influences that shaped Indian Islam see A. Schimmel, *Islam in the*

sustaining close ethnic ties and relations with fellow Indians who are Hindus.

To conclude, none of this difference is glimpsed from the treatment of Indian identity by contemporary Caribbean literature. Instead, the literature presents Indian identity, based on an assumption that the East Indian population in the New World consists of all Hindus. It does not raise questions as to how Indo-Muslims in the Caribbean mediate understanding of Indian identity or why there are scarcely Indo-Muslim fiction writers in the Caribbean. Not to be alive to these questions is also part of the problematic of Indian identity in the Caribbean, and is a failing of the literature by which all East Indians claiming some connection with the region might learn about themselves, how they become persons, and about the Indo-Caribbean world as marked by religious differences and social similarities.

Indian Subcontinent, Leiden-Koln, 1980, pp. 77ff. For the confluence of Muslim and Hindu ideas and forms of worship characterizing Muslim life and customs in India see also pp. 137ff. Informative also is the study by David G. Mandelbaum, *Society in India: Change and Continuity*, Vol. 2, Berkeley, 1972, pp. 546-557 where he notes that «Hindus and Muslims of a locality often use the same village shrines and practioners», citing an account of a village near Hyderabad in Andra Pradesh about the middle of this century. His study notes too that Muslim and Hindu neighbours in village areas of Uttar Pradesh cooperase in some contexts and not in others, that Muslim social mobility and social order suggest that they operate «much as do Hindus of the similar status», and that some converts to Islam of villages bordering Rajasthan kept their former ways intact.