**Racialised Femininities in Samuel Selvon’s Trinidad Novels**

Kate Houlden

This chapter discusses the racialised representation of women in three of Samuel Selvon’s Trinidadian novels, *Turn Again Tiger* (1959), *I Hear Thunder* (1963)and *The Plains of Caroni* (1970). Each of these texts focuses on an Indo-Caribbean man having sexual relations with a white woman: in the first, Tiger has a violent sexual encounter with Doreen before returning to his Indo-Caribbean wife, Urmilla; in *I Hear Thunder*, Adrian has passionate sex with his friend’s English wife, Joyce, before repairing his relationship with Indo-Caribbean Polly; last of all, Romesh rejects the control of his overbearing mother in favour of a relationship with white Caribbean Petra.[[1]](#endnote-1) In the final scene of each book, the protagonist is reunited with his partner as a reward for his trials, a consistency of narrative closure that shares much with the traditions of romance fiction and one that indicates the centrality of male-female relationships to Selvon’s fictional world. As suggested by the novels’ emphases on the experiences of Tiger, Adrian and Romesh, female sexual desire is consistently focalised through masculine need and women are primarily acted upon, rather than demonstrating individual sexual agency. Yet, at the same time, there is strong evidence for there being a trajectory across these works whereby stereotypes of white and Indian femininity are broken down in the service of a creolised regional (rather than ethnic) identity; it is this process which tempers the potential conservatism of the first two novels, in which the protagonists return to Indian women after an excursion through white flesh. With their focus on diverse forms of Indo-Caribbean selfhood – Tiger is the self-educated son of illiterate peasants who has an arranged marriage at a young age; Adrian is a middle-class, educated and urban ‘fete-boy’ (Walcott 126); while university-educated Romesh is from cane stock but is now a member of the professional classes – these texts counter what Shalini Puri has described as ‘the erasure that has dogged Indo-Caribbeans since their arrival’ (66). However, their sexual politics engender another kind of erasure, as there is a curious absence when it comes to the possibility of black women partnering Indo-Caribbean men. If sexual relationships are one of the primary mechanisms by which their protagonists cast off the legacies of the past, then the endings of these books invoke a Caribbean future predicated on the heterosexual family and a troubling negation of black claims to citizenship.

When viewed in sequence, these texts could be interpreted as promulgating a move towards whiteness, as the protagonists’ choices of long-term partner progress chronologically from submissive young Indian wife, through creolised Indian girlfriend to educated white Caribbean woman. It is more convincing, however, to view the books as being focused on expunging the fantasy of European superiority as symbolised by the white female body, with the correspondences between the primary sex scene in each lending credence to this claim. It is as though Selvon compulsively replays the same encounter between Indo-Caribbean man and white woman to slightly different effect each time, with his final outing rejecting the racialised charge of the earlier two works and emphasising the couple’s parity instead. Taken as a series, these novels, as well as undermining the stereotype of the imperious white mistress, also complicate the trope of the submissive Indian wife. On the one hand, they offer a diverse range of Indo-Caribbean female characters, some of whom illustrate the psycho-sexual costs of this traditional role. Accordingly, they overturn the connection between Indian femininity, racial purity and domestic order, problematising the mobilisation of women’s bodies in the service of ethnically-based nationalist claims. On the other hand, all of these women are punished (in one form or another) for transgressing the boundaries of hearth and home and all are eventually subordinated to a man. Selvon’s Indo-Caribbean women therefore have a more conflictual relationship with racialised models of gendered behaviour than his fictional white women. Overall though, the novels bear out Sandra Pouchet Paquet’s assertion that ‘the use of stereotype […] is at the core of Selvon’s conception of character. […] having established a stereotype, it is also characteristic of Selvon’s method that he more often than not challenges it’ (1979 xxi). As an alternative to both these categories – imperious white mistress or submissive Indian wife – the books champion a creolised model of femininity grounded in racial expansiveness, sexual expression and the enjoyment of localised cultural forms like calypso and carnival. It is this alternative mode of femininity that goes some way to offsetting Selvon’s tendency to use female characters as narrative foils for their menfolk.

If *Turn Again Tiger*, *I Hear Thunder* and *The Plains of Caroni* reveal Selvon’s interest in overturning the gendered and sexual legacies of colonialism as experienced by those of both Indo- and white Caribbean heritage, then black women in particular appear to be excluded from this process. In *Turn Again Tiger*, women of African heritage are either sexualised or maternal figures, whereas in the latter two works, they have minimal presence. The novels therefore substantiate Alison Donnell’s claim that ‘the issue of sexual encounters among Indians and Africans remains both the most sensitive and contentious zone of cross-cultural contact in Trinidad and a serious limit-point to the nation’s imagined community’ (225). As Donnell’s reference to national community suggests, idealised sexual formations are intimately linked to questions of citizenship. Mimi Sheller, for example, has argued that ‘normative scripts of sexual citizenship such as the good mother, the respectable woman, the worthy Christian, or the father of a family’ have proven crucial to ‘taking up positions as free subjects’ in the Caribbean (9-10). If the black characters – and specifically the black women – of these novels never inhabit such formations, then we might ask where the limits of subjecthood lie in Selvon’s fictional world. Across these books, the waning political (as opposed to personal) potential of the author’s creolised vision is shown. *Turn Again Tiger* (1959) evokes early nationalist fervour as its protagonist tentatively enters the political domain on the encouragement of his Afro- and Chinese-Caribbean friends. In *I Hear Thunder* (1963), Selvon’s disillusionment with both the Trinidadian bourgeoisie and the ethnic factionalism that followed independence is shown, as Afro-Caribbean Mark draws Adrian into his political ambitions mainly for his usefulness ‘among the Indian element’ (191). By *Plains of Caroni* (1970), which offers a cynical perspective on the island’s new freedoms, Selvon’s disenchantment has reached its zenith. In this novel, political aspirations are solely an Indo-Caribbean preserve, as Romesh’s mother attempts fraudulently to engineer his electoral success. Romesh only escapes these plans by leaving for England, a course of action making clear the extent to which the creolisation Selvon favours has become politically untenable in an island increasingly riven by ethnic divisions. This failure of national unity is, I argue, anticipated in the novels’ sexual relationships, which are almost solely concerned with the dynamic between those of Indian and European heritage. Both *Turn Again Tiger* and *I Hear Thunder*, for example,close similarly on a (re)unified Indo-Caribbean couple pregnant with child. Having worked through their issues of white superiority through sex with a white woman, the protagonists are ready to take on their roles as patriarchs and citizens, normative scripts that exclude any possibility for black women of participating in either family or national community. In his essay ‘Three into One Can’t Go – East Indian, Trinidadian or West Indian?’, the author talks movingly of how, as a child, he absorbed the sentiment that ‘the Indian was just a piece of cane trash and the white man was to be honoured and respected’ (8). At the same time, he acknowledges the widespread belief amongst Indo-Caribbeans that ‘White people came first, then Indians, and then the Blacks’ (8). Despite their wider advocacy of creolisation and the inclusion of politically-engaged black male characters like Mark, the sexual relationships in these novels nevertheless show their Indo-Caribbean protagonists reordering the terms of this description by making Indo- and white Trinidadians equal but maintaining Afro-Caribbean subordination.

## Three Into One Can’t Go

In *Turn Again Tiger*, the idealised white mistress serves as sexual right of passage, with the protagonist asking whether: ‘under all the old-talk, all I wanted to do was to screw a white woman?’ (149). When he succeeds in doing so, Tiger frees himself psychologically from the racial indoctrination of colonialism and is able, finally, to meet both his private and public responsibilities. His young wife, Urmilla, shows some character development, becoming more creolised, forging links with other women and, finally, challenging her husband with the words: ‘you think you is the only one in the world growing up, that nothing happening to other people, only you […]. The same way you getting older, I getting older too’ (126). In the closing pages, however, Tiger’s move into local politics and her concurrent pregnancy suggest a gendered division of active (male) and generative (female) roles in the birth of the new nation, with Urmilla being confined to domestic space. *Turn Again Tiger* therefore conforms to Partha Chatterjee’s description of how, in an Indian context, ‘it was the home that became the principal site of the struggle through which the hegemonic construct of the new nationalist patriarchy had to be normalized’ (631). Tiger and Urmilla’s relationship also comes closest to Doris Sommer’s discussion of the ‘national romance’ as being ordered by a ‘romantic rhetoric’ that builds towards ‘productive sexuality in the domestic sphere’ (76).

In *I Hear Thunder*, sexual abstinence is marshalled as a tool by which the protagonist can distinguish himself from the complacent values of Trinidad’s middle-classes, as Adrian sets himself the challenge of a year’s sexual prohibition in preparation for a longer-term commitment. Normative patriarchal relations are again upheld – as well as a particular view of ‘respectable’ male citizenship – when the protagonist vows ‘if he was going to be married, it was to be as near perfection as he could make it’ (11), words according with John Rothfork’s claim that ‘discipline, exemplified by sexual continence’ (9) is an ongoing theme of Selvon’s fiction. Like Tiger, Adrian is also tested by a journey through white flesh before he returns to his Indo-Caribbean girlfriend, Polly. Yet this racial ghettoisation is undermined not only by Polly and Adrian’s creolised natures – natures indicated by their names alone – but also by the fact that she is pregnant with a white man’s child by the time they are reunited. Polly herself is sexually free and dismissive of racial demarcations. The reader is told, for example, that she sees that ‘the future lay in forsaking’ her parents’ ‘memory of a distant country and a way of life that had no place in the West Indies’ (13). The novel ends with Adrian and Polly participating in carnival together, an event where, according to Selvon, ‘Black, white, brown and yellow […] all were out on the streets’ (189). As was the case with *Turn Again Tiger*, however, the end of the novel also shows order being restored through the bodies of a united, heterosexual Indo-Caribbean couple expecting a child. The fact that Polly is pregnant to white Randolph tempers the ethnic exclusivity of this vision, although it still lacks the presence of black characters.

In *The Plains of Caroni*, the wifely figure represented by Urmilla in earlier novels has been corrupted into the sinister presence of Romesh’s domineering mother, Seeta, who is expressly linked to the damaging racial legacies of both colonialism and the canefield. Like ‘countless Indian woman’ before her, she will ‘peter out her life in the village, growing old […] sustained on memory and hope’ (165). A youthful sexual indiscretion, it is revealed, has poisoned the life of both Seeta and her one-time lover, Balgobin, with the couple forced apart by Seeta’s arranged marriage to Balgobin’s brother. The book stages a confrontation between the values represented by Seeta and those of Romesh’s creolised white Caribbean girlfriend, Petra. Although the relationship ends with some ambiguity – Romesh is about to travel to England without Petra – their tentative promises to each other again reinforce the necessity of heterosexual union, although this time, it is an inter-racial partnership between an urbane, creolised pair. Whereas Doreen in the first novel is a mere cipher of white femininity, here we have gone full circle, the series of novels closing with the protagonist’s choosing an individuated white woman over an almost grotesque stereotype of Indo-Caribbean traditional femininity. Across the books, then, it is Urmilla’s tentative creolisation and Polly and Petra’s freer racial and sexual mores that are celebrated. Unlike the two earlier novels, however, *Plains of Caroni* closes with neither pregnancy nor a clear commitment to the nation; the creolised values championed by Selvon, it is suggested, must be tested across the ocean.

## From Object to Subject

The figure of the white mistress, representative of colonial power and domestic order, looms large across these books. However, the fallacy of this idealisation is made clear. As Daniel Coleman explains, the ‘white Lady, high up in the big house’, often formed ‘a distant and beautiful ideal’, symbol of the ‘master’s success’ and outward ‘sign of his manhood’ (59-60). This characterisation is directly applicable to *Turn Again Tiger* when the protagonist first stumbles across Doreen, the estate overseer’s wife, as she bathes in the river. Tiger immediately categorises her as ‘a woman. A white woman’ (48), a qualification that sets her apart in his mind. His first reaction is ‘to get away before he was seen – not creep silently, but to run wildly, as in panic. There was danger here’ (49), a response attributed to the childhood warnings he received to ‘keep off the white man’s land, don’t go near the overseer’s house, turn your head away if you see the white man’s wife’ (49). In this, Doreen is clearly marked as property, a commodification continued with the repeated references to the ‘glow’ of her skin and her ‘golden hair’ (48-49) – words that also make her an angelic, unreachable figure. When she calls out to Tiger, he runs away ‘like a little boy’ (51), an emasculating moment that forms ‘a scar on his mind nothing could efface’ (50). The inherent violence of his desire for her is also made evident when Selvon writes: ‘suddenly he was slashing at the bush around him […] it wasn’t a branch he was swinging at but it was her, her whiteness and her nakedness, her golden hair and her proud, pointed breast’ (52). Doreen’s ‘whiteness’ is here at the forefront of Tiger’s mind, revealing the extent to which he, as Pouchet Paquet puts it, ‘is still tied to the fears and inhibitions of a debilitating respect for a value system that makes the white woman different from any other’ (1979 xi).

Later, when Tiger works for Doreen, the mounting tension of their daily contact causes him to start drinking heavily and he curses ‘the bitch […] is she who cause me to be like this, she who cause everything. If the chance only come, I know what I go do’ (145), words that are borne out when the pair meet again at the river. This time, with ‘hatred, fear, lust’ in his heart, Tiger falls upon Doreen, so that ‘what he did was done blindly and vengefully and he never knew how it was’ (146). Once it is over, Tiger experiences ‘the fire and the rage and the fear and the lust all dead within him, and he felt a curious elation’ that now, ‘he would shed this thing from him and it would go away and leave him in peace for ever’ (147). Echoing this use of ‘thing’ – which refers to Tiger’s torment but is equally applicable to Doreen’s role in the scene – Tiger recognises that ‘what had happened had nothing to do with her’ (147). When she leaves wordlessly, he bathes, a reversal of their first meeting with obvious symbolic resonance as psychic rebirth. As Michel Fabre acknowledges, ‘Tiger’s symbolical cleansing in the pool shows his expurgation of the weakness in himself that remained vulnerable to the white woman as representative of white power’ (156).

The white woman herself, however, serves only as bodily vessel and psychic container. The reader is told that she ‘never cried out or made a sound but her body was trying like water to quench the rage and fury of his’, while she was also ‘murmuring to him, words he didn’t hear or care about’ (146). Tiger is uninterested in her perspective on events, merely hoping ‘that she wouldn’t break the silence that had existed’ between them (147). Rothfork is therefore right to assert that ‘beyond the easily exhausted pornographic stereotype’, Tiger has ‘no use for the white woman, much less her world’ (18).[[2]](#endnote-2) Although Tiger himself wonders whether their meeting was intentional or accidental, this line of inquiry is never pursued. As a result, there is some ambiguity as to the extent of Doreen’s consent in this violent encounter, with the fact that Tiger ‘held’ her, ‘crushed’ her and ‘ripped the white cotton shirt off her shoulders’ (146) furthering this indeterminacy.[[3]](#endnote-3) Whether their encounter serves as an actively sought racialised thrill on her part or an unwarranted assault by a man in whom she has a genuine interest, we can never be clear, although the references to her ‘caressing’ him and ‘murmuring to him’ (146) indicate some tenderness. Taken as a whole, Selvon’s portrayal of Doreen conforms to Martha Nussbaum’s seven forms of objectification, particularly in terms of instrumentality (treating ‘the object as a tool of his or her purposes’); fungibility (treating the object as ‘interchangeable’); ownership (treating the object ‘as something that is owned by another’); and denial of subjectivity (treating the object ‘as something whose experience and feelings […] need not be taken into account’) (257). More specifically to the Caribbean, the ambiguities surrounding Doreen’s presentation in this scene also relate to what Evelyn O’Callaghan has described as the ‘apparent absence of white women’s narrative voices from West Indian literary history’ whereby we can only ‘proceed by questioning what such “silence” might in fact articulate’ (2).[[4]](#endnote-4)

*I Hear Thunder* demonstrates a number of parallels with this disturbing encounter between Indo-Caribbean man and white woman. When Adrian meets his friend Mark’s wife, Joyce, she is also named in racial terms as the ‘white wife’ (8). Adrian, meanwhile, immediately feels a ‘slight uneasiness’ and a ‘quick physical attraction’ (34), this despite her being married to his best friend. Although he has managed to resist Polly’s charms for almost an entire year, one moment is all it takes for Joyce to have him flustered, revealing the exceptionalism of white femininity as Adrian perceives it. Just as Tiger felt that Doreen ‘was laughing at him’ (58), so too, Joyce ‘couldn’t help laughing’ (40) when she is introduced to Adrian, providing a similar affront to his masculinity. When Adrian first sees Joyce in swimwear on the beach, comparable imagery is also used to that employed in the description of Doreen: ‘the pale colour of her skin made her breasts look higher and firmer […]. He saw the gold of her belly and the beautiful curve of her thighs: the trunks fitted so snugly it looked like they were painted on her’ (45). Again, her whiteness, her firm breasts, golden colours and a certain painterly quality are all emphasised, creating an uneasy sense of Joyce as unobtainable yet, at one and the same time, a possession, with the crucial issue appearing to be *who* possesses her, rather than the legitimacy of such ownership. Just like Tiger, Adrian experiences ‘a kind of panic’ (46), while later, aware of the tension between himself and Joyce, he also begins to feel ‘an unreasonable anger’ (55).

Once he is finally alone with Joyce – again next to water – Adrian ‘fell on her’ and, ignoring her entreaties ‘grasped the neck of the dress to rip it down’ (63), with ‘fell’ and ‘rip’ almost exactly mirroring the language used in Tiger’s conquest of Doreen. In contrast, here, Adrian is foiled by his own premature orgasm. Chastened, he approaches Joyce again, this time, as he puts it, without any of ‘that melodramatic crap’ (63)—words that form an implicit critique of Tiger’s behaviour. Now, we are told:

They came together straining and heaving, in a kind of heartless, cruel passion. […] Silently she yielded, clasping him with arms like bands of iron, their thighs locked and wrapped, his body jerking and twisting. Until they were both wild and rolling, biting and clawing, murmuring and groaning. He reined as long as he could […] fighting to be aware of each precious second that was robbing him of the ideal he held so dear. (64)

Violence again suffuses this interaction, with ‘cruel passion’, ‘biting’ and ‘clawing’ directly echoing the earlier description. However, greater reciprocity is shown between the couple with ‘came together’ and ‘clasping’. Although Joyce yields ‘silently’ like Doreen, this silence is broken mutually as both she and Adrian eventually murmur and groan in tandem. The fact that this is Adrian’s second attempt at sex with Joyce (and she has not taken the opportunity to leave) also gives a greater sense of her acquiescence. Although ‘the ideal he held so dear’ most obviously refers to Adrian’s personal vow of chastity, the reader cannot help but read this through the racialised inflections of their coupling. Arguably, it is the second loss – Adrian’s prior idealisation of white femininity – which holds far greater narrative import than the plot motor of his failed abstinence.

Joyce’s earlier conversations with Polly also suggest greater intentionality on her part than was the case with Doreen. When told about Adrian’s vow, she asks ‘Do you think he has really been a good boy all this time?’ (45), teasing ‘maybe he hasn’t been tempted enough’ (41). Intrigued, she also wonders ‘how did he think? It would be interesting to find out’ (41), a lingering phrase that suggests her curiosity about him. Joyce is suspected of having an affair with a white man from the island, Randolph, and we are told that, when Mark married her, he was fully aware that she was not a virgin (39). In addition, she desires ‘the romance of green islands’ and the ‘quaint native’ (23), words adding a new aspect to her curiosity. There is, then, a grain of truth to Roydon Salick’s claim that, although both Tiger’s and Adrian’s encounters share a ‘perfunctory brutality’, in *I Hear Thunder* it is ‘less a matter of Tiger attempting to exorcize the ghosts of a colonial sexual fantasy […] than a matter of Adrian falling victim to the siren song of a woman who knows what she will and must do’ (1996 122). Salick, however, does not acknowledge one further difference between the encounters: Adrian is much closer to being Joyce’s socio-economic equal. Whereas a clear divide existed between cane labourer Tiger and overseer’s wife Doreen, here, Adrian and Joyce inhabit similar social worlds. Despite channelling evident racial currents, their transgression appears as much a symptom of that ‘complacent and easygoing’ (Nazareth 425) Trinidadian life elsewhere critiqued by Selvon. Joyce’s skin colour, then, is not her sole defining characteristic and a more realistic sense of the network of identifications animating bourgeois Trinidadian life is given.

Joyce is also far from disappearing conveniently from the narrative, as was the case with Doreen. When Adrian eventually confesses to Mark, all is forgiven and the foursome begins socialising again. The first time Adrian sees Joyce since their encounter, he ‘swept through any possible strain with an aplomb’ (168), while she confidently asks him, ‘What’s this “Hi” and rushing off like that? […] Don’t we get a big kiss after such a long absence?’ (171). As Adrian later notes, what is striking about this reunion is the ease with which they pick up their friendship, ‘as if they all possessed some supreme power to level out differences and shades and clashes and force circumstances to conform with their desires’ (175). Unlike Tiger’s experience of rebirth, for Adrian: ‘nothing had happened, nothing at all’ (176). Some trace of psychic disturbance is shown, however, when the two women use Joyce’s make-up to paint Adrian’s face for carnival. As Polly exclaims ‘now you almost as white as Joyce!’, Adrian ‘snatched the lipstick and marked his face all over’ like a ‘Red Indian’ (172). Those ‘differences and shades’ Adrian feels have been successfully glossed over, here resurface. Although Adrian may have exorcised his fascination with white womanhood, a residual anger nevertheless remains and he claims another kind of ‘Indian’ identity over and above any affiliation with whiteness.[[5]](#endnote-5) On balance, however, racial concerns are not the only element of Adrian’s interaction with Joyce, and the novel offers a more fully-rounded rendering of inter-racial sex between an Indo-Caribbean man and white woman.

This pattern is continued in *Plains of Caroni*, where, instead of the protagonist, it is his mother Seeta who, as Michel Fabre puts it, sees white skin as ‘a token of success’ (158). When she first encourages her son to talk to Petra, Seeta ‘had no eye for anything physical but the white colour’ (42), whereas Romesh sees her as more of an individual, countering Seeta’s repeated labelling of ‘the white girl’ with the retort ‘her name is Petra’ (47). Reflecting on their previous acquaintance, Romesh recalls Petra being ‘interesting and attractive’ and that, when they spoke, they had ‘found a mutuality and accord, almost sensing one another’s thoughts without need for many words’ (36) – an emotional and intellectual correspondence rather than Tiger and Adrian’s bodily responses. Greater reciprocity is also evident in this second meeting; when Petra first sees Romesh, ‘a look of pleasant surprise came to her face’ while he feels ‘sudden elation’ (41). In contrast to the threat of emasculation which ran through the previous encounters, Petra easily voices her concern that Romesh needs to assert his ‘manhood’ (106) against Seeta – rather than against her as a figure of white authority – to which he calmly agrees.

When Romesh and Petra first go to the beach together, the reader might be forgiven for anticipating what comes next, given the pervasive association of sex and water in the three novels.[[6]](#endnote-6) Yet this encounter plays out in starkly different terms. Romesh finds:

The first thing that came to his mind was sex. Sprawled there, with one leg drawn up, her breasts taut against the bikini’s top piece […] she was like a breathing holiday advertisement. There was a little down on her thighs that glistened golden even in the shade, tiny hairs giving off an iridescent glow. But there was more to her than that (51).

The repetition of ‘golden’ and ‘glow’ links to the earlier encounters, as does the emphasis on Petra’s pert breasts. However, Romesh’s crucial acknowledgement that ‘there was more to her than that’ sets this scene apart, as does his recognition that ‘this was why he was here with her now: because they had formed a mutuality’ (53). Romesh appears to experience, yet immediately transcend, the reflex of commodification that ensnared both Tiger and Adrian in the previous works. Rather than the frenzied couplings of the earlier novels, we are told that Romesh ‘put his hand out and rested it on her palm. Her fingers interlocked with his, gently, with no urgency or demand’ (53). Mirroring his thoughts, Petra confirms that they previously ‘made a lot of sense to one another’, to the extent that they were perhaps ‘a bit frightened by the suddenness of getting to know one another so quickly’ (53). The considered and leisurely nature of their conversation then carries over to their first sexual experience, for which we, notably, hear little detail. All Selvon tell us, with a more poetic turn of phrase, is that: ‘the westering sun threw warm rays under the galvanise and coconut branch, sculpturing their oneness in a long shadow on the sand’ (54).

Tracking across the three books, there is an increasing sense of the interior life of these white women, and the one Selvon devotes most attention to, Petra, was actually born in the Caribbean (whereas Doreen and Joyce are both English). Her portrayal therefore reinforces his point, in ‘Three into One Can’t Go’, that there are white people ‘who were born and bred in these islands […] who make an essential ingredient in the melting pot’ (11). Creolised Petra appears to have easy relations with Trinidadians of various ethnicities. When Romesh first meets her, they are in a ‘group of mixed students’ (36) and, when thinking about the problems caused by European tourists, he takes the view that ‘this girl beside him now was “different”, though she was white’ (52). Petra is also shown to be sexually free. Although she recognises that, ‘of all the men she knew, Romesh was the only one who sparked a feeling in her’, she nevertheless ‘had met many men, and indeed she was still meeting them’ (136). As he prepares to leave for England, meanwhile, she asserts ‘time and distance might change me too’ (166) – words echoing Urmilla’s assertion of her own development in *Turn Again Tiger*. The climax of the novel, where Romesh finds Seeta and Petra ‘holding him, one on either side’, so that he feels ‘trapped between them’ (157), can be seen as a battle between two models of femininity, one stereotypically Indian, one white and creolised. In the end, Romesh chooses Petra, the liberal, white Caribbean woman. This episode can, I suggest, be seen as the dissolution of Selvon’s stereotyping of white femininity across these three novels: whereas the series began with the one-dimensional characterisation of Doreen, it ends here with individuated white femininity. While Nussbaum allows that some forms of objectification are not ‘always morally objectionable’ (290), she does find the ‘instrumental treatment of human beings, the treatment of human beings as tools of the purposes of another’, to be ‘always morally problematic’ (289). Significantly, it is this aspect of Selvon’s treatment of white women – as tools through which to expunge the fantasy of European superiority – which is itself excised across the novels.

## The Obedient and Servile Indian Wife

Whereas Selvon’s white female characters move in a straightforward trajectory from objecthood to subjecthood, his Indo-Caribbean women instead form an eclectic collection of markedly different individuals, which in and of itself shows the fallacy of the limited stereotype of the submissive Indian wife. As such, they provide evidence to oppose Frank Birbalsingh’s criticism of the endemic ‘submissiveness of heroines in the work of earlier male novelists’ of Indo-Caribbean extraction (2013 16). Rather, Selvon makes clear the psycho-sexual costs of this traditional model of Indian womanhood, implicitly celebrating a creolised form of Indo-Caribbean femininity. Yet, at the same time, all of his Indo-Caribbean women are punished, in one form or another, for transgressing the boundaries of hearth and home, and all are eventually subordinated to a man. The novels therefore shore up, as well as undermine, this particular racialised model of femininity (whereas their portrayal of white women is more of an unequivocal counteraction). If Selvon’s treatment of Doreen, Joyce and Petra humanises the stereotype of the white mistress, then his writing of Indo-Caribbean women offers a more nuanced questioning of the terms of objectification itself, one more akin to Judith Butler’s (2008) emphasis on practices of signification. It is through his Indo-Caribbean women’s attempts to negotiate and perform – in successful, compromised and failed ways – the stereotype of submissive Indian femininity, that the instability of this construction is exposed.

By the early twentieth century, as Hosein and Outar outline, ‘the dominant notion of the Indo-Caribbean woman as Hindu, as passive, as heterosexual, as conservative, as submissive, as guardian of Indian culture via her body and her morality’ (1) was well entrenched. This model of Indian femininity features centrally in the novels through the repeated characters named ‘Seeta’: the first an inhabitant of Five Rivers in *Turn Again Tiger*, the second mother to Polly in *I Hear Thunder* and the third mother to Romesh in *Plains of Caroni.*[[7]](#endnote-7) The first Seeta serves as guardian of Indian culture and is dismissive of new arrival, Afro-Chinese Berta. She warms, however, to the temptations of creolised living, even daring to follow Berta’s lead and bathe naked in the river (79-83). In *I Hear Thunder*, Seeta consciously embodies traditional Indian femininity and has a fierce resistance to creolised behaviour. She is an enigmatic character that ‘lived as though she were still on the banks of the Ganges’ (13). To cook, she uses an ancient grinding stone, which has ‘originally come from India’ (69) and on which she ‘had seen her mother grinding […] and her mother had watched her mother’ (69), words making clear the longevity of the wifely role that she herself now inhabits. Her life appears an endless round of food production, occasionally interspersed with her husband’s criticisms of her failure to discipline Polly, while it is made clear that it is the mother’s role to enforce propriety onto her daughter. Thanks to the repeated references to Seeta’s blank demeanour, her sari and the grinding stone prove the central devices through which her character is expressed little sense of individuation occurs.

This bleak portrayal of Indian motherhood is continued in *Plains of Caroni* with Romesh’s mother, Seeta. Although she is conservative, heterosexual and, to some extent, representative of Indian culture, Seeta does not display the expected passivity. Instead, the novel begins by emphasising her dominance over her husband: her role is apparently ‘so unlike the traditional image of the obedient and servile Indian wife that Harrilal did not dare to let anybody know the true state of affairs’ (12). Far from being the antithesis of this traditional image, however, Seeta is, rather, a corrupted version of it, overly invested in the fate of her eldest son. So desperate is she to further Romesh’s prospects, that she has ‘even considered and accepted having herself fucked’ for him (83). This is contextualised when we hear that Romesh is in fact the product of the one night she spent with her true love, Balgobin, before acquiescing to an arranged marriage with his brother. It is this original act of submission which has determined the course of Seeta’s life and against which, the reader might infer, she has been in rebellion ever since.

When looking back at these events, Balgobin recalls how: ‘It was in the dark she had given herself to him, so freely, with such utter abandon that had he not known better he might have wondered’ (123). Here, a very different Seeta to the cold woman of the novel’s present emerges. In contrast to the stereotype, this is an instinctively passionate young girl who experiences sex as ‘ecstasy and […] exquisite joy’ (123). Accordingly, when she meets Balgobin again later in life:

It was as if she stood completely naked inside and out, shorn of every pretension […] leaving a bewildered, panic-stricken girl. She could not live with this new self, too long she had practised another face and manner and attitude to show the world (130-1).

Stunted in her emotional development by her loss, Seeta transferred her feelings on to her son, so that: ‘everything I done for you was like doing it for him’ (151). The reader is encouraged to sympathise with her plight, recognising that she has suffered her whole life because of this illicit passion. Yet at the same time, the relish with which her fall is written – the references, for example, to her seeming ‘older and haggard’, ‘shaking’ and unable to ‘keep her hands still’, suggesting that ‘it was as if, without make-up, she could no longer act’ (138-9) – indicates a degree of narrative punishment for her control of her son; this, Selvon’s fictional world suggests, may be a transgression too far.

These examples make clear the losses attendant to the traditional image of Indian femininity. Whereas the figure of the white mistress is gradually humanised across the three books, here, the opposite trajectory occurs, as the servile Indian wife is made monstrous. A counterbalance is offered, however, by an alternative, creolised form of Indo-Caribbean womanhood that also comes to the fore. *Turn Again Tiger* celebrates shy, young Urmilla’s attempts to assert herself and become more creolised. She, too, has experienced an arranged marriage and Selvon does not shy away from illustrating the negatives of her position, not least Tiger’s occasional physical abuse. Yet the novel also reveals how Urmilla has ‘grown from a girl into a woman, moulding herself with each new experience’ (6). Whereas the first Seeta does not pursue the possibilities of creolisation, the second simply replays the lives of her female ancestors and the third finds her life formed by the ethnic practices of her youth, Urmilla instead offers what Pouchet Paquet has described as ‘a sensitive, intelligent complement to Tiger’s maturing consciousness’, whereby she is ‘finally committed to the creole world of Barataria’ (1979 xvii).

After they have moved away to Five Rivers, Urmilla’s reservations about its predominantly Indian culture are made clear as she rejects the company of ‘Teek’s wife who was always complaining of illness, or Manko’s wife who prattled all the time in sing-song Hindi’; with ‘none could she find the pleasure she used to have […] in Barataria’ (76-7). At the same time, Urmilla’s relationship with Tiger also develops. Although she recognises that submissiveness is expected ‘when a woman was a wife’, she nevertheless asks her husband about his worries, a ‘sudden boldness’ that ‘made her cheeks red’ (44). This courage finds further expression when the women of the village band together to challenge their husbands’ drinking. During these events, Urmilla discovers ‘her inward shyness completely gone […] so that she found herself with the strongest voice’, causing the others to announce ‘Urmilla, you lead we, and we follow you!’ (81). Although they are ultimately unsuccessful in their mission, she finds new confidence in her role as ‘ringleader’ (87), while Tiger, in turn, recognises that Urmilla has ‘done a brave thing’ (88). In these passages, as Ramabai Espinet acknowledges, ‘the interior monologue of the woman is given full force […]. Selvon is able to suggest processes of reasoning and action which are specific to the experiences of women’ (Clarke et al 58). Patricia Mohammed has outlined how Indian women have often been ‘considered largely outside of the mainstream struggle for female equality and equity’ (2012 2) within the Caribbean. Here, however, Selvon shows Urmilla actively working for change, albeit within a relatively constrained domain. As such, the novel accords with Hosein and Outar’s call for greater recognition of the ‘subtle, subversive acts of working from within their group norms’ (3) employed by Indo-Caribbean women.[[8]](#endnote-8)

Selvon continues to explore creolised Indo-Caribbean womanhood in his later text, *I Hear Thunder*,with the character of Polly. At first, she is unsympathetic to Adrian’s sexual quest, having ‘made it clear to her friends that she was free and single’ (40-1) — a casual attitude echoing that of Petra in *Plains of Caroni*. Although hurt when she first finds out about Adrian and Joyce, Polly later ‘laughed to remember how little heed she had paid to him and his memory’ (104). Subsequently, she takes up with Randolph, a local white who ‘mixed freely in all societies’ and boasted of being ‘a “born Trinidadian”, uninhibited, free of all racial feeling and snobbery’ (14). When Randolph brews a tea made from a ‘rare fruit which stimulates and excites desire’ (105), it is Polly who jokingly claims ‘you won’t try it out on *me*!’ (116), a statement that precipitates their coupling. She goes into the bedroom to change, ‘leaving the door open’ (118), with the intentionality of these words made clear as we are told that when he followed, she was: ‘standing naked before the mirror, powdering between her legs. She simulated surprise and embarrassment when she saw him, clutching her hands over her breasts and locking her legs together in the traditional manner’ (119). Polly’s agency in this scene is evident, although crucially, she couches her desire in a ‘simulation’ of the ‘traditional manner’, with ‘traditional’ holding both sexual and racial connotations. These are exacerbated as Randolph himself observes that ‘she was roused so quickly that she must have wanted it ever since they were up on the hill’ and we are told that ‘he had never had an Indian girl before because they were supposed to be passive and stodgy in the act. But Polly could hardly wait for him to take off his clothes’ (119). Polly’s simulation, then, is as much of the traditional Indian girl as the sexual ingénue. These racial currents are taken further when Randolph wakes and discovers Polly naked and expertly wrapping herself in a sari. This arouses him enough to pull her to him for a second time, ignoring her protests that ‘you going to crumple up my sari!’; in fact, it is the sari that has ‘sparked off his fresh outburst of energy’ (121). Like Seeta in her passion for Balgobin, Polly here displays an instinctive sexuality at odds with the traditional stereotype of Indian femininity. This anticipates the kind of female sexual agency visible within the work of a later generation of female Indo-Caribbean authors such as Shani Mootoo or Ramabai Espinet (Birbalsingh 2013). However, neither Seeta nor Polly remains with the men who have engendered such passion on their part and we get little sense of comparable feelings recurring in their later unions with Harrilal and Adrian respectively.

Following this encounter, Polly falls pregnant to Randolph, who conveniently departs the country, leaving the way clear for a chastened Adrian to return to her side during carnival. As they dance together, she ‘burie[s] her head in his chest […] content that he [is] back again’ while he reassures her, ‘everything going to be all right’, with a mixture of ‘tender compassion’ but also a ‘little edge of superiority’ (168). After they have danced all night long, the book closes with Polly asleep in Adrian’s arms, as he reflects on the theme of ‘repentance’, ready to become ‘the symbol of a steady, reliable, collected man’ his earlier superiority portended. Crucial to this outcome, for Polly, is her association with what Selvon views as creolised values. Whereas her traditional mother, Seeta, ‘had no time for all this nonsense that went on at Carnival time’ (185), we are instead told, ‘there was Polly, a child kicking in her belly, dancing without a care’ (175). While her father may admonish ‘You didn’t bring that girl up Indian, you know. She too creolised’ (145), it is this creolisation that has granted Polly the security of returning to Adrian – and their bourgeois lifestyle – after her sexual misdemeanour. Yet, at the same time, their reunification does conform to the patriarchal edict from Polly’s father that ‘Indian got to stick together, we got to keep we own blood and don’t mix up’ (145).[[9]](#endnote-9) The final relegation of both Urmilla and Polly to a child-rearing role bears out Brinda Mehta’s claim that Indo-Caribbean women have been ‘subjected to a double literary displacement that has minimized their capacity to effectively engage in crucial issues of nation building, race, difference and identity’ (2). These episodes therefore serve to reinforce the idea that a bonded heterosexual union is the ideal of Selvon’s fictional world, despite the fact that the (sexual) losses of such unification are also made manifest., Selvon’s portrayal of Urmilla’s emerging feminist activism and the third Seeta’s and Polly’s sexual agency does counter what Mehta also describes as ‘the myth of the eternal feminine […] that negates the possibility of more […] plausible representations’ (28). These women may ultimately conform, but insight is also given into to the alternative gendered or sexual futures they might have envisioned.

## Women of African Descent

As the brevity of this final section suggests, black women barely feature as sexual partners to Indo-Caribbean men in these novels, although some positive relations between Indo and Afro-Caribbean individuals more generally are shown. In *Turn Again Tiger*, for example, Tiger and Urmilla’s creolisation is mainly expressed through their appreciation of their friendship with Afro-Caribbean Joe and Rita and the novel is infused with sentiments such as Tiger’s assertion to Joe, that ‘I creolise just like you’ (156).[[10]](#endnote-10) The most productive connections between those of Indian and African heritage, in fact, are the friendships experienced by Urmilla, who recognises that: ‘it was strange that she couldn’t find a good companion among her own people. In Barataria it had been Rita, and now it looked as if Berta would be her closest friend’ (78).[[11]](#endnote-11) Both Rita and Berta encourage Urmilla’s developing sense of selfhood and their connections provide a tantalising glimpse of a female cross-racial solidarity that counters what Mehta has described as the way that ‘Indian and African women have been pitted against each other as rivals in the fight for legitimacy and subjective autonomy’ (64). Yet Rita and Joe are also framed as ‘surrogate parents’ (Pouchet Paquet, 1979 viii) to the younger couple and Rita is primarily a maternal figure, even taking on midwife duties at the birth of Tiger and Urmilla’s first child in *A Brighter Sun*. Afro-Chinese Berta, meanwhile, is mainly portrayed in bodily terms and as sexually available, imagery consistent with characterisations of black femininity emanating from the plantation. When she is first married to shop owner Otto, it is Berta’s ‘beautiful body’ (72) that is emphasised, while she ‘made eyes at the fieldhands’ (71) and she is eventually rumoured to have cuckolded her husband with cane worker Singh (in the only hint across all three books of sexual relations between Indo- and Afro-Caribbean characters). Such characterisations clearly perpetuate a Madonna/whore dichotomy, limiting the ability of these figures to appear as fully-rounded individuals.

Aside from Rita and Berta in *Turn Again Tiger*, only two more minor references to women of (potential) African heritage are made. In *I Hear Thunder*, Randolph follows his seduction of Polly by having ‘a brown-skin lined up for the kill’, a ‘sweet little thing’, whose parents had ‘drummed it into her not to make friends with people who were darker than she was’ and whom ‘he had already fingered during a preliminary bout’ (152-3) – words that continue the crude association of black women with sexuality and which gesture towards those ethnic divisions unsettling the creolised vision of the texts. Finally, *Plains of Caroni* sees mention of ‘a pretty French Creole girl’ in a taxi (25), whose specific racial heritage is left indeterminate. She ‘moved as near in as she possibly could to the driver, and clasped her handbag tightly, looking straight ahead’ in response to the ‘vulgar conversation’ of the male passengers’ and the fear of being raped (25), sentiments removing her entirely from sexual purview. These limited references give barely any sense of Afro-Caribbean femininity (much less subjectivity), while even the novels’ more positive characterisations of Rita and Berta appear fairly stereotypical. Whereas Selvon carefully breaks down tropes of Indian and white femininity, no such process occurs with women of African heritage.

If sexual relationships are one of the primary ways to chart the author’s shifting responses to the failures and possibilities of post-war Trinidadian society, then this exclusion of black women forms a troubling lacuna in his regional novels. It also mirrors the gradual eclipse of black families that occurs more generally across Selvon’s Trinidadian texts, visible when comparing *A Brighter Sun* (1952) to these later works. Of course, no writer can be expected to give all perspectives equal consideration all of the time, and the majority of the action in *Plains of Caroni*, for example, occurs on an Indo-Caribbean run plantation in a predominantly Indo-Caribbean area of Trinidad, thereby limiting the scope for including Afro-Caribbean individuals. However, if sex forms as big a part of Selvon’s oeuvre as I claim, then these texts’ failure to conceive of sexual relations between Indo-Caribbean men and black women, suggests a broader negation of the place of black women in both family and polity. If they can be neither the ‘good mother’ nor the ‘respectable woman’ in partnership with ‘the father of the family’ (Sheller 9-10), then their fictional subjecthood is restricted across these novels. Selvon’s writing of sex therefore anticipates his works’ growing ‘disenchantment over the failure of community’ in the Caribbean (Pouchet Paquet, 1986 443). In a 1971 *Guardian* interview, Selvon attributes this failure, in part, to ‘certain Negro elements in the black power movement who mean “power for me and me alone”’ and, in discussing this ‘souring’ of relations between ‘Negroes and Indians’, he recognises that ‘now there are a lot of things to be threshed out between those two races’ (Knox 12). Whereas the sexual relations depicted in these novels do much to ‘thresh out’ issues between white and Indo-Caribbean populations, they fail to do the same for Indo- and Afro-Caribbeans. With Stuart Hall (1955) and Kenneth Ramchand (2013) among others emphasising Selvon’s nationalist credentials, then, provocatively, we might ask whether the sexual relationships discussed here in fact constitute what Salick has called ‘a moral and emotional fortification against what many consider to be a rampant, insistent Afro-centrism’ responsible for ‘marginalizing the Indo-Caribbean presence’ (2001 96). At the same time, however, these novels do more to undermine stereotypes of both Indian and white womanhood than has previously been credited.

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## Notes

1. *An Island is a World* (1955) also features Indo-Caribbean men having sex with white women. However, as these interactions take place *outside* of the Caribbean – in England and America respectively – that novel will not be discussed here. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Elsewhere in this collection, Lewis McLeod frames this apparent lack of interest in terms of Tiger’s fear of Doreen’s subjectivity and the disciplining gaze she might represent. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. In this, I disagree with Ramabai Espinet that ‘Doreen is given agency; she is a fully developed sexual agent; and her desire for Tiger is as urgent and as inexplicable as Tiger’s desire is for her’ (Clarke et al., 1996 58). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Tiger’s interaction with Doreeen is not the only reference to Indo-Trinidadian men and white women in this book. Local character More Lazy claims to have had a dream about a giant coming to raze the village, clutching a white woman in his arms. After More Lazy has vanquished the giant, he explains ‘the girl was too nice bad! She and me lay down right her afterwards. I treat she rough, man. I treat she rough’ (105). As Pouchet Paquet summarises, ‘in More Lazy’s crucial alteration of the King Kong myth, the challenger is not a giant black ape, but a giant white American male’ so that he ‘reverses the phallic image of superior fire power and takes the white woman as his prize’ (xiv). Similarly, we hear of Boysie, who has returned from abroad with a white wife, at whom ‘everybody staring […] as if they never see a white woman before’ (157). As Tiger recognises when discussing Boysie’s fate, ‘over here some of we still feel white people is God, and that is a hard thing to kill’ (158), terms echoing his psychical ‘killing’ of Doreen. Tiger’s own personal crisis therefore becomes ‘representative of the chronic social and psychic illnesses which plague the wider island community as a vexing legacy of its colonial history’ (Pouchet Paquet 1979 xiv). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. This resistance on Adrian’s part can be contextualised against Afro-Caribbean Mark’s engagement with white Trinidadian life and his eventual willingness to join that bastion of social privilege, ‘the club where only whites and the island’s *elite* went’ (169), despite his earlier protestations that he would do no such thing. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. In his discussion of Selvon’s later novel, *Moses Migrating* (1983), Jeremy Poynting observes a similar link between sex with white women and water, commenting: 'There is, [in *Moses Migrating*], I believe, a deliberate echo of the scene in *I Hear Thunder* when Adrian makes love to the white wide of his best friend in the sea, when Moses makes love to Bob's wife Jeannie in a similar maritime fashion' (264). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. This is both a very stereotypically Indian name and also that of the wife of Rama, in the Hindu epic, the *Ramayana*. She is both the central female character of that story and serves as a model of wifely virtue within Hindu mythology, meaning that there is a knowing quality to Selvon’s naming of this character. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Selvon’s description of how, when bathing with the other women, ‘Urmilla lay modestly on the stones and refused to get up and show herself’ (82) also raises questions about the extent to which Urmilla’s development can be viewed as a process of modernisation, as much as his own label of creolisation. See Mohammed (2002) and Hosein (2012). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. This is a direct echo of Tiger’s father in *A Brighter Sun* (1952), who tells his son: ‘you must look for Indian friend, like you and you wife. Indian must keep together’ (47). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. This friendship can also be interpreted in light of Alison Donnell’s discussion of neighbourliness and conviviality in chapter five. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Although the childhood friendship between Adrian and Afro-Caribbean Mark features strongly in *I Hear Thunder*, the strength of this bond is called into question as Adrian predicts that one day, Mark’s social climbing will mean that: ‘I wouldn’t be surprised if you pass me straight on the street’ (40). [↑](#endnote-ref-11)