About three-quarters of the way through Ingrid Persaud’s award-winning *Love After Love* there is an unexpected and controversial scene where a character pays to be beaten and anally raped by a prostitute. The experience gives him unaccountable healing and gratitude for a supernatural fetishistic deliverance. That was the moment where I felt, on first reading, the pieces of the puzzle fall into place, the point where a wider picture emerged, an indication of the depth and subtlety of this important novel. I was subsequently gratified to hear the author say in interviews that this scene had been the seed, written seemingly out of nowhere, from which the whole book had grown.

Enough has been said in reviews, blogs and reader comments about what an enjoyable read this is, and my comment above should not be taken to suggest I disagree with that. On the contrary; it is a marvellous book, which people have rightly called heartwarming and heartbreaking, but it is much more than that. Its willingness to deal with serious and topical themes, not just the well-known ones like domestic violence and homophobia but also self-harm, evident in the epidemic of adolescent cutting, signals its serious intent.

The story of school secretary Betty Ramdin, a victim of abuse by her late husband Sunil, her son Solo, who was just 5 when his father died, and maths teacher Mr Chetan, who becomes her lodger, holds the reader captivated from start to finish. The narrative, in the shape of alternating snapshots – or rather film sequences – told in slightly modified Trinidadian English from
the three characters’ points of view, forms a brightly coloured montage so convincing that even a reader unfamiliar with the Caribbean will come away with a lasting impression of both places and characters. For those who know Trinidad, in particular San Fernando, it is like visiting home. No wonder; it is where Persaud grew up and, though she now lives in London and Barbados, she has said her navel-string is buried there. The dialogue, splendidly timed and seasoned with the kind of Trini phrases that quicken the taste-buds – ‘Every bread have its cheese’; ‘Your guts hard like a calabash’; ‘Corbeau can’t eat sponge cake’; ‘People like me were always running from jumbie only to butt up with coffin’ – is just begging to be adopted for screen or stage.

However, much of the action takes place between the lush colours of these chapter-sequences, startling the reader with some fundamental development which takes on a ghostly presence. It is a narrative strategy which does not merely keep its readers constantly surprised; it also strengthens the idea that the ghosts of the past haunt the present and the future, and that the connections between them need to be sought out and processed. Some puzzling anachronisms, like the presence of iPads long before their actual invention, make sense because they enhance this sense of immanent present in the narrative sections by contrast with the absences between them. The absences encourage the reader to search for the complexity of motives and origins and investigate the mystery of identity.

Trinidadian identity – so vividly represented in the novel – shares all sorts of ghostly absences in its present, and these the author subtly integrates throughout. They form an integral part of each of the characters’ lives. Places and their names testify to the multiplicity of origins and their multiple connections, and manifest allusive appearances. These may be Spanish and Amerindian place names, like San Fernando itself or the pitch lake that Solo visits on a school excursion, where Spanish and British captains caulked their ships and first made contact with the Arawak inhabitants, or Maracas Bay, the best
sea-bathing on an island otherwise washed by the brown estuary waters of the Orinoco, or Chaguana, the centre of East Indian culture and fashion. The Solomon Hochoy Highway, the quickest connection between San Fernando and the north of the island, is named after the last British governor-general, of Chinese origin, born in Jamaica, who proudly took on Trinidadian nationality. There are also diasporic connections with Britain (the Windrush generation) and more recently the United States, where Solo goes to stay with his uncle Hari, Sunil’s brother.

Then there is the make-up of the language itself, where, in the examples above, we find, in addition to British cultural references like bread and cheese or sponge cake, the French brought by planters and their slaves in the word corbeau for crow, the Spanish calabash for the hollowed drinking gourd, or jumbie, a word for ghost related to zombie and believed to have been brought by slaves from central Africa. These are all added to a foundation of English, the later colonisers’ language, but with differing grammar (from the pidgin forced on Africans), modified African vowel sounds and a French-influenced intonation pattern. The unapologetic use of Trinidad English without annotations stresses its equal status among contemporary Englishes. Only the word steupse is explained, while most others, except perhaps lime (relax, hang out) and wine (nothing to do with whine or grapes but from winding, meaning sinuous dancing), are quite clear from their context.

Sometimes the book confirms common stereotypes about identity. Betty and her friends point out that all the casinos are run by Chinese people, although she adds, tantalisingly: ‘It must have a story behind that’. When Betty asks Reverend Lutchman (clearly an Indian name) to pacify the spirit of her dead husband, she puts his failure down to either only just having been ordained or being Guyanese. When the policeman Jackson walks out on Mr Chetan without a word, Chetan first complains that Jackson always wanted his own way. Here both the stereotype that Indo-Trinidadians are often teachers and Afro-Trinidadians policemen
is coupled to the notion that Indians are more passive and Africans more assertive, as well as the idea of Afro-Caribbeans abandoning their partners. Later in the story the stereotypes are contradicted, however, in Jackson’s role at the funeral and Mani and Patrick’s unfaithfulness, or Uncle Hari’s serial womanising in New York.

Earl Lovelace, another Trinidadian writer, suggests in his work that one of the effects of slavery was the need felt by men to assert their freedom and manhood, both in their drinking habits and in their behaviour towards women. Here we may surmise that this cultural expectation extended itself into the Indo-Trinidadian indentured plantation workers who replaced the slaves, persisting until today in people like Solo’s father, and in Solo’s own desire to show that he can be ‘a real man’. It may even play a part in the vehemence, at least until recently, of Caribbean homophobia.

It is, of course, Indo-Trinidadian identity which is central to the novel, as the main characters share Indian ethnicity. The flavour of Indian culture mixing with Caribbean ingredients permeates the book in the form of cuisine, with a series of mouth-watering descriptions of Trinidad dishes and drinks and in some cases precise instructions on making them. Who could forget the fried plantain and the cascadoux sizzling in a ‘curry bomb’ sauce which, in Trinidad folklore, will bind you to the island forever!

As all Trinidadians know, 30 May is celebrated in the island as Indian Arrival Day, with models of the first ship, the Fatel Razack, bringing indentured Indians from Calcutta in 1845. Indenture was the euphemistic name for the system of time-limited low-wage serfdom with which the plantation owners replaced slavery, using generous British compensation to get ‘coolies’ to cut the sugar cane, and simultaneously destroying the labour-bargaining power of the freed African slaves. It led to roughly half the population of both Trinidad and Guyana being of Indian origin today.

In the book the ship is named more correctly as the Fath al Razack (Victory of God the Provider), which belonged to an Indian Muslim from Bombay and was used when other ship-owners were
reluctant to get involved. It is mentioned in a section comparing Jackson’s family origins in antebellum America with the five generations of Mr Chetan’s family, who have now disowned him, since their arrival on that ship. We are used to the concept of purist threads of originary history being used to strengthen pride in identity, but here we are reminded that they also twist together or divide. After the cascadoux dinner, Mr Chetan gives Betty some chai rum to drink. Chai rum, invented, anachronistically, some years later by the Capildeo family of Chaguanas, connects India and the Caribbean by splicing rum with tea.

One memorable scene, a one-day cricket match between the West Indies and India in Port of Spain’s Savannah stadium, includes a version of the ‘Tebbitt cricket test’. While Mr Chetan and the others are cheering the West Indies on, the returnee from the UK they have christened ‘Mr England’ insists on supporting India because he can trace his ancestors back to Bihar. Though Mr Chetan himself went to work in England as a postman and cab driver before being encouraged to study and become a teacher, he has nothing but contempt for the other man’s knowledge of where his ‘dirt-poor relatives catch the boat to haul ass half way around the world for the opportunity to cut cane in this hot sun’ and how ‘his Windrush ass reached back right here’. Meanwhile the African Bravo and the Indian Denesh are scoring sixes for the Windies out in the middle.

This scene is an example of the artful way the plot combines elements in an inconspicuous way to show how little of life is black and white (even if the author takes liberties with the facts again: in that particular match Bravo and Denesh actually only scored nine runs between them). But the connections are used as the setting for the synchronistic and fateful meeting between Mr Chetan and his schoolfriend Mani, whose families had reacted so differently to revelations about their sexuality, though they ‘are the same country Indian people’. In posing the question of why the same strands produce opposite outcomes, apparently without rhyme or reason, Mr Chetan knows it is love, or the lack of it.
Love is at the centre of the novel, as the title indicates, and love, like identity, is of many different kinds, has many different origins and leads to quite different outcomes. We see familial love, which may not even be in a conventional family, as between Betty, Mr Chetan and Solo. We observe married love decaying and turning to hatred and fear, and how that in turn results in the pernicious effects of self-loathing. We experience the joys of love of place and of companionship. We witness the strength and absurdities of sexual drives. We see the bigotry and fanaticism it faces, and its vulnerability to human weaknesses. We see the enrichment of its connections but also the sacrifices it demands.

If connection is at the heart of writing, imagery is one of the mysterious techniques used to make the join. We have seen above how ships, chai rum and a cricket match have come to mean something more than themselves. Persaud includes a little masterclass on the art. Mr Chetan would love to deny his gay sexual urges, which he describes as ‘like travelling in a maxi taxi on the wrong side of the Solomon Hochoy Highway’ (a description that will resonate with anyone who has been crammed in one of those minibuses sporting rasta colours near San Fernando in the rush hour, with only images of Krishna and Christ for protection, and reggae music drowning out the screeching of brakes and the squeals of the passengers). He is trying to expel the images in his memory of an erotic encounter in the Maracas changing facility by imagining repairing the cracks in a wall. The resulting spillover between the two fantasy images may change your impressions of sex and DIY forever!

Religion is one of the oldest ways in which people have tried to understand and domesticate the connections in their lives. When Indians arrived in Trinidad they brought their religion with them (roughly 70 per cent Hindu and 30 per cent Muslim). They arrived in an officially Christian country, whose Christianity was interlaced with African Orisha and folk magic traditions. The results are syncretic religious customs and mixtures, like the
Hindu wedding with its drum rhythms and garden hose doubling for the sacred Ganges, followed by a Christian wedding ceremony for the same couple in sober suits. All the religions share the Christian celebrations, like All Souls Day, Ash Wednesday at the end of Carnival and Good Friday (coupled with a superstition that if you swim on that day you may turn into a fish). Betty belongs to a Christian prayer group, but she allows her friends to take her to a Hindu ‘pandit’ to exorcise Sunil’s spirit. The pandit’s house is surrounded by jhandis (prayer-flags), which, as Betty knows from the newspaper, were brought from India but are now only found in Trinidad and Guyana. The exorcism itself is a magic ritual carried out in Hindi (which is a foreign language to Betty) and ending with a biblical reference to Lot’s wife. Mr Chetan uses one of the healing remedies recommended by Jackson’s grandfather (Papa Eliot, who some believe can do obeah) combining seven tree twigs, the Lord’s prayer and a magical chant to change his luck. This is all pure mumbo jumbo, and yet, when Betty looks back, and reveals what she sees, she becomes in some senses a pillar of salt, and Mr Chetan does indeed find a new happiness.

Towards the end of the book Betty becomes involved in Kali worship, still a strong presence in Trinidad. Rejected by many as a dangerous cult, it shares some aspects of Orisha, like the trance-like states of possession called ‘vibrating’ and unexplainable phenomena like the ability to walk unharmed over fire (Persaud restricts herself to the slightly less spectacular placing of burning camphor balls in the mouth). Worship of Kali, the terrible Mother goddess with her necklace of human skulls, offers Betty a path out of her loneliness and the unbearable alienation from her son. But the goddess exacts a terrible price for granting her wishes.

These things can be explained away as tricks of plot, foreshadowing and dramatic irony. Or they may be seen as indications that we should look for connections that are not obvious to the superficial narration of events. Worthwhile imaginative literature is not didactic, but shows truths and reveals connections which neither
dogma, prejudice nor the rational intellect can discover, and preferably in a life-enhancing and generous spirit, like the poetry of Derek Walcott, from which the title is taken. Betty’s leitmotiv is her belief that God is love. Ingrid Persaud, from this perspective, shows that the opposite is also true.