

ABSTRACT

A Caribbean *Katha*: Re-visioning the ‘Indo-Caribbean’ ‘Crisis of Being and Belonging’ through the Literary Imagination

Jassodra Vijay Maharaj

This study argues that Caribbean fiction is a powerful but under-utilised resource for understanding the region’s social tapestry. The study therefore contributes to the Caribbean intellectual tradition an indigenous hermeneutics, the *katha*, as a heuristic device for opening up this inherent capacity of the literature. The traditional *katha* comprises techniques of interpretation that re-vision and foster dialogue among sacred texts and contexts of community concerns. In this study, *katha* techniques have been appropriated to devise a method of literary criticism for analysing a ‘crisis of being and belonging,’ people of Indian ancestry are said to experience. They are used to re-vision selected narratives published between 1877 and 1998 and representing the period between indentureship and independence. Drawing on the oral technology’s aim to resolve problems, the *katha* method is also deployed toward this goal.

The application of the *katha* methodology revealed that for every Caribbean group and individual, being and belonging have been compromised by “Presence Européenne,” which reinvented the past and made “us see and experience ourselves as ‘Other’” (Hall, “Cultural Identity” 394). The ‘crisis of being and belonging’ is thus a Caribbean postcolonial problematic. But each work of fiction is also a counter-hegemonic and counter-discursive exercise in self-reclamation. It performs its own reinvention of the past, often couched in the imperative to mix, to deconstruct pre-given categories of selfhood and to begin anew. The texts are thereby, however, enmeshed in the very categories they resist and prey to the return of repressed pasts. The final chapter which seeks to resolve the crisis therefore examines Naipaul’s *A Way in the World*, since this narrative re-thinks the past and its relation to the present and poses alternatives to customary ways of conceiving the self by suggesting a new epistemology of subject and society which can provide the starting point for renewed engagement with the problematic.

Keywords: Jassodra Vijay Maharaj, *katha*, ideology, discourse, being, belonging, culture, class, race, ethnicity, nation, hybridity, Caribbean identity, Caribbean literature, V.S. Naipaul, *A Way in the World*.