

**FROM THE PERSONAL TO THE POLITICAL: INDENTURE,
IDENTITY AND GENDER IN GAIUTRA BAHADUR'S
*COOLIE WOMAN: THE ODYSSEY OF INDENTURE***

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Abstract

The paper seeks to explore race, class and gender in the path-breaking “double-diaspor(ic)” book *Coolie Woman: The Odyssey of Indenture* by Gaiutra Bahadur. The book is a heart rending account of millions of indentured laborers (particularly women) who were transported to the Caribbean after slavery was legally abolished. However, the ghosts of slavery continued to haunt women like Sujaria (the author’s great grandmother) who had to bear the white supremacist male egos of their “masters” for economic sustenance. The book can be called an example of proletariat Diaspora and the emergence of the working class woman as a victor in her own right. Both Bahadur and Sujaria, in the course of the narrative, successfully trace their roots and their personal and collective identities while also making an attempt at *re-writing* the British colonial history.

The paper will try to trace the etymological roots of the word ‘Coolie’ which is often used in modern times but nevertheless with a lot of political and historical baggage. *Coolie* is someone who carries baggage and Sujaria carries the baggage of colonialism. Behind this bureaucratic term used by the British is a woman who is triply marginalized because of her gender, class and race. Though her gender did impart her some autonomy and empowerment (given that men outnumbered women on plantations and women were hence free to choose their sexual partners), she was nevertheless a plantation worker employed by a white ‘master’. In *Coolie Woman* the notion of migrating and crossing the waters can be seen as exemplifying a kind of “diasporic legacy” because all the experiences, stories and journeys are layered upon each other like a palimpsest. The paper will attempt to unveil each of these layers and give them their due share of attention and detail.

Keywords: Diaspora, Indenture, Caribbean, Colonialism, Coolie, Migration.

The Greek word *diaspora* is a derivative of two verbs *dia* and *speirein* meaning ‘to scatter, spread, disperse, be separated’. (Knott and McLoughlin 20) However, any movement or separation or displacement cannot be called diasporic unless its social, economic, political and cultural factors are considered at length. Avtar Brah writes, “while at the heart of the notion of diaspora is the image of a journey...not every journey can be understood as diaspora... the question is not simply about *who travels*, but *when, how, and under what circumstances*” (Brah 182).

Coolie Woman: The Odyssey of Indenture is a real-life account of the ‘coolies’ who were indentured to work in the sugar plantations in West Indies, Trinidad, Guiana, Fiji, Mauritius, Jamaica, Suriname and other parts of the Caribbean between mid-nineteenth century to early twentieth century. One woman who stands out in this grand narrative is Sujaria/Sheojari/Shivajaro¹ (all three versions of her name are the different transliterations she got in her village, on the ship *The Clyde* which sailed her to Guiana and in Guiana as a free unindentured woman in late twentieth century) who is the author’s great-grandmother. The word ‘coolie’ is derived from the original Tamil word *kuli* which means wages or hire. The system of indenture or contracts given by the British was a substitute for the century-old slave trade. Some historians named indenture as “a new form of slavery”. After the slaves were freed in the 1830s, the British replaced them by indentured Indian plantation workers. Sujaria was also one of these workers when she left her village Bhurahapur in Bihar to sail to British Guiana while she was four months pregnant. The baby was born on the ship and named Lal Bahadur who is the author’s grandfather. The book is more of a journalistic account which attempts to trace the author’s genealogy.

Sujaria’s journey to Guiana in 1903 forms the first instance of diaspora in the text. However this diaspora was a result of the colonial adventures, as the author herself puts it – “Colonialism and migration are inextricable joined in my family history. Migration involves resistance too – resistance against the loss of culture, of memory, of dialect...” (Bahadur 7). Sujaria’s history or historical story also resisted to be unraveled by her great-granddaughter. Bahadur tried to bring Sujaria from anonymity to recognition but Sujaria perhaps did not want her secrets to be told to the world. “The relative silence of coolie women in the sum total of history reflects their lack of power. But could it also reflect a strategy by women who had secrets to keep? Is it possible that each individual silence was a plan? Would my great-grandmother deliberately disappear behind a curtain to escape questions about her past?” (Bahadur 32) The author, by the end of the book and her journey to dig up Sujaria’s past, was not able to excavate all the details about her; there remained some questions which denied being answered – for example, Was Sujaria married before she sailed to Guiana; had she tried to flee mistreatment by her in-laws; or was she an outcast who was thrown out of her village because of her ‘character’; was the child Lal Bahadur born out of wedlock, was she a widow or a prostitute and many other questions. The beauty of the narrative is in its very elusiveness.

Diasporic narratives try to evade exact answers so as to maintain the fantastical and exotic element which is usually assigned to them. A displaced person’s identity can never be static or fixed; rather it is always in flux shaped by the multiple places or ‘homes’. This is what Knott calls the “empowering paradox of diaspora” – “the moving between a multiplicity of home spaces, the experience of ambivalently belonging both here and there, can open up new

spaces to reflect on and critique essentialist discourses of nation, ethnicity or origin and to creatively construct new homes and identities that are deemed hybrid, syncretic or fluid” (Knott 26). The different new and old ‘homes’ mark a shift in a diasporic subject’s new and old identities. However apart from the idea of homes, it is colonialism which marked the identities of the indentured labourers. Stuart Hall writes about “the traumatic character of the colonial experience” – as “two different ways of thinking about cultural identity, first a shared culture, a collective true self hiding inside the many other (to excavate the past of *Coolitude*); second cultural identity as a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being’... acknowledging the ruptures and discontinuities...far from being eternally fixed in some essentialized past, they are subject to the continuous play of history, culture and power” (Hall 223-225).

The second instance of diaspora is the journey undertaken by the author and her family in 1981 from the independent Guiana to New York which proved emancipatory for Bahadur. Guiana even after independence from the British rule was “divided by race and ruled by the African- dominated party” (Bahadur 9) and did not provide Indians with equal opportunities. Race and ethnicity had started to colour the first form of diaspora (of Sujaria) which resulted in the emergence of the second diaspora (of the author). The author recalls that her alienation from India was due to the “unspoken rules about what women should not and could not do” in India. The second diaspora liberated the author from Guiana (and her Indian roots) which was still dominated by lethal incidents of domestic violence as in the indenture era. ‘Coolitude’ became not only an economic or social condition but also an emotional state which meant liberation for some and confinement for others. A scholar of indenture, John Kelly, thus very rightly argues that the British did not “recruit” ‘coolies’ but rather “made” coolies.

It was common for prostitutes in Varanasi, Ayodhya, Vrindaban and Mainpuri to migrate to British colonies so as to escape the stigma which was beginning to be attached with sex workers as a result of the strict British rules and policies on prevention of venereal disease (though the British soldiers also made use of brothels and the government supported them). British viewed it as a part of their “civilizing mission”; they thought that by the emigration of prostitutes they were able to free some women from the “most barbaric elements of a heathen culture” (Bahadur 31). Colonizers saw an “unsettling liberation” (Bahadur 90) for indentured women on sugar plantations. Women there “possessed a value and an influence they would not otherwise have”.

The justification of colonization and the recruitment of Indian workers for the colonies went hand in hand. Therefore the colonial official records did not describe the grievances of the indentured; rather the white ‘master’ manipulated such records. The author in an interview at New York University talks about overcoming the “tyranny of the texts” so as to recover several different histories because textual histories are written by those in power who have “a vested interest” in their endeavors. These texts do not record the perspectives of the indentured.

Sujaria, in the eyes of the British who were her recruiters, was only Immigrant number 96153 who was “five feet, four and a half inches, of Brahman caste and Pregnant 4 mos” (Bahadur 18). As a Brahmin woman traveling alone and crossing the waters, she was seen as extremely vulnerable and triply marginalized. First of all she was a woman who had dared to migrate to a new land, second she was of a high caste and Brahmins were thought to lose their caste if they ever crossed the “dark waters” of the Indian Ocean, according to Hindu scriptures. Third, as a pregnant woman travelling alone on the ship, she was ‘open’ to dangers from the molesters onboard who frequently indulged themselves. James Clifford, in relation to this, has

written – “Diasporic experiences are always gendered...when diasporic experience is viewed in terms of displacement rather than placement, travelling rather than dwelling, and disarticulation rather than rearticulation, then the experiences of men will tend to predominate...life for women in diasporic situations can be doubly painful – struggling with the material and spiritual insecurities of exile, with the demands of family and work and with the claims of old and new patriarchies...” (Clifford 314) [*Diasporas*].

Religion is an important aspect in diaspora studies. Indentured laborers in Guiana often sought solace in Tulsidas’ *Ramacharitamanas*. Rama’s exile to the forests for fourteen years reflected their own diaspora and displacement from the homeland. Indenture drove them to religion and belief. The author observes, “For these displaced Hindus, the *Ramayana* is lifeblood...the plantations threw men into the arms of their gods. They were displaced, and Hinduism rooted them” (Bahadur 106, 125). Indentured women were supposed to look up to Sita as their role model – an epitome of chastity, obedience and domesticity. However, the vessel/ship that ferried them from their homeland to the new land transformed them completely. All the distinctions based on caste, religion, race and ethnicity were blurred onboard. All the indentured laborers were seen in one hue as a part of a larger populace which was homogeneous. Their pluralities, diversities, heterogeneities were erased on this journey. The family bonds of ‘coolies’ were already broken when they left India, but indenture further destabilized the institution of traditional, steady families. Widespread polyandry was common among the indentured because of the shortage of women on plantations. This led to mistrust, deception, trickery, sexual jealousy, violence and murders. Collective diaspora bred antipathy rather than camaraderie. The new land also made them victims of continuous othering, both internal and external. Homi Bhabha talks about the “three conditions that underlie an understanding of the *process of identification* – first, to exist is to be called into being in relation to an otherness, its look or locus...it is always in relation to the place of the Other that colonial desire is articulated...second, the very place of identification is a space of splitting...the disturbing distance in-between constitutes the figure of colonial otherness – the white man’s artifice inscribed on the black man’s body...third, the question of identification is never the affirmation of a pre-given identity, never a *self*-fulfilling prophecy – it is always the production of an image of identity and the transformation of the subject in assuming that image...” (*Location of Culture* 44-45).

The journeys of the slaves trafficked by the British and those undertaken by indentured laborers were similar in their transformative potential and the novel possibility of a break from the past. “Like the slaves before them, they (the indentured) were an entirely new people, forged by suffering, created through destruction” (Bahadur 63). The personal lives of both the slaves and the indentured were governed by the Empire. The Empire’s Orientalist project of imparting “knowledge” to the “heathens” began from the personal. The indentured were thought to be extremely unruly, savage and irrational in their personal lives. Hence when the incidents of domestic violence in Guiana soared to an unimaginable rate, the British blamed the “race” and not the “place”. Edward Said points to the constant presence of the Empire in this century which made the personal and the political complementary, rather than divergent. He writes, “...the facts of empire are associated with sustained possession, with far flung and sometimes unknown spaces, with eccentric or unacceptable human beings, with fortune-enhancing or fantasized activities like emigration, money-making, and sexual adventure...In the closing year of the nineteenth century, with the scramble for Africa, the consolidation of the French imperial Union, the American annexation of the Philippines, and British rule in the

Indian subcontinent at its height, Empire was a universal concern” (*Culture and Imperialism* 64).

The transformation of Sujaria on this journey of metamorphoses allowed her to accept three men in her life – Deodhar in India, they had a son Lal Bahadur, the author’s grandfather; Shewrattan Singh on the ship on her journey to the islands (Shewrattan Singh’s wife Munrai could not bear children so there was a mutual acceptance of Sujaria and Shewrattan’s relationship who had a daughter Mundi together; there was a “sense of community and extended family” among the ‘coolie’ workers), and her legally wedded husband, a milk seller Dilchand. There would not have been any possibility of changing her sexual partners, had she been in India. Diasporic displacement (which also largely led to a shift in the cultural values) allowed her to exercise sexual and financial freedom. However, the poet Lal Bihari Sharma puts the blame on indenture for the violent and aggressive actions of Indian men in the colonies. He writes, “this country” (that is British Guiana) “is a country of wrongdoing, it leaves no sense of *dharma*, I left behind my land, my hymns and the rest of religion...”

The sense of having lost one’s religion was immense for the displaced Indians. However, the idea of loss and the memory of that loss are fundamental to a diasporic experience. Vijay Mishra writes, “...the specters of the trauma need to be constantly recalled so that diasporic lives do not become footnotes to a neutral multiculturalism. An ethical relationship to the ghosts of diaspora is absolutely essential...without memory, without a sense of loss, without a certain will to mythologize, life for many displaced people will become intolerable and diaspora theory will lose its edge” (*Diasporas and the Art of Impossible Mourning* 37, 46).

In 1913, Gandhi began to protest against indenture and framed his protest around the “defence of Indian womanhood” (Bahadur 157). Diaspora invited one of the foremost national strategies in fighting colonialism. In Calcutta, the Indentured Coolie Protection Society or the Anti-Indentured Emigration League was formed but it had strong religious overtones in accordance with a Hindu vision of India as part of the nationalist project. In the struggle for independence, diasporic populace was increasingly called back to their homeland for religious, political, nationalist and economic concerns in a would-be independent country. Nonetheless, the abolishment of indenture became the first major achievement in the anti-imperial and anti-colonial struggle of Indians.

Bahadur concludes by writing, “My own *foreign homeland* (India) accused me [my italics]. What did I want coming back here? The country shoved me outside...for the first time it occurred to me that clinging to the past might weigh down not just us, but also the people we had left behind...leaving for countries with better-rooted traditions of feminism and greater opportunities for education and economic independence has meant that women in the second diaspora are transcending their history” (Bahadur 212). Transcending their indentured histories and gender disparities in the colonies along with carving a new identity for themselves is a key step in determining the shift from the personal to the political. The lives of the indentured gain political importance once their personal histories are given a voice in the public domain. The “double diaspora” in the text *Coolie Woman* is itself a marker of the shift from the personal to the political in its endeavors to carve out the politics of colonialism, imperialism and Orientalism in the biographical accounts of the indentured labourers like Sujaria and many others.

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