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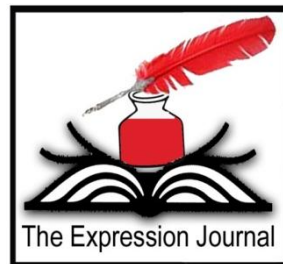
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GAZING AT THE PORTRAYAL OF *COOLIE WOMEN*: LOCATING PAIN, DISLOCATION AND SEARCH FOR SUBJECTIVITY

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Abstract

Indian women have been represented in multiple ways in diverse literature. The portrayal of coolie women in literature and media offers a critical lens through which to examine themes of pain, dislocation, and the search for subjectivity. One interesting study emerges is their portrayal as coolie women in Gaiutra Bahadur's *Coolie Women: The Odyssey of Indenture* (2013). This narrative portrays marginalized conditions of women and their journey for better opportunities. The selected narratives represent women through their experiences, although fictional, but linked to everyday reality. The diasporic women represented in the narratives are Indian by birth and cultural mooring. They spend their early years in India and then migrate due to circumstances. This paper progresses to comprehend the way women are affected by social conditions at home and after migration. It aims to trace the changes they encounter in terms of discrimination and the voice, agency, and subjectivity of women in diasporic context. This paper deals with the representations of coolie women, focusing on their experiences of physical and emotional suffering, their displacement from native lands, and their struggle for identity and agency in oppressive socio-economic systems. By analyzing literary works, historical documents, and visual media, this study highlights how coolie women are often depicted as victims of systemic exploitation and marginalization. However, it also uncovers narratives that showcase their resilience and resistance against these adversities. This paper aims to uncover the layered complexities of their lives, exploring how their pain is not only a consequence of their labor-intensive roles but also a result of cultural and familial dislocation.

Keywords

Gaiutra Bahadur, *Coolie Women: The Odyssey of Indenture*, Discrimination, Pain, Exploitation, Identity, Subjectivity, Women Empowerment, Gender Studies.

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Literary narratives are discursive production of knowledge. They link experience and its representation. Representation, as Hall (1997) states, "... is an essential part of the process by which meaning is produced and exchanged between members of a culture" (15). According to Hall, the way representation is constructed depends upon three accounts of reflective, intentional, and constructionist approaches. Drawing from Hall, in the process of construction of meaning, we interpret a chain of equivalences between things and our own system of concepts. Thus, as Hall remarks, representation involves a system. He adds that the object, people, or events one tries to represent are connected with concepts or mental images an individual possesses. Meanings depend on such concepts and images formed in our thoughts and it enables us to represent something. Our ontology, therefore, forms the basis of our perception of reality and its representation in one or the other form. Whatever we see around helps us perceive the event, object, or person. Thus, our knowing is guided by our being and is an important step in the whole process of knowledge production.

Diasporic literature mainly deals with the issues of displacement, movement whether it is forced or self imposed. The study of diasporic literature is an amalgam of various cultures. Diasporic writings focus on acculturation and, as Kuortti (2007) states, on violence, adaptation and changing identities in the new society. She discusses that in the field of literature, diasporic writing comes from the margins, entering the arenas that it is allowed to occupy. Paranjape (2001) puts "the problem lies in equating the diaspora with every form of migration or with every perception of powerlessness." The focus therefore "involves a significant crossing of borders", but borders are not just limited to geographical areas rather "more often are multiple borders such as the loss of homeland would suggest" (5). For the writer "the importance of the diaspora and its potential for creating a new kind of culture arise out of such a crossing of boundaries" (6). Moving beyond is of great importance. It is a

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step forward in resisting against the age old tradition, set up patterns, norms, values and rules. It marks freedom, a zeal for independence and selfhood.

Gaiutra Bahadur is a journalist and a book critic who is interested in writing about culture and politics of global migration. She studied at Yale and Columbia. She was born in Guyana and immigrated to the United States when a child. She has an Indian origin and the novel is an attempt to trace her Indian identity, through her great grandmother. Gaiutra Bahadur's "Coolie Woman: the Odyssey of Indenture" was published in 2013. It is an "odyssey" of not just Sujaria, but represents all such indentured women from India to Guyana, and who have remained unheard. The chosen narrative is woman centric and depicts the experiences from the writer's perspective. The paper uses qualitative research methodology and the critical discourse analysis method as Fairclough (2010) designs to study the select narrative from a feminist perspective.

The writings are embedded to study and interrogate the human conditions and the problems underlying and the way different social and gendered behaviours affect them. Through discourses on women, the writing helps to unravel the social conditions which affect the existence of women in society. The chosen narrative represents a distinct category of Indian women in diaspora. The first form of migration is represented through Sujaria, an indenture or coolie woman. She is an upper caste woman, a Brahmin by birth, who chooses to become a coolie due to dominant social conditions at home. Sujaria is trapped in a vulnerable situation in India due to her unmarried pregnant state. She moves all alone. Due to lack of written records and no ancestral links, Bahadur presents the saga of Sujaria by tracing different coolie women and their common existences. The major characters of the novel are coolie women represented as Sujaria, Lachminia, Mariam, Baby, and Ramjharee. Bahadur also occupies a pivotal role in the narrative. Bahadur delineates the details of the experiences of coolie women as mentioned in the archives and reports given by some British officers, like Grierson. Through these sources, Bahadur gains an insight of the lived experiences of coolie women, and connects them with those of her grandmother to find the gaps. In this attempt, Bahadur tries to trace her identity with that of Sujaria, her great-grandmother, and India. The study aims to analyze the representation of marginalized women of Indian diaspora. The discourse above questions the place of women in the society- where they lack voice, agency, and subjectivity. As woman, each one of them appears vulnerable to oppressions at home or host society. The analysis of their representation in terms of their narrated experiences, the discrimination they face, and access to social institutions help to comprehend the existence, agency, and subjectivity as diaspora. It further helps to delineate societal views of appropriate behaviour designed for women and normalized through discursive practices.

The major part of the selected narratives deal with the experiences of women as adults. Coolie Woman chronicles experiences of not just Sujaria but many other women like her. The novel can be deconstructed as an attempt of the writer to trace her individuality through her great-grandmother and the conditions in which the latter was forced to migrate. In the process of tracing back her origin she unravels the complex lives of million coolie women who were never heard. The narrative and the experiences of the coolie women assess Sujaria's past experiences by reflecting at the reports and archives of other coolie women. In the process she unveils the silenced lives of women as indenture labourers and victims at home, on board, and in the foreign land.

The narrative shows that in India, the lived experiences of women were guarded against strict social rules and traditions. Conditions were even worse for women who were

widows or outcastes. They were the “other” of the society and treated inhumanly. Such women had no motivation at home or society, and desired to escape through migration. Therefore, it was easier to recruit such women for migration to plantation. Apart from them, as Bahadur refers in the novel, the indentured women also comprised of wives of those men who were already working in the colonies. Other than them, women who were left by their families, or deserted by husbands, or left by their lovers, and also prostitutes were treated with disgrace and humiliation in the society. They were sights of abuse and were left by their families. They had no reason left, but to move. The daily suffering, without proper social acceptance, lack of dignity, and vulnerability were reasons for them to escape the brutal conditions at home. Although as the narrative shows the highest percentage of migrants came from the low castes, next to them were women who were abandoned or widows. However, surprising cases as Bahadur delineates suggest that high caste women were also a considerable percentage of the migrants.

Represented through Sujaria, such cases were a result of their conflict with the traditional socio-cultural forces. The Brahmin women, who were left by husbands, or did not abide to the designed practices related to marriage, family, and birth, were treated like outcastes in their own communities. The stigma of such existence was so overpowering and humiliating that these women had no option but to escape. As Bahadur asserts, migrating overseas to work was mostly male enterprise (2013: 27). It was due to the cultural barriers which were more pronounced for women than men. It prevented women to talk, meet, and build relationship with men outside family. Such strong relationships often suffocated women, especially when they were exploited at home by their husbands and their families, and wished to escape. Even when they managed to run away, very few could manage a life of their own, while most of them fell in the trap laid by men and landed in prostitution. The narrative illustrates the case of women who were misled by men and wanted to migrate to the plantations. “Confronted with a tradition that had kept women from the prying eyes of outsiders for centuries, Pitcher had no choice. He had to interview them from outside a closed door. The women told him, through an interpreter, that they were not coolies bound for sugar cane colonies. They were concubines, they said.” (Bahadurvi: 28)

These women, as the discourse further illustrates, were exploited on grounds of love, promises of marriage. They were sexually abused and sold for money to recruiters who would take them as coolie. This indicates the objectification of women in terms of body, sex, emotions, and labour. By illustrating the conditions prevalent at that time, Bahadur wonders the relevance of either for her great-grandmother. Drawing from Geetha (2013), as the discourse illustrate, the bodies of coolie women appears as a playfield of humiliation. The movement beyond borders, which for them was a hope of better future and life, inflicted similar nature of tortures. It marginalized their existence in varied ways. The authority and control over the coolie women gets transferred from the men of their home and communities to British Officers, sailors, and other coolie migrants around them. The narrative represents everyday experiences of women being treated as sexual objects. Examples are illustrated with the help of discourses by women. During a routine body check-up, a woman reached to one of the doctors, Dr. Holman, and narrated her painful experiences on board. She complained, “It is true that on three nights the surgeon took me into his room and had connexion with me.... I was not a prostitute in India” (Bahadur: 59). They lived with these tortures inflicted on them every day. Ironically, in spite of the reality some British officials categorized the indentured women as immoral women. Apart from sexual exploitation, they were also physically dehumanized. Among the migrant women, most of them were pregnant. They

were not given proper food, medicine, or treatment. They are represented as “women on deathbeds” (Bahadur: 61).

Due to such conditions, most of the time women gave untimely births. Sujaria, too, gave birth to a son two months premature. They gave birth and most of the times lost them due to the negligence of the officers. Bahadur further elaborates at the mental conditions of the women. They went mad and with past burden and present pain, most of them were “driven to suicide, engaged in infanticide...” (Bahadur: 61). The inhuman treatment and oppression made their conditions even worse. The doctors blamed the mothers for this. Rather malnourishment and bad milk were the reasons and was never reported. Their pain did not end on ship rather continued with varied oppressions in the plantations. After, women reached the plantations, a same painful saga continued for them. The new world was mysterious for them. Yet, their existences, as Bahadur depicts, resemble with birds who sat in wilderness and quest of the unknown. They lived in fear due to the vulnerability they experienced at home. “The world, like the larger world did not treat women equally, and it often did not treat immigrants, whatever their gender, justly” (Bahadur: 81). “The immigrant quarters on sugar estates lacked latrines as well as privacy. Nor was there typically a source of clean drinking water” (Bahadur: 84).

Women, like Lachminia and Mariam represent physical humiliation done by men, which affects their bodies and minds. Bahadur illustrates the extent of violation by their husbands who mutilated their body parts and disabled them to work. Sujaria is represented with a number, particularly an Immigrant identification number, which appears very close to those on a prisoner’s uniform. People who were assigned this number were not addressed by name. Rather they were recognized with an identity which associated them with the job, crime, or institution the number signified. Coolie women by getting such belonged to a collective group of workers, irrespective of their past, gender, and social concerns. Names carry along an individual’s personal, social, and cultural memories and moorage. By replacing them with numbers, such links were broken and established with newer ties of work and uniformity among all. Sujaria is represented as “Immigrant#96153” (Bahadur: 17). Apart from this the details included her name, age, caste, height and physical information. “Name: Sheojari.” “Age: 27.” “Height: five-feet, four-and-a-half inches.” “Caste: Brahman.” She is represented as a commodity with the basic details by which one can identify her. She belonged to a small village Chhapra in the State of Bihar, India. Years after in 2005 as the narrative discloses, when Bahadur goes to the small village to find clue about Sujaria, people did not approve her as a good Brahmin woman. “No good Indian girl in 1903 would have done that, much less a good Brahman girl” (Bahadur: 20). Sujaria, as a Brahmin woman, is discriminated by her community on grounds of disobeying the social customs. By violating the rules of marriage and childbirth, she does not remain virtuous and ideal of upper caste women. Sujaria was restrained by strict social conditions and her unmarried pregnant status without wedlock made her situations even worse. She escapes for freedom, which as Freire (1996) opines, is acquired by conquest. Sujaria attempts for this through her quest as coolie.

The making of coolie woman is on similar grounds like the making of a woman. Kelly (1991) elaborates their making. In this context, he writes that the officers took different groups of people with unique identities, roles, and interests to convert them into an indistinguishable mass, where all were coolie. The coolies were made to take a bath before leaving for the new land. The bath they took, at the bank of the river Hooghly, washed off their past linkages and made them one, irrespective of their castes and religions. As the narrative shows, the coolies were made to discard the sacred threads (janew) and appeared

without any religion and caste. They were given same dress which made it look more like a uniform for them. After being made one as coolies, they ate together, lived jointly, and slept together. But the treatment and practices they indulged in marked them as dead bodies who had been bathed after the essence of life has left the carnal bodies behind. The identity of coolie is made one, which the song illustrated by Bahadur depicts,

“When we reached Calcutta, our miseries increased.

We were stripped of all our beautiful clothes,

Rosary beads and sacred threads.

Bengali rags decorated us now.

The sadhu’s hair was shaved.

And sadhu, Dom, Chamar and Bhangi,

All were thrown together in a room.” (Bahadur: 44)

This new identity broke ties with the roots back home. In India, a person is identified with the religion, caste, family, name, and society one carries. But the mixing of all in one made them “coolies”. This, as Bahadur hints, “cut the umbilical cord connecting the emigrants to India” (49). With such a making, the coolies were discriminated both by their families in India and the natives in the plantations. Bahadur illustrates such differentiation after they return to India. “Their time overseas had turned them into a people apart... It has transformed them into a social problem” (Bahadur: 169). The account of indenture involved a series of exploitations on women. Besides the conditions of famine, stringent social stigmas, “... women had more reasons to flee,

greater oppressions to escape” (Bahadur: 26). Still there was a strict rule imposed that confirmed that no woman could emigrate without her husband’s permission. The role of the male and his control was still perceived. “If she claimed to be single, and officials thought she was lying, she could be detained up to ten days as constables checked her story” (Bahadur: 26). This shows that while a man could migrate without his wife’s consent, a woman needed the man’s permission to do the same.

To conclude, Coolie Women shows the uprooting from the soil and family ties, and more so, their existence was a painful psychological and physical experience for them. The voyage metamorphosed the oppression and also their marginalization. As coolie, they were free to choose partners across castes yet the nature of humiliation and pain hardly changed. The narrative focuses on marginalization of women as targets of sexual and physical sites. Frequent physical and mental tortures began on the dark waters itself. On the ship the women were treated as sexual objects by the ship mates and the officers. “Latrines on indenture ships served as bizarre portal to the women abroad, where “puddings” were occasionally left as sad enticements for sexual favours” (Bahadur: 51). Similarly, foods and other stuffs which were not meant for the emigrants were given to women for sexual favours. While some women would submit themselves without much objection, there were strong women who rejected the advances facing serious consequences. Those who rejected were denied food and handcuffed for several days. Women were scarce than men and were in demand. “There were sixty-four women per 100 men on Guyana plantations. For the indentured, the problem was more acute, with forty-one women per 100 men” (Bahadur: 26). This increased the fear of sexual assault. In order to reduce such apprehension, “... the plantation officials allotted unattached women to men The immigrants arrived, each was assigned a room, and each man was assigned a woman”(Bahadur: 84). The officials ensured such a relationship to ease sexual conflicts and ensure a better living among the immigrants so that a bizarre did not occur. A woman was considered weak and not fit to stay in single. The discourse hints at the way women were

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denied self autonomy after they migrated as coolies. It is a rejection to the resistance these women showed by moving beyond the borders and transcending their own self(s). This subjugation of women as weaker sex marks a vital step in her making. This line of relationship women were made to live in, can be interpreted as the legitimization of man's control over female body and resources.

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