

‘Show, Not Tell:’
Reimagining Society Through
the Lens of Theatre

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Artistic Aims

For my senior project for the Theatre and Performance major, I am concentrating in playwriting. I am writing an original one-act play called *A Daughter of Demerara*. I hope to finish my latest and working draft by October 1st, 2018. For this project I hope to write a play that people of all backgrounds can relate to while focusing specifically on the Indo-Caribbean community and how it deals with domestic violence, sexual assault and immigration issues.

The community I want to focus on is one I belong to, the Indo-Caribbean community, and its diaspora in the United States, specifically in New York City. From both personal knowledge and news stories, I have learned that domestic violence is a rampant problem not addressed enough in this community. Additionally, the issues of sexual assault and immigration are also hardly addressed. Furthermore, along with the lack of enough Indo-Caribbean representation in theatre, I believe these issues should be given a spotlight as my senior project in the form of a new play.

Personal Goals for *A Daughter of Demerara*

I hope to give these issues a spotlight by writing a play that will as accurately as possible give voice to Indo-Caribbean characters facing them. Not only do I want to give them a voice in the play, but I also want their voices to be heard. Therefore, I will be putting up the play in late January 2019. I hope that by seeing the play, people will know more about these issues and this community. Not only do I want to bring awareness to these issues but, I want people to see how theatre can bring people together as well. With this end in mind, I also hope to have some sort of discussion or talkback afterwards. I hope I can accomplish these goals through writing and putting up the play.

Artistic Challenges and How I Will Conquer Them

While telling this story, one main artistic challenge I hope to conquer is writing the play to a full working capacity to then be put up as a production or reading. While I do not want to write this play solely to put it up, I feel it is important to let this play be shown so that the characters' voices are heard by a present audience. Thus, one of the challenges I have is writing this play with fully realized and three-dimensional characters. In addition, I need to write a well-fleshed out conflict and solution to the story. I find these obstacles are challenges to writing a working script because I have not written many full-length plays. While Playwriting I and II have prepared me with the basics of writing a play for in-class feedback, writing this play for a live audience feedback will be a uniquely different challenge.

One of the ways I hope to conquer this artistic challenge is to write or edit every day from the moment of conceiving the idea to the last draft. I received this advice from shadowing Theatre and Performance graduate and Playwriting minor, Thalia Sablon, who wrote and put up her own play, *Rep*, as her senior project last year. She advised me to write every single day, even if it is not on the topic. In that way, I could practice putting myself in the mindset of writing something each day and not face writer's block.

Another way I hope to conquer this artistic challenge is to create deadlines for myself. I hope that by creating deadlines, that I not only follow them, but pace myself so that I have enough time to follow them. By having deadlines, I know that I am holding myself accountable for finishing the drafts by certain times. With these self-imposed deadlines, I finished the first draft on June 15, 2018. The second draft was finished on July 30, 2018. The third draft was finished around the beginning of September and sent to my first reader, Andrea Thome, on

September 13, 2018. With these deadlines, I hope to continue and have a working draft by October 1, 2018.

Potential Impact of *A Daughter of Demerara*

Writing this play to a working draft is an important step in my post-Purchase plans because I hope to be involved in and create more works of art by people of color featuring people of color. I feel that there are not enough realistic and fair representations of Indo-Caribbeans specifically. No mainstream theatre plays address Indo-Caribbean people or issues that affect them. At Purchase, I learned that art is one way to bridge that knowledge gap between making people aware and entertained. Therefore, I would love to contribute to the representation and visibility of Indo-Caribbeans by writing *A Daughter of Demerara* for my senior project. In doing so, I will also be contributing to creating more Indo-Caribbean theatre as well as spreading awareness through art.

Another way this project benefits me after Purchase would be in proving that theatre is an accessible and inviting way to discuss important social issues. By introducing these issues through the play, people can become more aware of them and more open to discussing them. By inviting people of my community to come see the play and talk about it, they could potentially break some of those taboos. In using the play as an accessible and inviting form of discussion, I can show that theatre is effective in creating change in people's lives.

Finally, this project is an important step towards my post-Purchase plans because it would allow me to create a full work of theatre that I am the sole creator of. For many plays I have read and studied through my time here, I adapted them to make them more personal to me. But with creating my own work, I will be able to put those personal and learned experiences into

my own work in a deeper way. I feel that this step is important because it allows me to use my past performances, readings and knowledge and apply it to a work I create. Therefore, by writing and putting up this play, I will use all the knowledge I have accumulated at Purchase while also being able to later use it in the professional world.

Why Now?

Writing *A Daughter of Demerara* as my senior project is needed now more than ever due to several news issues we face today. After the new stories of several Indo-Caribbean women who died due to domestic violence in New York City was forgotten, I felt that people's attention and support needed to be revived in a different way. Similarly, within the vein of the #MeToo and #TimesUp movements, discussions about sexual assault seemed to only happen when a news story was broadcasted only to later be forgotten. But with creating my own play, I hope that it can add to the normalization of discussing these issues within everyday settings. Therefore, I hope *A Daughter of Demerara* addresses these issues through a new, more enduring perspective: the theatrical lens.

I also hope to address immigration through a theatrical lens. America is in a time now where immigration rights are greatly debated. People's opinions, especially those I have heard among family and friends, differ greatly on immigration. I want to write this play now so I can understand why there is both opposition and acceptance. I also want to show that not all people of color are pro-immigration, particularly among the Indo-Caribbean community. I want to explore the classist and elitist attitudes that exist among some Indo-Caribbeans in the diaspora. Therefore, this play will also address immigration issues, hopefully offering a different perspective.

Personal and Community Impact

One impact I hope to gain through writing *A Daughter of Demerara* is to change and bring awareness to my own understanding of domestic violence and sexual assault in Indo-Caribbean households. I want to understand why there is such a prevalence in violence among the Indo-Caribbean community in New York City. I also want to answer the question of why this problem still perpetuates year after year. Furthermore, I want to understand and explore why people have certain conceptions about immigrants, especially when they are also immigrants themselves. Therefore, the personal impact I want to have is to understand why these issues continue by writing the play.

The larger impact I hope writing this play will bring is a willingness to discuss these issues within the Indo-Caribbean community. While widely undiscussed, I feel that with the introduction of these issues in the form of theatre, people would feel more comfortable expressing their opinions. The play would also allow these issues to be discussed in a subtle, non-invasive setting. I hope that my audience, whether Indo-Caribbeans or others from different communities, also feel a sense of understanding. I want people to walk away knowing that they are not alone in their issues and are also not that different from one another.

I hope that *A Daughter of Demerara* also impacts my audience by introducing a new perspective on domestic violence, immigration and sexual assault in the Indo-Caribbean community. I hope to conquer the challenges of writing a one-act play with time management, deadlines and writing practices every day. I also hope that the play will lead to wider discussions about these issues. The writing and production will also give me a chance to apply the knowledge I have gained at Purchase to my own work, which can be used in the future.

'Rising' Theatre as a Social Tool in Addressing
Indo-Caribbean Gender Violence

Augusto Boal once said that, “The theater itself is not revolutionary: it is a rehearsal for the revolution” (Saxon). In following in Boal’s sentiment, this paper will focus on how theatre can be used to spark discussions and create social change in the Indo-Caribbean community. This paper will cover the origins of Indo-Caribbean gender violence, showing how it may have started, its effects and how theatre can be an essential tool in aiding its revolution. This paper will also cover how one Indo-Caribbean play, *Jahajees Rising*, served to spark that revolution, from covering the start of gender violence in colonial Guyana to present day New York.

In January 2018, Stacy Singh, a 28-year-old woman and mother of two young children, was the first murder victim of the year (Kilawan Narine). Her brutal murder shocked many Indo-Caribbeans but also did not surprise them, writes Aminta Kilawan Narine, a lawyer and gender advocate activist. Many felt that the issue of domestic violence was so overlooked and pushed behind closed doors that her murder was almost accepted (Tracy et al.). In response to the community’s acceptance and ignorance of Singh’s murder, along with other past victims, Taij Kumarie Moteelall, a playwright and co-founder of the Jahajees Sisters, a gender-based violence advocate group, wrote the play, *Jahajees Rising (Jahajees Sisters)*. This paper will examine the origins of Indo-Caribbean gender-based violence from the time of colonialism in British Guiana to its current state in New York City and the role of growing Indo-Caribbean theatre in addressing this issue in a unique way.

Jahajees Rising: Raising Awareness Through Theatre

Jahajees Rising focuses on the reimagining of Stacy Singh’s murder, by inventing a fictional character named Sevita Singh (*Jahajees Sisters*). Put up at the Flushing Town Hall on May 5th, 2018, the play drew more than 200 attendees, many of them from the Indo-Caribbean

community. The storyline followed a young Sevita Singh being attacked and injured by her partner. She wakes up in the hospital and is confronted with the choice to leave her husband or stay in the relationship. From this first instance, we can see how Moteelall uses the technique introduced by Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed- as using the rehearsal or performance as a means of revolution and reimagination (Saxon).

To understand the complexity of Indo-Caribbean gender-based violence and how *Jahajees Rising* uniquely addresses it, one must understand the origins of it, as the play also does. Moteelall explains that the Jahajees Sisters “wanted to address the root cause of gender injustice” and “not just put a band-aid [on it], we want to heal the wound.” This root cause, she explained, was in part caused by colonialism's introduction of Indian indentured laborers in the Caribbean, which exacerbated violence done against women. She added that “part of the incentive behind *Jahajees Rising* was to raise this awareness and this consciousness within our community.” For many Indo-Caribbeans Moteelall explained, gender-based violence has gone largely undiscussed. Rather years of invalidation caused Indo-Caribbeans to feel oppressed and powerless to change. Moteelall said:

“I realize arts and culture are very intertwined. Arts is an expression of our culture and I realize that the way oppression has worked is that [when] you invalidated a people's culture, which is their means of production, their ways of being, their living, their spirituality [...] when you invalidate a people's culture, invalidate them and they are then weaker and you can actually oppress them and take over them. I saw how that became such a part of colonialism and the strategy of colonialism.”

To understand the effect of colonialism on Indo-Caribbean culture and how Moteelall's play reveals this, an understanding of the history of colonialism is needed.

How Colonialism Shaped Indo-Caribbean Gender Violence

To begin to understand the Indo-Caribbean woman's journey, one must see how they became Indo-Caribbean in the first place. After the abolishment of slavery, in the 1830s, new laborers were needed to work on plantations all over the world (Bahudur x). The British transported over a million Indians to their various colonies including Fiji, Jamaica, Mauritius, Suriname, and British Guiana (Bahadur xx). Like the Middle Passage was for African slaves, the voyage to the various colonies and preceding embarkment was similarly traumatic and harrowing, despite efforts to make it more humane. One can argue that this very first trauma inserted itself into the gender-based violence that Indo-Caribbean women experience today.

Once aboard the ships, Indian women who were lacking in number compared to their male counterparts were susceptible to physical and emotional abuse. Some argue that their lack in number caused gender-violence to escalate once in British Guiana. Various factors also explain the low ratio of Indian women aboard including cultural attitudes that Indian woman should not leave their family to migrate. Other factors including laws prevented many from migrating as well, including the 1883 Indian Emigration Act. This act prevented single women from travelling without getting hard to obtain documents stating they were widows or single (Bahadur 27):

“[T]he female emigrants consisted of four groups: the wives of men who had already been to the colonies and had returned to fetch them, destitute widows with no one to take pity on them, prostitutes and ‘married women who have made a slip, and who have either absconded from their husband's house with or without a lover or who have been turned out of doors by their husband’” (Bahadur 33).

Furthermore “recruiters looked for women who had no one. No one to provide for them and no one to prevent them from going” (Bahadur 32). These facts along with other tactics show how Indo-Caribbean women were already vulnerable to gender-based violence once becoming

indentured. Their indenture contracts also changed their ability to retain their culture and arts once migrating. Thus, once they lost their culture and validation, fighting against the cycle of oppression and violence was made harder, like Moteelall revealed.

Similarly, laws were not upheld to prevent gender violence in colonial Guyana. Ships were not legally allowed to sail unless they had a certain quota of men to women, but this rule was often broken. Bahadur writes, “No ship could sail unless there were forty women for every 100 men among the coolies it carried” (27). This rule was enacted because without enough women, violence would be rampant with the limited number of women there. Men often shared partners, making jealous and revengeful acts common in the colonies, with women bearing the brunt of the violence. Thus, the small number of Indo-Caribbean women in the colonies along with the loss of culture caused violence to become commonplace in British Guiana.

While the caste system was not upheld in British Guiana, women were still held to past gender customs. However, Indo-Caribbean women were able to choose higher-status partners like Indian sirdars (drivers on plantations) or white overseers (Bahadur 82-94). But rumors of infidelity and jealousy caused them to experience violence and death at a gruesome rate. One woman, Laungee, was found with thirty-five chops about her body (Bahadur 103). Her murder was spurred by her speaking against her husband, with him using a cutglass (or “long curved blade used to cut cane”) to dismember her (Bahadur 103-104). “Between 1859 and indenture’s end, more than 167 women were killed by intimate or would-be intimate partners in Guiana,” (Bahadur 108). These gruesome acts of violence would follow Indo-Caribbeans as they migrated from Guyana in the 1970s to the United States up until present day (Kilawan Narine).

How Theatre Can Reshape Indo-Caribbean Gender-Based Violence

One cannot pinpoint one explanation to such violence except by understanding that there are multiple causes including jealousy, the emasculation of men and more, stemming from colonialism. However, as Moteelall suggests, one glaring fact often overlooked is that the erasure of Indian culture once in Guyana kept stagnant the gender violence perpetuated there. “By really stifling on creativity and invalidating our culture, we became submissive [and] we become oppressed,” said Moteelall. This oppression, she argues, is only reversed when “we reclaim it as artists, as visionaries, as the storytellers.” Thus, theatre becomes a unique way to rewrite this learned behavior into a new light.

Felicia Singh understood and articulated just how powerful theatre was for shedding this new light. After watching *Jahajees Rising* she recalled a moment where she experienced a similar but more negative outcome to addressing gender violence in her life. She recalled seeing her aunt’s husband at a party who asked her if she had told his wife to leave him in jail:

“‘Yes, I did,’ I said, bravely. He proceeded to yell and scream at me as everyone watched in astonishment and shock. I was helpless as my aunt’s abuser yelled and cursed at me endlessly [...] No one, not one family member that was present defended me.”

Singh’s encounter with her family and her aunt’s abuser came to her mind when seeing *Jahajees Rising*. In fact, she recalled she started to cry and heard “a symphony of sniffles from all corners of the room including [from her] mother, friend, the woman behind [her].” Singh argues that the play was important in addressing shame by bringing it out into the open, in a community-wide setting. Unlike her experience at her family’s party, in the play there is an alternative supportive society that addresses gender violence. This can be seen in the moment when Sevi Singh goes to a women’s support group (mirroring the Jahajees Sisters’ empowerment sister circles). There,

Sevita gains the support of other women which also enables to audience to see that there is support available.

Support was also given throughout the play in its music and poetry, meant to uplift and encourage the audience members towards healing their trauma. “*Jahajees Rising* challenged the notions of shame,” Singh writes, offering us to both recognize that shame and think of how we could rewrite it. “When I saw the light of Sevita’s ancestor, Sundari, being taken from her by her abusive husband, I couldn’t help but think how many lights have been put out because of the patriarchy in our culture,” Singh revealed. Singh’s comments on the parallel between the play and her own accounts of similar abuse shows how the play adequately acknowledges the gender violence occurring in Indo-Caribbean communities. But furthermore, the play also offers an alternative which makes it a unique way to address gender violence. Singh writes how we see a future Sevita and her grown-up daughter, Shanti, who becomes “a strong, independent woman” in a loving relationship. “The image of Shanti and her husband reminded me of the value of recognizing the difference between an unhealthy and healthy relationship,” she said. Thus, Singh reiterates a main point Moteelall strived to embody with her work, which was to “show, not tell,” reimagining society through the lens of theatre.

How *Jahajees Rising* was Created

For Moteelall, reimagining a different society was key to creating the play. She explained that in graduate school at New York University she learned how the arts could be used as a tool for social change and how it was an integral part of all major social movements. “I started seeing [how] you can’t really have a social movement or social change without a parallel arts piece which is the voice of the people,” said Moteelall. Using the reimagined voice of Stacy Singh through Sevita Singh, Moteelall shows us how we can address Indo-Caribbean gender violence

through theatre. “It’s also the vision of the people,” she continued, that is necessary for a social movement, “because I think for us to be able to transcend the current reality or want to shift the current reality, we have to have vision [...] We have to know that something outside of what we’re living in, is possible, and vision allows us to know that’s possible” (Moteelall).

That vision is shown in *Jahajees Rising* through the structure and storyline of the play. After Sevita Singh is hospitalized, she dreams seven generations back into her past and then seven generations into the future. Moteelall said the importance of this flashback and flashforward was integral to the audience understanding the deep rootedness of trauma and the time it takes to heal. “The violence against women is generational and what I’ve learned from indigenous communities is we carry seven generations of trauma in us [...] so with that- the Stacy Singh [story] and in recent years a lot of my work has been trauma-informed,” said Moteelall. The jump into her past examines gender violence originating from colonial Guyana where her ancestor, Sundari, is abused. From then a cycle of abuse continues, down to Sevita’s grandmother, her mother and then herself. The abuse ends with her daughter, Shanti. Moteelall reiterated the importance of showing this shift in narrative, explaining that she and the Jahajee Sisters collective wanted the community to understand how the play wanted to become a catalyst for social change. Their aim was for the audience “to understand that the way we perpetuate violence is linked to the way it has been normalized and perpetuated throughout our lineage,” Moteelall says. This learned behavior could thus be unlearned and reimagined through theatre.

Why Theatre is Unique in its Approach

Although theatre could reimagine a new way for the Indo-Caribbean community to think of gender violence, it also begs the question if it is an effect of theatre or the way the story is written itself. When asked this question, Moteelall answered, “I feel theatre has the ability to

engage hearts, minds and spirits and that's how change is going to happen. It's not going to happen through an analytical approach. It's about how people understand it." From her perspective, one can imagine that theatre is more engaging than other direct approaches, for example social services, as Moteelall points out. While social services and immediate help are vastly important, there should also be a more subtle, but also engaging and full discussion of gender violence, Moteelall continued. She believes that theatre as a more engaging art form invites audiences in a non-pervasive way, allowing them to sit and enter the world of the play but also think of the possibilities of the play and its parallels to their real life.

Speaking about the responses to *Jahajees Rising*, Moteelall comments that overwhelmingly the response was positive:

"People loved it. They thought it was really well done [...] We got a lot of positive feedback. People felt it was really good and should be grown and evolved and should be used as a travelling piece to support people to have a dialogue about these issues and talk about it and generate solutions."

This response was not expected but appreciated as Moteelall says this was her aim, to open to the community a new way to imagine a healthy and happy world. Like Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed which allows for rehearsal for the revolution, Moteelall says her play is similarly aligned. She wanted people to "start and step into their most bold and creative selves and create and build power and potential within themselves." She continued that it only made sense that the audience is a part of the discussion, which she hopes to incorporate into a future version of the play, along with an interactive curriculum. "People [should] get to be a part of co-creating the future [...] and know that we are the ones who can create the future and shift the present. So that's where I want to go with [*Jahajees Rising*]," said Moteelall.

Why Theatre is Effective in the Indo-Caribbean Community

Many factors make it hard for Indo-Caribbean people to discuss gender-based violence writes Aneesa Baboolall, who conducted a study on immigrant perspectives and why survivors of intimate partner violence keep silent. Shame, cultural attitudes, age, resources, immigration status and dependency are all factors that contribute to survivors staying silent and staying in abusive situations (Baboolall 165-169). While the violence enacted upon Indo-Caribbean women may not have started from colonial Guyana, it was certainly exacerbated there due to the internalization of violence by Indo-Caribbean men on the plantations as well as other factors relating to colonialism (Bahadur 124). One hope of reversing this generations-long trend is through unlearning this behavior through giving back that validation once lost.

Jahajees Rising is one play that can offer a hope for unlearning this behavior and reimagining the future of Indo-Caribbean gender relationships. The play tackles gender-based violence through a fictional lens while drawing on an actual case, which allows the audience to care about it and hope for an alternative ending. Moteelall gives that ending and understands the dire need for it. Thus, one way we can address this very difficult subject and offer solutions is through a theatrical lens. Theatre allows the audience to have comfort in the fact that they may personally have been through the story but recognize it. Moteelall says this aim was the goal in both founding their organization and putting up the play; to have a catalyst to end gender-based violence in the Indo-Caribbean community.

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The Creative Process of Writing, Revising and
Reading *A Daughter of Demerara*

For my senior project requirement in the theatre and performance major, I decided to write a full-length play titled *A Daughter of Demerara*. As one of the two playwrights writing a new play as their senior project, I felt an obligation to also put it up as a full production. However, throughout the creative process I understood that it was important to focus on the story of the play rather than also focusing on the efforts of putting up a full production. Dialogue, character and plot were some main factors that I kept going back to during the writing of *A Daughter of Demerara*. My goal of writing a universally common, yet distinct play as well as accurately voicing important social issues in the Indo-Caribbean community was also achieved in unexpected ways. I also learned that feedback is essential to every step of the creative and theatre-making process. Without feedback, both before and after the staged reading, the play would not have benefitted as substantially as it did. Therefore, although I did not put up a full production of the play, I learned some essential lessons for a future production.

The concept of *A Daughter of Demerara* came to me in May 2018 during my junior seminar class. Immigration rights, sexual assault and domestic violence were all issues that were current in the news then but were also given little news time which made discussing these issues difficult. I had also lived in Guyana (where Chandini Meera, the main character is from) in middle school. My time there made me think about the privilege I had as a U.S. citizen and how similar and different American life was to Guyanese life. I wanted to find out what would happen to a girl who did not have the same privilege of U.S. citizenship as I did. So, I focused on creating the story of Chandini, a 15-year old girl, who gets to come to America but faces obstacles that cause her to question herself and her presence in America. Among the most

difficult aspects of writing the play were focusing on the dialogue, characters and plot of the play. I wrote three major drafts between June and December of 2018 and then additional scenes with minor edits. However, I was not fully satisfied with each draft. I tried to pinpoint what areas could be worked on. The three main ones that stood out to me were the dialogue, character and plot.

Challenges of Writing the Play

While writing a play proved to be difficult, writing a play in Indo-Caribbean patois proved to be especially challenging. I kept writing fully in English to match the straight and traditional plays that I had read both in and outside of theatre classes. Finally, I understood that it was essential for Chandini's character to speak in patois as well as Darren and Sunita Ramoutar, the play's older Indo-Caribbean characters. Not only would the dialogue make the play more distinct, but it would also accurately reflect Indo-Caribbean culture. After several edits, I felt that the characters' dialogue reflected them more accurately.

When the reading occurred on May 6, 2019, one audience member commented that the dialogue spoken by the parents and Chandini, versus the American-born children, Vijay and Victoria Ramoutar, differentiated significantly. They added that it helped them in understanding who the characters were and made sense as the children grew up in America, having American accents, while the parents and Chandini did not. Audience members also revealed that the choice in actors, who did the Guyanese accent, was effective towards them understanding the characters better. Likewise, the actors also revealed that the way the play was written, partly in patois and partly in English, made it easier for them to read for the characters. This feedback confirms that focusing on the language was essential towards writing the play.

As mentioned above, I wrote several drafts of the play with different plots while trying to accurately represent the characters and story. Some plots focused solely on the domestic violence that the family experiences while some focus on the sexual assault that takes place. But, after reading and editing the various drafts, I realized that these issues intersect and could be merged. I also realized that both issues were widely ignored in the Indo-Caribbean community but could be opened to discussion through theatre. Therefore, I decided to merge scenes from each draft ensuring the plot became intersectional to reflect Indo-Caribbean issues.

Another element that proved difficult in the creative process was creating full characters. Each character needed to have their own goals and voice in order to make the play realistic. While my previous strategy of creating characters was through scene development, my advisor, Andrea Thome, suggested writing exercises to help me understand the characters better. These prompts allowed their voices to eventually emerge. I was also able to understand their wants and needs, which significantly drove the play forward. Some themes that also emerged were issues that each character dealt with personally including addiction, alcoholism and depression. Some of these writing exercises later became monologues in the play that helped both the actors and audience better understand the characters.

Another goal when writing this play was to accurately represent the voices of Indo-Caribbean characters facing their own personal issues. One actor, Devon Narine-Singh, who played Vijay, expressed that the play accurately represented what he felt addiction was like for Indo-Caribbean males. Similarly, Aaron Sital, who played Darren, said that the play captured the various personalities of Indo-Caribbean men he knew. Audience members also shared that certain monologues and scenes spoke to the social issues in subtle yet engaging ways. Overall,

the feedback from the reading was helpful in confirming that the characters, dialogue and plot choices were accurate in their aims of creating a realistic Indo-Caribbean play.

Lessons Learned From the Staged Reading

The final artistic aim that I had was to have a full production of the play. I thought that for the play to have an impact it needed to be shown as a full show. However, as my writing process developed, I realized that the story was more crucial to focus on than a full production. By focusing on one staged reading, I was able to gain a sense of how the actors perceived each character and how the script changed when they read it. The reading was also the first time every actor read the script altogether, allowing their most natural selves to emerge. I realized that the staged reading was an invaluable opportunity to hear the play in its most natural form, without heavy direction for the actors. Therefore, I am grateful that the play had this reading because it allowed me to capture the actors' first impression of each character which will be used in future edits.

After the reading's conclusion, I learned that no draft is ever final as theatre always strives to provoke ongoing conversation. At the end of the reading, I asked audience members to share what stood out to them. They shared images and scenes like Chandini sitting in the dark, and other scenes that I might have otherwise cut or revised. They also reinforced scenes that I wanted to keep in the play but was hesitant about. One audience member shared that the monologues impacted him, saying, "The dream-like final scene will be memorable to me." I also asked audiences if they had any questions. These questions were more related to the choice of actors in reading for certain parts and my inspirations for writing the play.

After being in Em Hampton's senior project, *! – A Survival Project*, I realized that after witnessing strong subject material, audiences may also be hesitant to share vocally what they think. Em used a notebook after each show for people to share what they thought. Therefore, I similarly passed around post-it notes to allow people to give me any other notes they would like. These notes were crucial as almost everyone wrote down a note I could benefit from. One helpful critique was that the stage directions could be restrictive at times and to “allow the [actor and director] to do their own interpretations.” This feedback is essential towards creating further drafts because it showed me that I could consider writing additional character monologues and more interpretative stage directions in the future.

Lessons Learned From Purchase Productions

Another lesson learned during the creative process of writing this play was that I needed to use my full theatrical knowledge gained at Purchase to accurately reflect how I saw the play's world. During my time as a student I performed in both straight plays and performance art. Plays like Kiyou Kamisawa's *Yuya* showed me the importance of structure in storytelling. Performance art like Em's *!* showed me the powers of both the unsaid and spoken in theatre. Both straight and unconventional theatre also have artistic aspects that I deeply admire and wanted to incorporate in *A Daughter of Demerara*. Therefore, I attempted to make the play a mixture of both the straight play and performance art.

Through the writing, editing and reading of *A Daughter of Demerara*, I realized that what was needed to make the play well-written was not a full production but deeper dialogue, character and plot work as well as incorporating my own personal knowledge of theatre to the script. Thus, I revised the play using both English and Indo-Caribbean patois. I also strived to fully tell the characters' stories through additional character work, which later became the

monologues in later drafts of the play. Finally, I understood that the themes present in the play all intersected to form a complete plot. With the lessons I have learned from the creative process, I hope I can create an improved final draft.

Staged Reading Documentation



Actors from the staged reading of A Daughter of Demerara done on May 6th, 2019 at 6pm in Humanities 2053. From left to right: Firyal Salih (read for Sunita Ramoutar), Jaya Mallela (read for Victoria Ramoutar), Devon Narine-Singh (read for Vijay Ramoutar), Jihan Ramroop (playwright and read for Chandini Meera) and Aaron Sital (read for Darren Ramoutar).

Link to staged reading recording: https://drive.google.com/open?id=1RTOX2Cx87-gRVLGdkjY5ad2_4wVN3PtI

A DAUGHTER OF DEMERARA

By Jihan Ramroop

CHARACTER LIST

- Chandini Meera*: 15. Born and raised in Guyana. Migrates to U.S. at 18. Staying with the Ramotaurs. Culture shocked at the American way of life but adjusts as best as she can, hopeful of the future but also mature beyond her years.
- Darren Ramoutar*: 40s/50s. Born in Guyana. Migrated to the U.S. in 20s. Husband to Sharon. Father to Vijay and Victoria. Alcoholic, tries to be a good father but is overly strict and critical, dislikes himself.
- Sunita Ramoutar*: 40s/50s. Born in Guyana. Migrated to U.S. in teens. Wife to Darren. Mother to Vijay and Victoria. Tired, mentally and physically overwhelmed and hanging to last threads of her family, just wants everyone to be okay.
- Vijay Ramotaur: 20. Born and raised in U.S. Son of Darren and Sharon. Depressed but hiding it, guilty for going away to college, trying to be better.
- Victoria Ramotaur: 14. Born and raised in U.S. Daughter of Darren and Sharon. Self-assured, and the most positive one of her family, although it's her way of protecting herself from everything going on around her.
- Police Officer #1: New York Police Officer.
- Police Officer #2: New York Police Officer

* Denotes Actor Speaking with a Guyanese Accent.

SETTING

The dining room of a house in Queens, New York.

The basement of a house in Queens, New York.

TIME

Present Day.

*Note: Content warning for strong language and themes of violence. *

Dedicated to all the strong West Indian women in my life

ACT I

Scene 1 ~ “Yuh Favorite”

At Rise:

A dining room beautifully decorated with immaculate objects. A rich mahogany or similar table sits centerstage covered by a clear plastic tablecloth. The kitchen (unseen) is stage right of the room. The front door and foyer (unseen) are stage left of the room. SUNITA (40/50s) is sitting at the table when DARREN (40/50s) enters. She gets up when he comes.

SUNITA:

Yuh finally home!

Darren inaudibly replies.

Meh cook yuh favorite.

DARREN:

Wha?

SUNITA:

Yuh nah know what yuh favorite is?

DARREN:

Meh not—

SUNITA:

Pumpkin and roti!

DARREN:

Okay.

SUNITA:

Everything alright?

*She goes over and rubs his
shoulders. He moves slightly. She notices.*

DARREN:

Meh very tired.

SUNITA:

Wha, yuh very tired with all of a sudden?

DARREN:

Work. Dem bai¹ get backup at the station cause de chief deh out.

SUNITA:

Oh where he went?

DARREN:

On vacation.

SUNITA:

Oh.

DARREN:

Meh ah go to bed.

SUNITA:

Yuh nah gon eat?

DARREN:

Laytah.

¹ Bai=boy/man

SUNITA:

Okay, well meh wan ask yuh something.

DARREN:

What?

Beat.

SUNITA:

Well...there's this gyal b²ack home. Yuh remember Darshanie? Meh used to be friends with she...She have a daughter. Well she get thru with one visa so she want she fuh come.

DARREN:

Okay. That's good. What da ga do with awee³?

SUNITA:

Well we...can have she stay with abee⁴. Because they nah really have nobody here.

DARREN:

She nah have no place else?

² Gyal=girl/woman

³ Awee=Us

⁴ Abee=Us

SUNITA:

No...Most of them family live in Canada. She mother's a nice woman and she always been good
to me since meh small.

DARREN:

We don't know those people.

SUNITA:

Darren. I know she. She nah have no place else to go.

(Pause)

It's Darshanie daughter. She only fifteen.

She gon stay for one month the most till she mother get enough money to come.

Beat.

DARREN

Only one month.

SUNITA

One month, yes.

He leaves. Sunita looks at the plate. Lights fade.

Scene 2 ~ “My Favorite”

CHANDINI (15) *and Darren stand in the dining room.*

CHANDINI:

It’s such a nice house so big and...nice.

DARREN:

Thanks. Well, them children should be home soon.

(Pause)

Yuh-you want, you want something to eat?

CHANDINI:

Okay.

DARREN:

Okay hold on.

He goes into the kitchen.

CHANDINI:

Do you want help uncle?

DARREN:

(Calls out from the kitchen)

No! Meh good!

He returns a few moments later with a plate of roti and pumpkin. He sets it in front of her.

CHANDINI:

Oh this is my favorite.

Darren grins.

DARREN:

Me too.

He sits but not near her. While she eats, he watches her. She notices.

DARREN:

Yuh have a lot of friends back home? They're probably gonna miss you.

CHANDINI:

No not really.

DARREN:

Not even a baifriend⁵?

He laughs.

⁵ Baifriend=boyfriend

Chandini tries not to grimace.

CHANDINI:

No.

DARREN:

Why not- your parents nah allow you?

CHANDINI:

No-I just don't want one...

DARREN:

Good. Meh wouldn't tell yuh mother!

Beat.

He continues watching her.

She eats.

DARREN:

Yuh have a phone? Yuh gone need to call yuh mother and thing.

He gets up and moves closer.

He pulls out his phone.

I can get you one. One like this, you know.

CHANDINI:

Oh that's okay.

DARREN:

It's not expensive. I get deals.

CHANDINI:

No. I have one.

She pulls out a phone.

*He puts his hand on her knee,
taking her phone in his other hand.*

DARREN:

Muh guh get you a better one. Victoria and Vijay have one, the same one.

Chandini looks at him. Is uncomfortable.

Unbearable beat.

Finally, he removes his hand from her knee.

DARREN:

I'll get you one. Don't worry.

CHANDINI:

Okay.

Lights fade.

Scene 3 ~ “Dinner”

The dining room is bare except for a still

Chandini watching the kitchen entryway.

Sunita is in kitchen.

SUNITA

(from kitchen)

Eh Chandini, come help me bring them food out.

*Chandini snaps out of her daydream
and goes to the kitchen. As she disappears in
the kitchen, Darren enters and sits down,
taking off his watch. Chandini comes in
bringing a steaming bowl of okra. Smoke
rises from it. When Chandini sees Darren
she jumps, clattering the dish on the table.
He notices, saying nothing. Sunita follows,
bringing a container of roti.*

SUNITA

(to Darren)

Yuh finally come home.

DARREN

Aya get all yuh shopping done?

SUNITA

Yes... Abee get everything.

DARREN

Where dem children deh?

SUNITA

Victoria!

DARREN

Where's Vijay?

SUNITA

You nah rememba?

Chandini enters bringing cups of tea.

His bus not coming in today. His bus come Friday.

DARREN

Why? Why he can't come earlier?

SUNITA

That is when he last exam finish. Victoria!

*After a while VICTORIA (14) comes in
while Chandini and Sunita bring in the rest
of the food.*

DARREN

What yuh doing with all that thing on yuh face?

VICTORIA

It's just makeup dad. I'm just—

DARREN

Yuh betta not be wearing that to school.

VICTORIA

Why?

DARREN

Yuh asking me why?

SUNITA

(to Victoria)

Yuh gonna help Chandini register at the high school tomorrow.

VICTORIA

Me? Why me?

SUNITA

Just show she where the office is. I don't get home till late tomorrow morning.

DARREN

Why she need to enroll in school for?

(To Chandini)

I mean... Yuh parents nah come over soon? Yuh probably gonna have to switch schools.

SUNITA

Well it don't make no sense for she to be here all day doing nothing. Plus if she family move she can always catch the bus to Hillcrest. It's right next to everything.

VICTORIA

(to Chandini)

I'll show you around, you'll like it. I think.

When is Vijay coming home?

SUNITA

Friday. Around 5.

VICTORIA

Aww...Friday. That's so quick. Are you picking him up Dad? Can I come with you?

DARREN

Hmph. He can walk or catch the bus.

SUNITA

He has bags.

DARREN

I go see.

SUNITA

Chandini, you want to stay with Victoria or in de basement? If you stay with she, yuh might need one air mattress. But we can put it on the floor next to she bed... But the basement have more room, if yuh want some privacy?

Everyone waits for Chandini's answer, looking at her.

CHANDINI

I um... Well the basement sounds—

SUNITA

Oh it's clean! I just clean it up today! I only have some old suitcase and clothes down there.

VICTORIA:

I don't mind you sleeping with me. If you're scared of the basement...

CHANDINI:

I can sleep in the basement...is no problem...

*Everyone says something of
agreement. Lights dim and then the family
slowly cleans up and heads upstairs except
for Chandini.*

*Chandini stands center stage in the dining
room. The lights are different from the normal
dining room light.*

CHANDINI:

Mommy,

I never expect America to be like this.

It's so new but so dirty.

When I first land in the airport, JFK, it was like you can feel the air different. Like new.

But cold...uncertain-like. Like you nah know if it's good or bad.

I picture it just like the movies. But it's not like the movies at all.

I said I would go in the basement.

But, Victoria still show me she room just in case. That was nice of her.

It's like two-three times the size of abee room back home.

And she have everything.

Vanity. Big bed. All dem pillows.

I never know people live so...comfortably.

But even if it's comfortable, I could hardly sleep.

I keep staring at the moon, full in meh window.

I can't— I can't stop thinking about—

Well it's nothing. It's...nothing.

Lights fade.

Scene 4 ~ "Homecoming"

*The table is set immaculately. There's a lot of food
and dishes on the table for VIJAY's (18) return
home. Darren, Sunita, Victoria and Chandini stand
waiting for him awkwardly while the food tempts
them.*

DARREN

(looks at watch)

Well, where he dey?

VICTORIA

(looking at phone)

He says he's close by.

DARREN

Well how close?

SUNITA

Just relax/ Darren.

DARREN

Relax?/ You telling me to relax?

Sunita stays quiet. They wait a few more minutes and then there's knocking at the front door. Darren goes to get it and Sunita follows. There's the sound of bags hitting the floor and Sunita's kisses and exclamations. Darren mutters a greeting as well.

SUNITA

Come son, I make all yuh favorite.

Vijay enters the room.

Victoria runs to him and hugs him.

Vijay notices Chandini and looks at her while hugging his sister.

SUNITA

Oh this is Chandini. She's Darshanie's daughter. Yuh remember meh best friend from home? She just came from Guyana! She gun be staying with abee for a few...weeks. Well, let's eat.

Everyone sits.

VIJAY

(to Chandini)

Hi. Nice to meet you.

CHANDINI

Hi. You too.

VIJAY

Let me just wash my hands ma.

Vijay disappears to the kitchen while Darren takes some roti from the container.

SUNITA

Yuh can't wait fuh yuh son?

DARREN

Really? Yuh guh talk to me like that in meh own house. Chandini yuh see how she talking to me?

SUNITA

Don't bring she into this. What's the matter with you?

Vijay returns. As soon as he does, Darren slaps Sunita. Victoria gasps. Vijay runs over to his mother.

VIJAY

What's your problem?

DARREN

What's my problem?

VIJAY

Don't fucking touch her again.

DARREN

Don't talk like that in my house!

VIJAY

Or what? What are you gonna do? Hit me! Come on, hit me!

Sunita tries to push him away.

SUNITA

Please. Stop.

DARREN

You think yuh big now boy? Yuh think because yuh go to college

yuh big man now?

VIJAY

Fuck you.

Darren swipes at him but Vijay dodges. Vijay pushes Darren but Darren is stronger. Darren pushes him into the table and some dishes fall.

VICTORIA

(crying)

I'm calling the cops! I'm calling the cops! Stop it! Stop it!

(Pause)

Victoria starts dialing on her cellphone. Victoria and Vijay can overlap in speaking.

Yes, please/ come to 130-05 Liberty Avenue. My dad is hitting my mom and my brother. Okay.

Okay Thank you.

Chandini rushes over to Sunita who has ended up on the ground.

VIJAY

Fight me!/ Come on you fucking coward!

Fight me!

Darren goes toward him. Sunita runs between them. They stop, looking at each other.

SUNITA

We can't even enjoy one decent meal.

There is a knock at the front door.

Darren goes to open it. Sunita follows. Two police officers enter the dining room.

POLICE OFFICER #1

Sir, ma'am, we received a call from this residence. Is everything alright?

DARREN

Yes sir, everything is fine. My wife and I just get into a little dispute and meh daughter sheh, she's just overreact.

POLICE OFFICER #2

Ma'am are you ok?

SUNITA

(a pause)

Yes.

VICTORIA

Mom...

SUNITA

I'm ok, I'm ok.

POLICE OFFICER #2

Are the children hurt?

DARREN

No, they're fine.

POLICE OFFICER #1

Ma'am? Would you like press charges?

VIJAY

Yes, we would. He hit my mother.

DARREN

(laughs)

Against me boy?

POLICE OFFICER #2

Ma'am would you like to press charges?

DARREN

Against me? I'm she husband.

POLICE OFFICER #2

This is not the first time we have received complaints. The
neighbors are concerned...

VICTORIA

Mom...

DARREN

I'm your fadder⁶.

VICTORIA

You don't act like one.

POLICE OFFICER #1

Ma'am, we're gonna have to leave if you don't—

⁶ Fadder=father

SUNITA

Yes. / Yes officer. I would like to press charges.

DARREN

What? / What the hell wrong with you woman?

POLICE OFFICER #2 (V.O. from foyer)

Sir, I'm going to have to ask you to come with us.

They handcuff him and escort him out.

DARREN

Yuh making a mistake Sunita. I hope you know that.

POLICE OFFICER #1

Have a good night miss, kids.

SUNITA

Aya clean up this mess. I'm going to bed.

*She goes upstairs. Vijay looks at his sister,
then Chandini. Chandini starts cleaning up the
broken dishes on the floor, not paying them any*

*mind. Both Victoria and Vijay look at her. Slowly,
they begin to help her. Lights fade.*

Scene 5 ~ “Is it Cold Here?”

Later that night. Victoria and Chandini are in the basement. It is barren except for a bed in the corner, some mismatched furniture and some clothes in a suitcase.

VICTORIA:

Is it cold here?

CHANDINI:

No it's fine

VICTORIA:

Are you sure? You can put up the heat- oh I think my dad said it's broken

CHANDINI:

It's okay

VICTORIA:

Okay. Well the blankets are here and if you need more there in the upstairs closet.

CHANDINI:

Okay. Thanks.

Beat.

Do they always. Does he always...

VICTORIA:

What?

CHANDINI:

Nah worry...

VICTORIA:

Just spit it out

CHANDINI:

Does he always argue like that?

VICTORIA:

Yeah. Sometimes. My mother always just tries to forgive him.

CHANDINI:

My mommy always thought aya⁷ lived good. She always assumed aya had the perfect life.

⁷ Aya= you all

VICTORIA

Haha funny.

Beat.

I never used to understand why she doesn't leave him.
Until I was in love too. Or I thought I was. He wasn't even mine. He was just some boy I talked
to everyday in my lab class. And then we would have lunch together.

He was so kind to me. Even though I wasn't kind to him.

And then we stopped talking and I tried to forget him

But when your heart attaches itself to something, to someone,

It's hard to extract it. I guess I don't know...

That how my mom feels?

Except this love isn't love.

But she stays.

And I kinda understand.

Anyways, goodnight. I'm sorry this-

CHANDINI:

Don't apologize.

VICTORIA:

Okay. Goodnight.

CHANDINI:

Good night.

Lights fade.

Scene 6 ~ “Saving Current”

Later that night. The dining room is dim, so we only see a shadow of someone sitting in the far left head of table chair. A light is on in the kitchen nearby. We hear footsteps and then the front door closing. Vijay enters the dining room and turns on the light. He jumps when he sees Chandini sitting there.

VIJAY

Holy shit./ What are you- why you sitting in the dark?

CHANDINI

Sorry/ Meh—

She gets up. He waits.

I was eating. I didn't want to waste the current.

VIJAY

The what?

CHANDINI

I didn't want to waste the curr-electricity. I could see...what I was eating so I didn't want to put on the lights.

VIJAY

Oh.

CHANDINI

I was hungry. I couldn't sleep so I came up.

VIJAY

I kinda am too.

CHANDINI

I made some tea if you want. The water's still hot.

VIJAY

Nah, I'll just get some milk.

*He goes into the kitchen. He
returns a few moments later.*

CHANDINI

I'm...sorry for what happened today.

VIJAY

(defensive)

Why you sorry? Was it your fault?

Beat.

CHANDINI

No...but it wasn't yours.

She gets up and goes to the kitchen. We hear her rinsing the cup.

Then the kitchen lights turn off.

CHANDINI

Goodnight.

Vijay doesn't say anything back so Chandini goes. Just as she's about to turn the corner he speaks.

VIJAY

Goodnight.

She pauses without looking back. Then leaves. After a few moments he carries his cup to the sink. He doesn't wash it. He turns off the light and heads upstairs.

Scene 7 ~ “You Don’t Understand”

Daytime. Sunita is in the kitchen, cooking.

The sounds of pots and pans clatter. Vijay

comes in from the foyer in a hurry.

VIJAY

Mom! Mom!

Sunita comes out to dining room, looking worried.

Is he back?

Sunita nods warily.

Why?! You dropped the charges!

SUNITA

He’s your father.

VIJAY

I don’t care. He’s psycho.

SUNITA

He needs help.

VIJAY

You don't have to be the one to give it to him!

SUNITA

He doesn't mean it. It's the way...he grow up.

VIJAY

That's not an excuse! What about me? I'm growing up this way too! So I'm going to turn out like him? And what about Victoria? She's gonna learn that it's okay for her husband to—

SUNITA

Wha? Wha yuh want me to do?

VIJAY

Leave. We did it before.

SUNITA

Is nah da simple. And yuh remember what everyone say?

(mocking them)

'Go! Go back tuh yuh husband Sunita! Aya make up. Dem kids guh sufa'⁸

⁸ Sufa= suffer

VIJAY

Mom! Who cares what they say? They're not living here are they? Aren't we suffering anyways?

Sunita touches her forehead with the back of her hand. Her fingers have dough on them from mixing roti. She pulls out a chair and sits down.

SUNITA

I have to go to work just now. Just watch yuh sista and Chandini too.

(Pause)

He goh probably not even come home tonight.

VIJAY

(still restless)

Good! I don't want him to come!

SUNITA

(exploding now)

It don't matter what you want! Can't you understand! This he house! He cyar⁹! He job ah uphold all of this! So it don't matter Vijay what you want... You think me alone can pay for all this? You think meh low paying job wiping people ass can pay for all of this? Pay for yuh college?

⁹ Cyar=car

Long beat until he feels he can talk.

VIJAY

What if I help you? Move back home. Go to Queens College.

SUNITA

(rubbing dough from her fingers)

I...I have to go to work.

Sunita leaves. A few moments

Chandini enters the dining room,

coming home from school.

CHANDINI

Hey. I just saw your mom.

Beat.

Uh...yuh sister said to tell you she sleeping at her friend house tonight.

She said it's Michelle. She said yuh can call to make sure if you want.

VIJAY

(more to himself)

She- my mom probably told her.

CHANDINI

Huh?

VIJAY

(harsher than he intends)

Nothing.

A pause. Chandini looks hurt.

It's nothing. Just my father is— He might be coming back tonight...

CHANDINI

Oh.

VIJAY

Yeah I know. It happens a lot...I should just be used to it by now.

Chandini rubs her arm unconsciously.

VIJAY

I can order pizza if you want. My mom...didn't get to—

CHANDINI

That's, that's ok. I'm- I'm not really hungry.

She is in a daze-like state. Vijay notices.

VIJAY

Okay...you sure?

CHANDINI

Yes.

*The lights dim on Vijay but a red light
comes on Chandini. She stands opposite
from Vijay.*

CHANDINI

When I look in the mirror, I can't look in the mirror. I hate myself. I want to hurt mehsself. I just
want me to disappear. This school- is nothing like Guyana school.

*A red light comes onto Vijay. It's like
they are speaking to each other but not
facing each other.*

VIJAY:

I stopped writing stories when I realized they weren't real.

Like they would never come through in real life

You know?

CHANDINI:

There I know the kids. Everybody know each other and know who each other parents is and
everything.

VIJAY:

I think there's two parts in your life where you die before the final time

CHANDINI:

Nobody really take them eye pass¹⁰ you in Guyana...but here...

VIJAY:

The first one is when the child you dies

It's like that moment right after you witness something or experience something and then you die

Just like that

Except it's quieter and there's no funeral or flowers.

CHANDINI:

But here... Them children rowdy. Them hate the teacher and them hate me. Meh nah even know

if it's hate. Is worse. Is like them don't even care.

VIJAY:

I think I died when I realized he could be cruel because that meant that the world could be cruel

and that meant there was nothing good anymore

CHANDINI:

I eat lunch in the bathroom today. I didn't want to sit with all of them... and and me- I can't...

I don't even wanna speak in class... for they call me fob again. —Fresh off the boat.

¹⁰ Tek them eye pass= take advantage of

And then I just remember.

CHANDINI AND VIJAY:

I just remember what he did. All over again. And sometimes, sometimes I want him to...

CHANDINI:

Nevermind. It is in the past. It is in the past. It is in the past. And I...forgive him...I think.

VIJAY:

I don't really wanna talk about that time.

CHANDINI:

But you should.

Beat.

VIJAY:

I don't...

CHANDINI:

You said you die two times. When's the second time?

Long beat.

VIJAY:

The second time... is when the adult you dies

It's the part when you've given up hope

Become depressed to the point of suicide

It's crazy

(Pause)

I started smoking hella weed then

Honestly I still do though I'm trying not to fucking do it

It's more of a social thing now

Sometimes

Shit

I hate this shit

When you lie to yourself

Okay I smoke it when I crave it and when I cave and sometimes I can't fucking help it but it helps when I don't want to feel anything anymore and just forget the world for a little but because sometimes having the world on your own two shoulders feels like a fucking lot

Beat.

The first time I was six.

He squeezed my mother's ears

At first I began to laugh because I thought

It was funny

Because he would never hurt her in my eyes

Laughs without humor.

And then I stopped laughing and

Tried to stop seeing

(Pause)

Ramroop 70

And I still think I am trying to stop seeing

Lights fade.

Scene 8 ~ "Is it Good Enough Now?"

Early morning. Darren is sitting at the dining room table.

DARREN:
Good mornin'.

VICTORIA:
(distant)
Morning.

DARREN:
Where yuh going?

VICTORIA:
School. Where else?

DARREN:
Why yuh have an attitude? /
In the morning?

VICTORIA:
I didn't / mean to.

Beat.

Do you want tea?

DARREN:

I have already.

VICTORIA:

Oh.

DARREN:

Isn't she- that gyal going with you?

VICTORIA:

Chandini? Yeah she's coming down soon.

DARREN:

What time aya have to get the bus?

She looks at her phone.

VICTORIA:

Um 7:15

DARREN:

It's already 7.

VICTORIA:

I know dad. We'll be fine.

DARREN:

Yuh wearing – why yuh wearing that thing on yuh lips?

VICTORIA:

It's just lip stain, you can barely see it.

DARREN:

Meh though yuh supposed to go to school clean.

VICTORIA:

(deadpan)

Oh my god. Haha so funny.

DARREN:

And why don't you go change that shirt?

VICTORIA:

Why?

DARREN:

You asking me why?

VICTORIA:

Yeah. I like it.

DARREN:

Well I don't like it. Just go and change it.

VICTORIA:

We don't have time.

DARREN:

I'm gonna drop you.

VICTORIA:

Seriously? This is my favorite shirt.

DARREN:

Okay. I'm not paying yuh phone bill next month.

VICTORIA:

Oh my god. It's a decent shirt. I'm not even showing anything! You should see how the other girls dress!

She says as she storms out and Chandini walks in.

DARREN:

Good morning.

CHANDINI:

Morning.

Beat.

DARREN:

There's tea, go make some.

CHANDINI:

I'm -I'm not hungry.

DARREN:

Go. Yuh need to build yourself up. Nah be shame.

CHANDINI:

I'm not shame. I just don't want any.

*Darren schews his teeth.*¹¹

DARREN:

God meh nah habe with ayuh.

(calling to Victoria)

Meet abee in the car!

Darren and Chandini exit. The light changes to a light purple. Victoria comes down a few moments later. She picks up a scissors or knife from the table. She makes a cut in the shirt until it is all shreds, barely clinging on to her body. She stands.

VICTORIA:

Is it good enough now?

She puts down the scissors and then exits. Lights fade.

(Lights fade).

¹¹ Schews his teeth=sucks his teeth

Scene 9 ~ “Cheat”

*Darren is sitting at table in the dark
when Sunita comes home.*

DARREN:

Where yuh been?

SUNITA:

Wha yuh ah do in the dark like that?

DARREN:

I... I ask yuh where yuh been?

SUNITA:

Wha yuh mean where meh—

*He gets up clearly drunk and holds
her between his arms.*

DARREN:

Where yuh been?

SUNITA:

You're squeezing me!

DARREN:

Where—

SUNITA:

Work! Work!

DARREN:

So late?

SUNITA:

You know I been getting the night shift.

DARREN:

Tell them yuh nah want it anymore.

SUNITA:

I can't. That's the only one them giving me.

DARREN:

Hmph.

SUNITA:

Why yuh does drink?

DARREN:

Meh can't drink?

Beat.

SUNITA:

I'm tired.

DARREN:

From what?

SUNITA:

Work, me nah just tell yuh—

Darren gets up again, swaying and walking.

DARREN:

Which man yuh seeing?

SUNITA:

What?

DARREN:

Who is you seeing? Meh know yuh seeing one man!

SUNITA:

What man!?

DARREN:

That man who drop you? Nah think meh nah see—

SUNITA:

Eric? Eric is my coworker! He drop me from the—

DARREN:

You're a whore!

SUNITA:

Darren—not now.

*He grabs her by the throat,
strangling her. She struggles.*

SUNITA:

L-l-let me—

She coughs.

DARREN:

Don't you ever cheat on me, you hear me?

He lets her go. He looks at her for a moment. Beat. Then he leaves. She looks up after a moment, rubbing her throat. Sunita sits at the dining room table. As she speaks, she rubs her throat repeatedly.

SUNITA

I want to chop it all off. I'm so tired.

I want to chop it all off. My hair. Because it reminds me of me. Because I failed.

My kids and myself.

Because I can't stand to look in the mirror sometimes.

Because I hate myself sometimes and sometimes even more.

It is hard to keep going when you hate the very vessel that brings you air, blood, life.

I think the hatred first start when he hurt me the first time.

It was when I was young and just married.

He went out, came home late.

I *smelled* other women

On him.

Asked him

His words

Hurt more

Than the blow

That came after

After he

Stopped trying

To hide his

Hits from the kids

He said why yuh sad, why don't you

Do something with your life instead

Of worry about me.

But I tried and you didn't want me

To

Because I was to stay home not you.

You would take care of me. You said after pregnancy. And I,

the woman

And I see how we

You could do what you want.

That was just an excuse for

Yuh to do what you want.

And I'm- I'm so tired of this. Shit. Pretending. Each day this doesn't hurt.

The same cycle for eighteen years. You must get tired. No. He doesn't love me.

Anymore. I don't think he never really did. Because if you love someone you

Don't treat them like that. If you truly do. I don't think he's capable of it.

Why? Because maybe someone never loved him and so

That's what he learned. Instead.

Beat.

I had a dream. To live happily in America and have the life with the man I loved. The family I wanted. Only one happened. I did want to become somebody too.

A teacher.

(Breath)

That's the first time I said it since I was 20. Before they said I had to marry.

Lights fade.

Scene 10 ~ “A Nice Smile”

Basement. Darren enters. Chandini, startled, wraps her blanket around her tighter.

DARREN:

Yuh not sleeping...

CHANDINI:

Yuh wake me up.

DARREN:

Oh. Sorry.

CHANDINI:

Why-why are you here?

She rubs her eyes.

DARREN:

I-I wanted to check you.

(Pause)

I'm sorry yuh parents' papers is taking so long.

CHANDINI:

That's ok.

DARREN:

Meh actually get somebody working on it today. So it might be a few more weeks.

Really might be this month.

CHANDINI:

Really?

DARREN:

Yes.

She smiles brightly.

DARREN:

Yuh have a nice smile.

Chandini stops smiling immediately.

DARREN (CONT'D)

Why yuh stop smiling?

CHANDINI:

I-I don't know.

DARREN:

Yuh smile is very nice.

CHANDINI:

Thanks. I'm... tired.

DARREN:

Me too.

He sits down on her bed.

DARREN (CONT'D)

I thought you was tired?

CHANDINI:

I am...but.

DARREN:

What?

CHANDINI:

(really uncomfortable)

Are you...sleeping here?

Beat.

DARREN:

(pats her knee and laughs)

Oh! No! Meh going. Meh going. Goodnight.

He leaves.

Chandini sees a bottle of oil.

Slowly she starts rubbing it

on her skin as she speaks.

CHANDINI:

Meh hollow.

Meh hollow. Ever since meh came here. Meh feel hollow.

Me- I can't understand why I'm feeling this way.

Except maybe it's he. I don't know.

He nah do nothing.

But me feel uneasy.

Un- meh nah know the word

U-unokay around he.

Meh feel unokay.

But meh can't tell

Yuh this

Mommy you want me to be okay. But

Meh

Feel unokay

And and

Hollow.

Waiting for you is like

Waitng for Forever.

And meh don't even know if you guh get

Thru.

Meh want to leave

He keep givin me looks

I can't explain.

Meh feel unokay.

Chandini puts down the oil. Lights fade.

Scene 11 ~ “In Case You Do Understand”

Basement. Victoria enters basement warily. She looks around. She is about to go when she sees something on the table. It is a letter. She picks it up, reading.

VICTORIA:

Dear Auntie Sunita,

I hope you are not too mad. I am sorry. I had to leave. I don't think you would understand but in case you do understand, I left because well I can't stay here anymore.

Your husband- I'm sorry but your husband is not a nice man. I think you know that already.

And I just can't stay here forever. I'm so sorry.

Thank you for treating me like a daughter. Tell Victoria and Vijay I said goodbye.

I hope we can meet again.

Chandini.

Victoria starts crying, her mouth covering her hands. She sinks into the bed crying and covers herself with the blankets. Lights fade to a dim. Time passes. Victoria has fallen asleep. The basement is dark with little light coming in. Darren comes in. He moves drunkenly toward the bed. He falls into it and then there is the sound of scuffling.

*Finally silence. Darren gets up in the dark
and stumbles out of the basement. Lights
completely blackout.*

END OF ACT I

ACT II

Scene 1 ~ "I Can't Get the Taste of You Off Me"

*Victoria sits in bed. While speaking,
she is rubbing her mouth constantly.*

VICTORIA:

I can't get the taste

Of you

off me

The taste of me lost

In you

Off me

I can't get the taste

Of you

Off me

You're not here

Yet

I feel

your lips

your self.

I ask myself

Myself

Why is it so hard to

to get the taste

of you

off me?

Beat. She stops rubbing her mouth.

And I'm not mad

anymore

I'm just sad

Or something resembling sad but worse

Cause I feel like I won't ever

Get the taste of you

Off me

And I want to speak.

But it feels like a lot.

Now my lips won't move

My body won't move

Because I feel

Like I won't

Ever get

The taste of you off me.

Lights fade.

Scene 2 ~ “Tell Me”

Nighttime. Dark. Dining room. Sounds of crying are heard.

SUNITA:

Ah who da?

*Sunita turns on the light. She has just come
home from work.*

SUNITA:

What happen? Why yuh crying?

Victoria cries more.

SUNITA:

Eh gyal, stop crying.

*Sunita comes out of her shock, putting her bags down.
Victoria keeps crying. She holds up a letter. Sunita reads it.*

SUNITA:

Oh meh god.

Beat.

Okay. Stop crying. Meh guh call she mudder.

Victoria still sobs.

SUNITA:

I said/stop.

VICTORIA:
He thought/ I was her.

SUNITA:

What?

Beat.

VICTORIA:
Daddy thought I was...Chandini...and and...he was drunk...and I was sleeping in the basement on
her bed...and and...

Victoria starts crying again, unable to speak.

SUNITA:

(softly)

No...

Lights fade.

Scene 3 ~ “It Was She”

Dining room. Sunita is sitting at the dining room table. Darren enters from work.

DARREN:

Why yuh sitting like that?

Beat.

DARREN:

Where dem kids deh?

SUNITA:

Upstairs.

DARREN:

(looking at the table)

Pumpkin and roti huh?
Yuh know that’s meh favorite...

*He smiles. Beat. He gets
some food and starts eating.*

SUNITA:

You know Chandini left?

DARREN:

She left?

SUNITA:
Yeah. She left one letter.

DARREN:
A letter? Hmph. What it said?

SUNITA:
Say she can't stay here no more.

DARREN:

Oh.

Beat.

Well that good, maybe she parents get through. At least we nah have to feed she anymore.

Long beat.

SUNITA:

(breaking down)

Yu-yuh ever take advantage of her...?

Darren stops eating.

SUNITA (CONTINUED):

But it wasn't just-just her you take/ advantage of-

DARREN:

What/ the hell yuh talking about?

SUNITA:
Chandini / left Friday.

DARREN:
No she didn't leave/ Friday-

SUNITA:
Friday morning.

DARREN:
No, she was here Sunday! That gyal/ lying! I see she-

SUNITA:
It was/ Victoria...It was Victoria you see Sunday...

It was our daughter.

Sunita exits.

Darren sits at the dining room table. He pulls out a bottle of Johnny Walker Black Label. He pours the brown liquor into a glass until it's full. Then he pours the glass of liquor back into the bottle. He repeats this as he speaks.

DARREN:

I am five.

It's the first time.

He hit my mom.

I bury it.

We are fine.

But we're not.

Abee not fine.

Abbee the opposite of fine.

Meh nah know what to say when he do it.

Both times.

Long beat.

He touch me and it's like no words nah know how fah come out meh mouth.

Meh try fah talk.

Nothing ah come out.

Meh try fuh scream.

Seh meh body ah betray me.

Meh say it's fine.

It's what man ah do even though me KNOW tha man doesn't touch other man.

Bai.

Meh nah know if me tell me mudder¹² what she would ah do.

¹² Mudder=mother

Because she ah been scared ah he too.

See he came into abee life so sweet and then he turn sour like watermelon.

I don't know what fah make of it except that's how some man stay.

And then he hit she the first time and then he say he nah gon do it again.

But everybody ah beating them wife and of course yuh guy do it again and then she went back
and back and back till meh say it nah gun change.

Meh bury it.

I bury it like I did bury meh grandmother who die in Numba Three village cemetery.

I bury it like it's the gyurl I did like in primary 3 but she nah like meh-
she like somebody else.

I bury it like I bury meh shame and guilt for nah stopping he.

I bury it deep.

And I don't know now.

What to do.

We are fine.

We are fine.

And I say we are fine.

My family is fine.

My wife is fine.

And my daughta and my son are fine.

But we are not because we are not because we not.

It's a blitz¹³ that follow me and meh can't get it to stop follow me.

And meh want to but... meh can't

Because meh bury it too deep.

*He takes a drink from the glass until
all is gone. Then he drinks from the
bottle. He keeps drinking as the
lights fade.*

¹³ Blitz=problem

Scene 4 ~ “I Would Like to...”

*Chandini, Victoria and
Sunita all read the poem
together in a dreamlike but
realistic setting.*

SUNITA:

I would like to kill a man

Rip open his insides

Cut them into little pieces.

VICTORIA:

While he is watching me, I would like to take his eyes out

Strip his chest

Put his insides back in

CHANDINI:

Put his eyeballs back in

And watch him as he watches me

Burn every part of him that I can touch

VICTORIA:

So he knows

Exactly how it feels to

Feel afraid to look

While his insides feel like shit

While his body burns with the feel of every unwanted touch.

SUNITA:

So he knows exactly how it feels

To be a woman.

VICTORIA:

But I will not kill a man

Because the world does not work that way

SUNITA:

I cannot kill him

When what he has done to me is worse

CHANDINI:

Than death could suffice.

ALL:

Because I am stronger.

VICTORIA:

Even though I feel like I'm not.

CHANDINI:

Even though I feel like I'm not.

SUNITA:

Even though I feel like I'm not.

CHANDINI, VICTORIA, SUNITA:

Because I am...

A daughter of Demerara

The river brown like me

Gushing like my beating heart

And strong like me.

END OF PLAY