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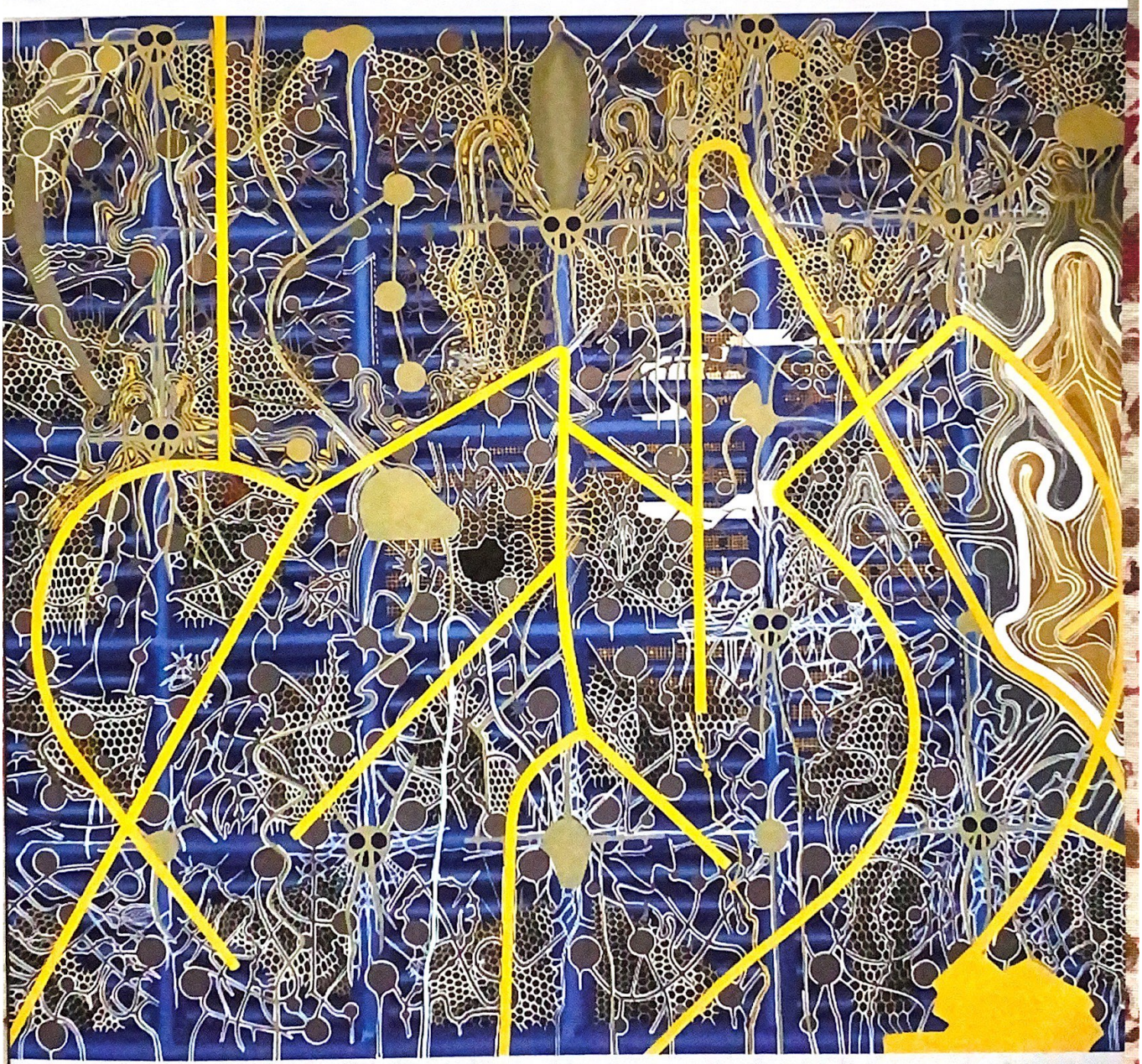

Anjali Singh

Gaiutra Bahadur's *Coolie Woman*: Recasting Indian Indenture through a Gendered Lens

Abstract

The story of Indian indenture is widely believed to be an account of betrayal, of trauma, and of resistance. However, it is also a narrative of resilience, assimilation and acculturation. In the earlier works written on indenture, leading writers, both Indian and British, have examined the experience on either of the two polarities: colonial or postcolonial. In doing so, they have largely ignored the voices of the indentured people and only scratched the surface with a 'historical, fact-based' understanding of the system. It is only more recently that the third and fourth generation descendants of the indentured labourers are writing about indenture with an increased focus on issues of identity and belonging in their literary works. For most of them, their second migration has necessitated the need to delve deeper into the personal histories surrounding indenture.

Keywords: coolie, diaspora, indenture, *Jahajins*, narrative techniques, postcolonialism.

The last two decades have witnessed a revival in indenture literature with the third and fourth generation of the indentured diaspora revisiting the past and writing narratives that are based on revealing testimonies and anecdotes. Their works raise a challenge to the colonial narratives that have largely focussed on official records and have stereotyped the indentured Indians as misfits in India, as well as in the countries to which they were taken. The authors have mined the rich oral tradition in order to project the voices of the original *girmitiyas,* who have recounted their experience in varied sources, such as the *bidesiya* songs. These resources have enabled the writers to piece together the history of the period. Indenture began just after slavery ended in the 1830s and lasted till it was 'abolished in all its forms' in 1920. This translates to nearly a century of indenture; a period

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which finds little or no mention, neither in Indian history textbooks, nor in its literature.

Recent works by the younger generation of writers, who are descendants of the indentured diaspora, have become involved in a process of 'reclamation' around the word *coolie* (a gender-neutral term of address for the indentured people in the plantations). These writers have managed to re-position indenture on the literary map. They are writing about indenture poetics and highlighting a distinct vocabulary that is required to be cautiously revisited, keenly analysed, and then finally understood, in order to comprehend the experience.

Shortlisted for the 2014 Orwell Prize for Political Writing, and the winner of the 2014 Gordon K and Sybil Lewis Prize, Guyanese-American writer, Gaiutra Bahadur's seminal book, *Coolie Woman: The Odyssey of Indenture* (thereafter *Coolie Woman*), explores complex issues of migration with respect to the post-slavery exploitative system of indentured labour. It delves into a subaltern woman's point of view as a memoir in the literary non-fiction genre, exploring the origin and legacy of the life of Gaiutra Bahadur's great-grandmother, Sujaria, who was brought to British Guiana around 1903 to work in a sugarcane plantation.

This paper explores Bahadur's narrative with relevance to the issues of migrancy, and also generates aesthetic evaluation while negotiating, interrogating and navigating the cultural and theoretical constructs involved in aiding the emergence of a new hybrid identity from the forgotten past of indenture. The resulting perspective highlights the 'collective consciousness' of the social group of the indentured diaspora, and evaluates the role of memory in their viewing of India as an 'imagined homeland'.

It also attempts to correct the History, with a capital H, which was written by the British Empire to further its own interest. Instead, it endeavours to replace the colonial discourse by incorporating private and personal histories. This process of (re)visioning of indenture history takes place at the level of the individual narratives, tying them with the larger community of the indentured diaspora spread across the world.

In his essay "Cartographies of Diaspora" included in *Routledge Diaspora Studies Reader*, Avtar Brah opines that the word 'diaspora' "invokes the imagery of traumas of separation and dislocation... but diasporas are also potentially the sites of hope and new beginnings" (237). This also holds true for indenture narratives, which can be associated with the subaltern entering the colonial space of English language and using it as a mode of resistance to the hegemonic discourse. In *The Literature of the Indian Diaspora: Theorizing the Diasporic Imaginary*, Vijay Mishra extrapolates that narratives on indenture have taken into greater account the experience of the indentured men.

However, he highlights, "equally miserable and much more abject were the bodies of women, the silent rarely written underside of indenture experience" (84).

Literature written by the women descendants of the indentured diaspora in the Caribbean offers a unique perspective of the system as it unfolded across islands. These narratives offer an enduring knowledge of the legacy of indentured labour. Gaiutra Bahadur's narrative portrays a panoramic picture of Indian indentured labour in British Guiana (Guyana) and offers a gendered perspective of women in indenture. It places her great-grandmother (a gendered product of colonial capitalism) into the centre of the discourse. In doing so, the book manages to weave together the "entangled histories" of the many other indentured women "from the moment they left their villages, through their middle passages, through their reinvention and struggle in a new world" (177). Sujaria's story interpellates with countless other stories of indentured women, allowing Bahadur, in telling her story, to reconstruct the gaps in the colonial office records. Posed as rhetorical questions that point out the lacuna in the official records, Bahadur's queries are extremely vital in analysing the accounts of indenture.

> The colonial office records, unreliable narrators that they are, rarely tell tales of rape and unrecognised children. They leave gaps. Grapple, for instance, with the untold in the report of an unnamed indentured woman found guilty and sentenced to death for killing her newborn on a Berbice plantation on June 19, 1913... no mere single woman, she was a religiously committed celibate, or *sadhin*... Her story begs the question: what circumstances make a baby unwanted enough to prompt infanticide? And how does a *sadhin* come to be with a child in the first place? Was her celibacy a guise to resist sexual service, if not indentured service, in the West Indies? Or was she raped? The records do not say. (*Coolie Woman* 195)

The book opens with an epigraph taken from Adrienne Rich's "Cartographies of Silence" in *The Dream of a Common Language*. It is telling in nature because it talks about 'silence' and 'telling' and 'history'. The epigraph sets the tone for the rest of the book which is a rich narrative combining archival research with oral testimonies and folk songs. It begins with the metaphor of a search and uses the approach of a personal memoir with the autodiegetic narrator beginning the story *in media res*. The narrative is divided into three parts; 'Embarking', 'Exploring' and 'Returning'. The travel metaphor continues throughout the narrative with Bahadur returning to the leitmotif of travel multiple times in the book. The metaphor of the journey bridges the gap between the first generation (Sujaria) and the fourth generation (Bahadur) offering a space where past grievances can be elucidated and resolved.

From the very onset, Bahadur critiques the loss of identity which was the common denominator for everyone who was indentured, whether forcibly or by choice. She points out that Sujaria was "a pregnant woman travelling alone" and like "most Indians who migrated, she did not have a last name" (10). Bahadur's narrative continues to raise questions as it traces the journey of Sujaria, from her home in India to the long voyage on *The Clyde*. The book charts Sujaria's life narrative through her indenture till her death aged 89 in 1962. It sketches her arrival as a 27-year-old indentured labourer to Guiana and thereafter, her becoming a *coolie* on the plantation. (The term *'coolie'* was used by Europeans and Creoles to address Indian indentured labourers in the Caribbean in a dehumanizing manner). Her immigration pass lists her as a *Brahman* named Sheojari. Also included as an aside is a scribbled note "Pregnant 4 mos" (18).

> One scholar of indenture has remarked that the British didn't recruit "coolies" for their sugarcane fields. Rather they made "coolies". By this logic, the system took gardeners, palanquin-bearers, goldsmiths, cow-minders, leather-makers, boatmen, soldiers and priests with centuries-old identities based on religion, kin and occupation and turned them all into an indistinguishable degraded mass of plantation labourers without caste or family. (*Coolie Woman* 56)

Bahadur highlights the manner in which, "mystery darkened the lives of many women who left India as coolies" (26). According to a law stipulating 40 women for every 100 men in a ship bound for the colonies, the recruiters were forced to meet the quota by convincing women to indenture. This was no easy task as women rarely came into direct contact with the recruiters. Officially, women recruiters were not allowed in the system. However, male recruiters outsourced this task to women who could easily convince the other women to indenture themselves and board the ships bound for the British plantations. "The law that aggravated the shortage of women, the 1883 Indian Emigration Act, was intended to stop wives from passing as widows or single women to escape their husbands" (Bahadur 27). According to the 1891 census of the United Provinces (the region from which the greatest number of indentured labourers were recruited), 90 percent of girls aged between ten and fourteen were already married. This made the task of female recruitment considerably difficult for the recruiters.

No ship would be allowed to sail if it did not meet the 40:100 ratio. This led to several cases of kidnapping, deceit and forceful detention of women in the sub-depots. To make the situation worse, in 1903, a law was passed which did not allow any married woman to emigrate without the permission of her husband. Recruiters thus, looked for women who had no one to provide for them. The most desperate lot was the socially-vulnerable women who were easy targets for the recruiters. Bahadur cites the report of Sir George

Grierson, the British civil servant posted in Bihar who observed that the 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 husbands. (*Coolie Woman* 33)

These statistics have given rise to one of the greatest myths of indenture regarding the type of women who became indentured. Women in indenture have been classed as 'morally degenerate' under the colonial narrative. What is lacking is the listing of reasons that 'forced' women into indenture. They did not actively choose to get into the system but did so only out of lack of any alternative.

Widows fleeing *sati* (Hindu custom of immolating widows on the funeral pyre of their husbands) were subject to acute hunger and poverty. The only alternative available to them (prior to indenture) was prostitution. Bahadur notes, "There is a reason the word *randi* or *ranri* can mean both young widow and prostitute in both the Bhojpuri and Bengali languages" (*Coolie Woman* 35). Married women whose husbands had taken on another woman, as well as women who were ill-treated by their in-laws also had no recourse to an alternative other than suicide; neither did the women who had been seduced and then abandoned. In the Indian social order, they were already 'rejects', standing on the periphery. In order to show indenture in a positive light, the British demonstrated its civilizing influence by liberating oppressed women from what they perceived a barbaric and heathen culture. Indenture would save their lives. It is not difficult then to understand why the women emigrated despite strong social taboos.

The testimonies of the women who indentured show "glimpses of headstrong women, determined to go or not to" (*Coolie Woman* 31). Were they, to borrow critic Charu Gupta's phrase, "innocent victims or guilty migrants?" ("'Innocent' Victims/'Guilty' Migrants: Hindi Public Sphere, Caste and Indentured Women in Colonial North India" 1345). By recovering their voices from official petitions, reports, songs and letters, Gaiutra Bahadur has constructed her protagonists as gendered beings standing on the intersections of sexuality and morality. The indentured subaltern woman has many sides and layers to her persona. It is true that she was a victim of deception and misinformation. It is equally true that in many instances, her choice to indenture was a deliberate choice which accorded her agency. But was this not a pseudo choice? Faced with prostitution or suicide, what alternative did she have except to get indentured?

Indenture was praised by the colonists as a liberating experience for the oppressed lower caste woman in India. Was it equally true for the women belonging to the upper echelons of Indian society? These contestations are significant in deconstructing the assumption of a single cultural identity ascribed to the *coolie* women. The fixated binary of disempowered woman forced into migration versus the female voices on consensual migration needs to be carefully re-analyzed. There are two main narratives of indenture for women, centering around kidnap and escape. Until recently, everything written about the Indian women in indenture has been written by men who have presented polarized images of these women. During the years of indenture, single low-caste Indian women were perceived as immoral and were looked upon with suspicion. They faced economic and sexual exploitation at the hands of the planters, as well as by their Indian male protectors.

Indian women, for probably the first time in their lives, were working and earning wages outside the home. Their relatively lesser ratio to men also gave them an edge over their sisters in India. During the early period of their indenture, Indian women enjoyed a degree of independence as they earned their own wages. The paucity of women also accelerated their emancipation. They could leave their husbands and marry another, or simply live with him without marriage. The social mores had collapsed with the breakdown of the caste barriers. Women could also marry across caste lines. "New hierarchies emerged across the dark waters" (*Coolie Woman* 92). When colonists emphasized that women could do in the colonies what was unthinkable in India, they negated the idea about the choices of women being necessitated by pragmatism. By exercising the choice to select and change partners, the indentured women were choosing their own protection. A segment already marginalized and subaltern in an alien terrain, they were bold in protesting against the sexual exploitation by the planters. Overturning the tradition of giving dowry to a bride (part of the marriage ritual in India), the parents of the brides in the Caribbean were able to demand a 'bride price' for their daughters. From being seen as a financial liability in India, they had become an economic asset to their family under the indenture system. This is not to say that their lives were easy despite the rosy picture painted by the colonists. The 'plantocracy' (according to the *Online Oxford English Dictionary*: a population of planters regarded as the dominant class, especially in the West Indies) on the one hand, and their own husbands and partners on the other, conspired as a strong force to curtail the freedom of the indentured women.

During the initial years of indenture, the women in the colonies enjoyed a certain sense of freedom away from the set social norms prevalent back home in the Indian society. This freedom, however, became the source of unmitigated sexual jealousy in the Indian men. Jeremy Poynting has pointed out in his paper "East Indian Women in the Caribbean" that the indenture

experience of the indentured women was one of multiple oppression. He suggests, "The reason for both the possibilities and the miseries of the Indian woman's experiences during the indenture period was her scarcity" (133). The agency exercised by the women added fuel to the Indian male's inability to have sole power and monopoly over his partner. He desired to establish complete control over his woman. She did not want to let go of her new-found-freedom willingly. This created an atmosphere of hostility which was ultimately responsible for the 'wife murders' in the Caribbean.

The archetype of 'Sita' in the *Ramayan* as the ideal woman was placed in front of the women for them to emulate. The attempt of the Canadian Mission was to emphasize on the importance of housewife duties. The identity of the women was fixed in relation to societal parameters of gender and caste. If they tried to resist the oppressive patriarchal and socio-cultural claim on the Indian family, the women were at once branded immoral, abused and punished. Indian indentured women in the Caribbean thus bore the brunt of the worst kind of violence perpetrated by men.

'Othering' of indentured women in the Caribbean began even before they were recruited. The term 'Othering' was coined by renowned postcolonial theorist, Gayatri Chakravarti Spivak in her seminal essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" It is defined by her as "a process by which the empire can define itself against those it colonizes, excludes and marginalizes" (*Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader* 74). By creating a postcolonial subject through its hegemonic framework, the colonial discourse silences the subaltern and pushes it to the margins. Since indenture in the Caribbean followed the abolition of slavery, the planters continued with their belief in seeing women as unproductive and did not seek their presence beyond a bare minimum in the plantations. They were unwilling to pay for the cost of an immigrating Indian woman who was perceived unproductive in the labour economy. This led to a skewed gender ratio among the first wave of indentured immigrants arriving in the Caribbean. It was only later that a set ratio of 1 woman to 4 men was enforced by the Emigration Act passed in 1860.

The murder of women was a common feature in all the colonies that witnessed indenture. They bore multiple forms of individual and systemic violence. Uprooted and displaced from their 'home', the women inhabited liminal spaces and occupied the place reserved by colonial hegemony for the 'other'. Historian Donald Wood reveals that twenty-seven murders had been committed in Trinidad between 1859 and 1863. In each of these murders, the victim was the wife or the mistress. Between 1885 and 1890, Guiana witnessed forty murders of wives or paramours by their men (*Trinidad in Transition: The Years after Slavery* 152). The crime scenes showed ghastly images of women killed by the cutlass (the crescent shaped tool used in the sugarcane fields). Ironically, the weapon used to sever the bodies of the

women was the same that the women had used for their emancipation — the cutlass or the machete.

There is a distinct poetics of community building that women writers of indenture literature project in their narratives. Their women characters experience indenture differently from their male counterparts. When the storyteller is a woman, the vocabulary she uses is distinct and the interpretation is measured on a different scale. There is an underlying counter-discourse that questions the master narrative. These writers push the boundaries of research in order to understand and interpret the seemingly vulnerable links that the past holds with the present.

When she moves from the first to the second part of the book, Bahadur changes the voice from a first-person narration to a journalistic overt narration of asking rhetorical questions. The rhetorical approach emphasises the "narrative as an interaction between an author and an audience through the medium of a text for some purpose" (*RENT* 500). In posing her "impertinent questions", Bahadur is able to open a dialogue with the past and seek answers that have never been documented as the indentured women were illiterate and could not write their experience. Bahadur's dialogue with the past opens the narrative to include polyphonic voices that clamour for attention. The "term 'polyphony' is derived from Mikhail Bakhtin who described it as texts or utterances where more than one voice can be heard". In such texts, there exists "a plurality of independent and equally valid voices which are not subordinated to any single authorial hierarchy" (*Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Techniques* 443). Bahadur's tone hovers between the journalistic and the academic. When she nears the end of the book she brings the narrative back to contemporary time and talks about the lives of the descendants of the indentured Indians living in the Caribbean.

The Indo-Caribbean women's novel is a distinct sub-genre in the area of indenture literature. Such novels trace the trajectory of the lives of indentured women by bringing together different voices and narratives. Their writings on the subject uncover many stories behind stories that have been silenced in the traditionally male-centric discourse on indenture. Theorist Mariam Pirbhai looks at the narrative techniques employed by women novelists from the Caribbean in "The *jahaji-bhain* Principle". She extrapolates, "Indo-Caribbean women novelists arguably work in tandem with historians in the memorialisation and excavation of women's narratives, for they not only strive to fill in historical gaps but also to mobilize these stories as models of cultural and feminist agency for present generations" (47).

Gaiutra Bahadur's *Coolie Woman: The Odyssey of Indenture* is an ethnographic non-fiction narrative which, on the surface, seems like a genealogical search of an ancestor. It is a well-written critique on colonialism

and its profit-based system of indenture. A closer look reveals the carefully mined data and analysis that Bahadur has painstakingly researched by using material from official archives. She has also conducted numerous interviews to fill the gaps left in the official records. In her extensive research-driven book, Bahadur has researched archival records and data while also bringing log books into the gambit of her study. She has also interweaved family memory and genealogical records. The result is the articulation of the gendered Indian women, who had long been marginalised in the male-dominated system of indenture. The unearthing of these unheard voices is a testimony to the ever-present sub-text of gendering in identity politics. Bahadur's final triumph lies in her using the stigmatic term 'coolie' in the title. By adding 'woman' to a gender-neutral term (coolie), she brings visibility to the women in indenture; those who have only been counted in records either as stipulated numbers in adherence to a law or as dependants of male migrants. The feminist approach shifts the power dynamics and gives voice to the hitherto silenced women in the master narrative of indenture.

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