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Growing up in the Caribbean: A Reading of *The Nowherians* and Other Stories

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Abstract

Krishna Samaroo's *The Nowherians* (2016) is a coming-of-age story, a bildungsroman, of two brothers who are at the mercy of Trinidadian societal practices at the time. The details of childhood are a capsule of memory from pre-independence to post independence. In this article, I examine some key issues that arise from Samaroo's work and make connections to two other works set in a similar time in Trinidad and Tobago—Hodge's *Crick Crack, Monkey* (1970) and Persaud's *Butterfly in the Wind* (1990). Growing up in Trinidad and Tobago in the 1950s and 1960s includes experiences that are determined by social class and specifically in these works, the rural-urban dynamic as it affects social issues. These three works include childhood as a major theme and as a result, home spaces and caregivers in the forms of grandmothers and aunts are also issues of importance. My own family stories offer connections to thematic discussions in the article.

Keywords: Caribbean literature, home-spaces, rural-urban, family stories, grandmothers, aunts

Introduction

Most of my research on digging up family stories are characterized by a yearning to know more about life in Trinidad and Tobago before I was born, especially about the lives of my relatives who have passed on, or those who are quite old and risk

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forgetting. Stories of first- and second-generation Indo-Trinidadians have been sparse in the published literature of the region, so I continue to pursue new leads that initiate further discussions and more stories. Krishna Samaroo's *The Nowherians* is a worthy addition to a body of published literature that captures life and stories of Trinidad and Tobago during the 1950s and 1960s. Berger and Quinney remind that "narrative scholars of various stripes seem to concur with the proposition that lived experience can be understood through the stories people tell about it" (5). They add that "stories are not merely of telling others about ourselves but of constructing our identities" (5). Since family and place are socially constructed, the family story offers a piece of a historical record of the lives that are featured, the place where they inhabit, and the relationships that emerge. My own family stories have helped in making connections with works that capture life in Trinidad and Tobago. I continue to piece together episodes of my family's past when I encounter new literature that contain thematic similarities to my own family stories as they offer the opportunity to make connections to the larger social context of Trinidadian and Caribbean experience.

Home spaces and places—domestic spaces and objects

Krishna Samaroo's first person narrative from a boy-child's perspective examines the fluidity of home spaces for many characters—major and minor ones, as adults make decisions based on circumstances that characterize the social and cultural backdrop of rural and urban settings in 1960's Trinidad. The unnamed narrator seems to live in the shadow of his older brother Terry, who accompanies him as they are carried off to live with their maternal grandmother. Through a series of storied chapters, each an episode on its own, the plot progresses over the course of the protagonist's elementary education. Unable to choose for themselves, the five-year old narrator and his brother, older by two years, are taken from Belmont in the capital city of the island to the eastern rural district of Sangre Grande. The unnamed protagonist at once gives the narrator fluidity of person that lends to a more generalized representation of a societal archetype, but the details of emotion and experience ground him in the thematic scope of childhood and coming of age.

The opening pages of *The Nowherians* are related to the adult narrator's perspective as he looks back on the time that he spent as a child in the rural district of Sangre Grande. He acknowledges that the place where his grandmother lived holds: "the building blocks of my life – the building blocks of the prime of my life" (i). He invokes the power of memory in muting the present to return to the past—the

nostalgia to which he clings. The longing for the place that had become his home in his formative years contrasts the rest of the plot where he longs to return to his family in the urban area of Belmont. The closing scene of the narrative examines the child's fears of returning to Ma's house even in his dream. Kathy Mezei explains the significance of domestic spaces in autobiographical work in shaping identity (82). She highlights the power of "[i]nterior domestic spaces (furniture, rooms, doors, windows, stairs, drawers—familiar, everyday objects) which have and could be perceived as banal and ordinary, and hence insignificant, are vital to the shaping of our memories, our imagination, and our 'selves'" (82). The bed is one such symbol in Samaroo's work that is central to the protagonist's place in the house that he inhabits. It is also a site that "draws upon the everyday and human relationships within and beyond the house" and "because domestic spaces are the product of society, they express and reinforce its norms, social practices, and ideologies" (81).

In the opening scene of the book, the two boys—Terry and his brother— "dashed from the gallery, raced through the living room, scampered into the bedroom and scurried like rats, one after the other, under Ma's four-poster" (1). The four-poster bed in Ma's house is a site of representation for the various relationships and hierarchies that show up. For example, when the boys and their grandmother are alone in the house, they sleep on the bed. They are displaced when Uncle Gabriel returns from Port of Spain where he works during the week. The boys sleep on a cot in the same room—they are demoted in lieu of the older male relative. On their first night there, the boy recalls that Ma "settled us on the inside part of the four-poster (she taking the end to lie down on)" (6). The children are stuck on the inside, while the adult dominates the space that is considered better.

Uncle Gabriel is the person who is given priority when twenty-two relatives from Belmont spend a night in Ma's house. The plot reads, "They told her that she needn't worry about that. They would make themselves comfortable in the living room leaving Uncle Gabriel to get his much-needed rest in the bedroom" (84). The narrator notes, "Ma and Uncle Gabriel slept on the four-poster as usual. My mother and Aji used the cot Terry and I slept on. On bedding made of Ma's counterpanes and which were spread out on the bedroom floor, the children were set to sleep" (90). This arrangement does not seem like a chance, one as the man of the house, even if he did not live there all the time, is given priority in terms of sleeping arrangements. The women who sleep with the children are those with specific positions in the family structure. The boys' mother is Ma's daughter, and therefore earns the right to sleep in the bedroom, while Aji is the elder woman—the paternal

grandmother who enjoys the space of the bedroom because of her place in the family.

In the closing scene of the book, the protagonist's symbolic falling off the new bed in his father's home in Belmont shows his new displacement despite his wanting to be there. He sleeps with four of his siblings on a single bed, and dreams of being crushed by Ma's house in Sangre Grande. Although he dreads leaving his family again and going back to the country, the symbolic bed is the site on which he experiences misfitting once again. The effects of decisions that adults make are severely disruptive for their children.

In *The Nowherians*, children do not have the option of voicing their feeling or opinions in the matter of where they live. This shows up as utter heartbreak for the young child. After a family excursion where the protagonist's family leave Belmont and take the two young boys, the protagonist and Terry, from Sangre Grande to Manzanilla beach, the void that the child feels is palpable. He says, "After they left, I hadn't a tear to shed. There wasn't one drop of tear left" (92). Subsequently, when his father spontaneously takes him on a road trip where he has to deliver bolts of cloth to a shopkeeper in Guayaguayare, the longest drive on which he had ever been, he experiences "a holiday gift [he] hadn't expected; and, as it came from [his] father, it was especially sweet" (134). The child's inability to bear the abandonment he feels after his outing shows up when he rushes to the latrine so that he could cry: "I cried my heart out. I wanted my father, I wanted my father. I wanted to go home" (138).

The title of the book, *The Nowherians*, illustrates the volatility of the home space for the two main characters. The term is a common one in Trinidadian dialect that implies a person does not have a sound sense of belonging to a particular place. The narrator comments on how he and his friends are described by adults who do not really know them. "I wonder who chirren them is…Look like they is a set of nowherians" (Samaroo 173). The description of Terry and his brother is symbolic as they are moved from one home to another.

The protagonist of *Crick Crack, Monkey* is a motherless child who lives with two aunts during the unfolding of the plot. Other than those two home spaces, she finds refuge in her grandmother's home in Pointe d'espoir. The home space shifts as she balances education and her relationships with mother figures as discussed in the next section of this article. Significantly, at the end of the novel, she is due to travel to England to be reunited with her father and ventures into a new home. The child has no voice in choosing where she lives.

Persaud's Kamla contrasts Hodge's Cynthia and Samaroo's protagonist. Kamla's family own a shop and is economically privileged. Her mother is progressive for her time and insists that her daughter is well educated despite the practice of Indo-Caribbean people at the time to neglect formal education for girls. Although she ventures out of her district for secondary schooling, she never has to leave her home space until she is an adult. Like in *Crick Crack, Monkey,* Kamla leaves her home country to go to England. In the closing page of the work, she comments, "And suddenly the pain of knowing that I would not be seeing my parents for three years gushed out" (Persaud 205). For the Indo-Caribbean woman subject in colonial Trinidad, the cost of higher education is leaving home.

Grandmothers, Tanties and Aunties

On the back cover of *Nowherians*, the blurb recognizes the work as "a moving tribute to grandmothers the world over". The young protagonist's experience of being taken from his original home in the urban setting of Belmont to live with his grandmother in rural Sangre Grande is traumatic but becomes nurturing as the boys are left with their grandmother for the next six to seven years. In the Prologue of the book, the reminiscent voice of the protagonist of *The Nowherians* situates his grandmother in the space where he, as a child, lived with her. "Where I lived as a child is now bush – a vacant lot. But Ma is there" (Samaroo i). As an adult, he draws on "the bittersweet teardrops of memory" and yearns for "the nostalgia to hit" (Samaroo i). Ma Marie, the unnamed protagonist's grandmother is the major nurturing force in his early life from entering to the final year of elementary school life. Dolbin-MacNab and Yancura note that "[g]lobally, it is common for grandparents to serve as surrogate parents to their grandchildren, often in response to family crises and other challenges such as poverty, disease epidemics, and migration" (3). Chamberlain notes that in the Caribbean, surrogacy by grandmothers is not only an economically underscored phenomena, but it also revolves around "cultural beliefs in the centrality of family" (63). The main relationship in the plot of *The Nowherians* is that of the young protagonist and his maternal grandmother. Even when some women characters are not major characters in Caribbean literature, they show up as caregivers. Chamberlain explains the importance of "the prevalence of 'aunties' and, in particular 'grannies' in our knowledge of (and in the literature on) the Caribbean family" (64). She attributes that "poverty [is] the overriding imperative which [drives] the sharing of childrearing activities" (64). Conforming to Chamberlain's theory, poverty is the reason for the child's placement with his

grandmother. The reader does not have evidence of this until the end of the narrative when the boys return to Belmont, their previous home, after their paternal grandmother has died. When they return to Belmont for her funeral, the protagonist notes that the place has been considerably changed. It is the first time that the reader learns of the domestic space that spurred the removal of Terry and his younger brother to live with their grandmother in Sangre Grande. The narrator notes, "My father said it was a temporary house, but at least we were no longer begging a lodging from Uncle Sanwah as was the case before Terry and I had been sent to Sangre Grande" (Samaroo 198). In a conversation with the author, Samaroo discusses the autobiographical nature of this episode. He tells me that his older brother and he had been sent to live with his grandmother as there was not much space in his uncle's house where they had been living. They did not have their own home at the time. The author explains that his eldest brother was expected to help his parents with whatever responsibilities there were, and his sister who was the eldest girl was supposed to help with housework. As a result, the boys who were younger than their siblings were more dispensable and were thus taken to live with their grandmother without their understanding of what was happening.

Hodge's *Crick Crack, Monkey* is another example of Trinidadian literature that contains strong examples of the role of aunts and grandmothers who act as surrogate parents in the absence of the mother figure. Ma Josephine is Tee's grandmother. Although she does not serve as the protagonist's primary caregiver, she takes care of a band of grandchildren. The narrator remembers the "division [that] usually fell between those who were kept by Ma and those of us who didn't really live there" (Hodge 16). Ma's home in Pointe d'Espoir is a safe-haven for many of her grandchildren—within the plot, this phenomenon fits in as ordinary in terms of the social and cultural setting of life in pre-Independence Trinidad and Tobago. When Tee dreams of escaping Aunt Beatrice's house where she does not feel at home, she imagines that her other aunt, Tantie, would meet her with disapproval for running away, but she knows that her grandmother "would surely welcome me with bursting joy" (Hodge 109). Tee is a motherless child, and her grandmother presents for her a safe space.

The narrative of *Crick Crack, Monkey* records examples of ways in which grandmothers and aunts take up the care of children in the absence of a mother and for the purpose of easing economic hardship. Tantie—Tee's paternal aunt, and Auntie Beatrice—her maternal aunt fight over custody of Tee and her younger brother, Toddan. Both aunts are polarities of economic privilege in the plot. Tantie lives in the

country and is characterized as base and culture-less by Aunt Beatrice who lives in a pretentious environment of a higher social class. Ultimately, the privilege of a sound secondary education is the rationale for Tee's move to her richer aunt's home.

Butterfly in the Wind provides a contrasting relationship where the main character and her family are considered affluent. Kamla enjoys being with her grandmother but is never separated from her mother. She is sustained by a group of women: "All the women, my mother, my grandmother and Sultan mother squeeze so much of their energy into me that I am sure I will grow" (Persaud 10). The girl's parents own a shop and have paid helpers in the household. This is an example of the advantage of economic privilege in providing the child with better care.

My family stories

My mother tells me that as a child from 11 to 15 years old, she was sent to spend "August holidays" at her sister's home in Claxton Bay, a village over 20 kilometres from her own family's home in Barrackpore. As an adult, she comments that she was never asked if she wanted to go. Instead, at the commencement of her vacation from school, her sister and brother-in-law would take her to their home, so she could watch over their children while they worked in the sugar cane fields. She laments that she did not get to spend her holidays, which spanned most of July and August with her friends from the village. My mother's experience conforms to Chamberlain's theory of aunts being included in child rearing in the Caribbean (66). Unlike Chamberlain's examples, my mother was not elderly, but her experience does highlight the cultural practice at that time of incorporating the extended family in childcare, especially women who did not have children of their own. According to the literature being discussed and in considering my family stories, economic privilege and class are the most important factors that characterize the practice of childrearing. For my Indo-Trinidadian mother whose sister needed to work in the sugar-cane fields, she fills in as caregiver.

Stories surrounding my Nanee—my maternal grandmother

Although I knew my maternal grandmother until her death in 1979 when I was 12, I never lived with her for any prolonged periods of time. My early memories of her are dominated by her telling me to help my mother with housework. Mostly a bother to me when she did this, it was not until recently that I considered her reason for doing this. Other than coaxing me into the domestic role that was expected of me,

she wanted to help her child—her daughter. I recall hearing her telling my mother that she should get me to help. Although I regularly reminisce with my cousins about my grandmother since starting my research on family stories in 2011, in preparation for this article, I asked them to specifically tell me about their memories about our grandmother. Cici is my mother's sister's daughter, and Kat is my mother's brother's daughter. Their recollections are quite different despite living on the same road of the village in which my grandmother also lived. What could be a three-minute walk probably took my grandmother a longer time since she had broken her foot, and it did not heal well. Cici's childhood home was situated to the east of Nanee's house, and Kat's was to the west.

In conversations with my cousins, I learn that there are differences in the activities that my grandmother, Nanee, chose to do with them. For Cici and her siblings, when her mother—my grandmother's daughter worked in the fields, Nanee would check on them to make sure that they had eaten. Cici remembers scrubbing Nanee's back as she took a bath, something that my sister and I also remember doing when we visited our grandmother. Kat is Nanee's eldest son's daughter. Like the protagonist of Samaroo's narrative, Kat's place in her family determined that she could spend more time away from her own home and with her grandmother. Her older sister was expected to stay in the household to help with any domestic duties. Kat recalls going to her grandmother's home on evenings so that she could sleep with her. She also describes going with Nanee to sell *dahi*–yogurt that my grandmother made. They would walk to the neighbouring village carrying a simple pot with a handle. She talks excitedly about the way in which Nanee would measure the *dahi* using a cup and pour it into the buyer's container. Since one of my uncles lived in the home with my grandmother, I do not believe that Kat spent much time with Nanee simply for companionship and support although this is an important feature of the experience. Kat's family was quite poor, so there were few pieces of furniture and bedding. She reminisces on the warmth of Nanee's blanket, and the large size of the bed on which they slept. These were not luxuries that she enjoyed in her own home. This story illustrates another example of ways in which grandmothers can sometimes offset underprivileged situations.

Rural-Urban Difference in the Caribbean

In the three works included in this article, rural-urban differences show up in various ways. The opening chapter of *The Nowherians* highlights the naivety of the brothers—Terry and the narrator, as their mother leaves them at their grandmother's

house, which will become their home for the next seven years. The boys are taken to live with their maternal grandmother in Sangre Grande, and they have no clue about their abandonment until they watch "the back of [their] mother's cream dress with the red polka dots [disappear] from view" (Samaroo 1). Although the reader never knows exactly how old the boys are, the young child is put in "ABC" class—the first class of elementary education, and by the time they learn of their paternal grandmother's death, the protagonist is in Common Entrance class—the most important one where students write an examination that determines which secondary school they will attend. After having spent about six formative years away from their family in the urban area of Belmont, on their return, Terry and the narrator become "country bookies come to town" and their siblings and cousins laugh at the way they have begun to speak (Samaroo 199). Other characters in the novel offer clues about rural-urban difference at that time. Uncle Gabriel works in Port-of-Spain, the capital city of the island. Due to the distance from Sangre Grande, he stays in the city during the week and returns home on the weekend. There are better opportunities for work in urban areas.

In *Crick Crack, Monkey*, Tee is sent to live with her aunt in the town, so that she could attend a prestigious high school. The adults in the novel collide to displace the young girl from her home with Tantie and her younger brother because they all recognize the importance and implications of having a good education. Hodge explores the difference in educational opportunity for secondary schooling in rural and urban areas. The bright protagonist has earned a place at a prestigious high school, but she must leave the country to be able to do so. Her cousins describe her as "some lil relative Mommer found up in the country" (Hodge 109). Other than opportunities for work and schooling, there is difference in the social habits associated with Tee's family and friends from the country and her more affluent relatives in the city. The narrator notes, "One day I absent-mindedly put my food into a bowl and took a dessert spoon with which to eat it. The other two stared, their forks suspended in the air, and then looked at each other and burst out giggling" (Hodge 95). Aunt Beatrice reminds her of the difference between living with her and that of living in the country with her other aunt. She says, "We don't eat with bowl and spoon here, you're not living at your precious Tantie now" (Hodge 95). Similar to the protagonist of *The Nowherians*, Tee becomes cultured according to her environment. In contrast to Terry and his brother, she is exposed to urban living in a higher social classed household. Although she has not acquired all the social graces of Aunt Beatrice's

children, she understands the difference in practice. She watches in horror when Tantie visits and observes,

The worst moment of all was when they drew forth a series of greasy paper bags, announcing that they contained polorie, anchar, roti from Neighb' Ramlal-Wife and accra and fry-bake and zaboca from Tantie, with a few other things I had almost forgotten existed, in short all manner of ordinary nastiness. (Hodge 106)

One of the greatest challenges that Tee faces is navigating the different cultures characterized by two aunts, her paternal aunt—Tantie from the country, and her maternal aunt—Aunt Beatrice from the city.

Education for Kamla in *Butterfly in the Wind* underscores the entire plot. She explains, "My mother believed in education in the same way some people believe in God" (Persaud 14). Although her family is economically privileged, education is not simple for the Indo-Trinidadian girl subject. The narrator highlights the plight of Indo-Trinidadians in securing a sound secondary education when she says, "[T]he secondary schools of a high standing were in the capital and distant from the Indian villages in the wide alluvial belt of sugarcane and rice" (Persaud 136). She explains, "In the past, girls who wanted a sound academic education had to travel all the way to the capital, Port of Spain" (Persaud 159). For Kamla, she is forced to leave St. Augustine Girls' High School, which was closer to her home but limited in its offering of education at the time. She recognizes that "in many ways, St. Joseph's Convent was a contrast to SAGHS. It was not in the middle of fields, open to the cooling Trade Winds descending from the Northern Range. It was instead situated in the capital in the main port, retailing, administrative and commercial centre of the island" (Persaud 167). Especially as Indo-Trinidadian, Persaud makes sure to highlight the effect of the rural-urban dynamic in her prose as it has been through much sacrifice that Indo-Trinidadian women received sound secondary education in 1950s and 1960s Trinidad and Tobago.

Rural-urban difference in my family stories

When my mother passed the first ever Common Entrance Examination in 1962, she earned a place for secondary education at St. Stephen's College in Princes Town. She was then required to commute by bus from her home in the rural community of Barrackpore to the more urban Princes Town. She tells me that she had to wake up very early every day to be able to be punctual for school. Due to the time that she had to leave her home, she could not eat breakfast as it was much too early for her.

None of my mother's five older siblings had had the chance to attend secondary school, and she was grateful for the opportunity. There were no secondary schools in rural areas at that time, so anyone who had to acquire further education needed to venture into the town.

Until 1979, my family had been living in the urban area of San Fernando, while my grandmother and most of her children and grandchildren were living in the rural village of Barrackpore. In conversations with my cousin Kat, she explains that she thought that my family was extremely rich because we lived in San Fernando. This was probably because we lived in an apartment that had running water and electricity and they did not. While talking to her about our memories of our grandmother, she remembers attending my ninth birthday party. According to her, Nanee gathered as many of her grandchildren including Kat herself and hired a taxi to take them to my home in San Fernando. Kat had never attended a birthday celebration like that before, and she was in awe of the number of multi-racial children who were present at the party. As Persaud notes in her novel, Indians in Trinidad were primarily located in the rural areas as their lives were tied to the sugar-cane fields. The urban areas were home to more diverse populations. While economic status was not always high for people who lived in urban areas, there was certainly more exposure to services including education, different cultures, and varied social practices.

Conclusion

The Nowherians is a valuable contribution to the published body of Caribbean literature. Described as fictionalised autobiography, it captures important details of life in Trinidad and Tobago and the Caribbean that could disappear if stories such as these are not encouraged. In teasing out predominant themes within the work, and make connections with other works, namely *Crick Crack, Monkey,* and *Butterfly in the Wind*, and my own family stories, there are important commonalities of life experiences in Trinidad and Tobago. As Langer reminds, "Storytelling is probably the best method for communicating important—sometimes complex—in a simple and memorable way" (739). I continue to seek stories from literature that is being published, and to use memory work and research with my own family to draw out untold stories in my attempt "to keep history and legacy alive" (Langer 739).

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