



ISSN 2455-7544
www.daathvoyagejournal.com

Daath Voyage : An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English

A Refereed Open Access Journal
Vol 9 No 1 March 2024

Editor: Dr. Saikat Banerjee

Editor: Dr. Saikat Banerjee
Assistant Professor, Department of English
St Xavier's College, Ranchi, Jharkhand



: An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English
(A peer reviewed open access journal)

ISSN 2455-7544

www.daathvoyagejournal.com

Vol.9, No.1, March, 2024

A Study of Memory and Trauma in *Coolie Woman: An Odyssey of Indenture* by Gaiutra Bahadur

Shivangi Verma
Master's Student,
Department of English and Modern European Languages
University of Lucknow

Abstract: *Coolie Woman: An Odyssey of Indenture* by Gaiutra Bahadur embarks on a journey into the past to find her great-grandmother, excavating the repressed history of some quarter of a million other coolie women. In 1903, a young woman, alone and pregnant, sailed from India to Guiana as an indentured labourer. The United Kingdom abolished slavery throughout the British in 1833, the act taking effect the next year. But British authorities found a workaround. They used “coolies” – Indian labourers recruited for fixed terms of at least five years – to meet the clamour for cheap labour on tropical plantations. The history of indentured labourers is extensively covered in this paper, along with the remarkable experiences that these workers had, as described by Bahadur in the book. The paper shows collective memories of the women (coolies), who came from various parts of India, had shown interest in working voluntarily for five years or longer on sugar plantations in various colonies under contract, despite lacking detailed information and realizing that the agreements and promises made would not be fulfilled. In addition, paper also shows the plight of women and the strict rules which were to be followed by them.

Keywords: Indenture labour, memory, identity, trauma.

Introduction

The fields of trauma and memory studies have seen a rapid increase in attention and prominence, especially since the early 1990s. In this light, trauma can be helpfully viewed as a sick type of remembering. Trauma and memory studies are complementary and linked topics of study. The focus has generally been on “how these forms of remembering operate as Collective representations of the past, how they constitute a range of cultural resources for social and historical identities, and how they privilege particular readings of the past and subordinate others” (Keightley and Pickering, 2013). However, The study of memory has developed into a multidisciplinary field that started with individual memory and appears to be expanding to include social memory. There are various ways to recall things, which



contributes to the formation of societal histories and cultural resources that subsequently became social and historical identities. Memory research is closely linked to many issues at the forefront of contemporary political debate, particularly the political effects of the continuing presence of past hurts in the present (Radstone, 2008).

The term collective memory was first coined by Hugo Van Hofmannsthal in 1902 (Olick and Robbins, 1998). However, the field of collective memory research is widely credited to the French sociologist Halbwachs. Halbwachs created the idea of collective memory, opposing the individual-psychological theory of memory and claiming that people can only recall within the framework of their groups. He noted that social groupings use both individual and communal memories as means of establishing their dominance over people's lives. Memory has taken center stage in historiography as it has expanded from the official to the social and cultural, as memory depends on history so often. Halbwachs made a distinction between historical memory, which is memory that is only accessible to us through historical records, autobiographical, which is memory of the events we personally experienced, history, which is the remembered past but no longer matters to our lives, and collective memory, which is the active past that shapes our identities. A few examples from literature taking inspiration from this literary movement include – *The Remains of the Day* by Kazuo Ishiguro, *The Giver* by Lois Lowry, *Into the Light* by Aleatha Romig. All these are insightful exploration of memory from one's experiences. LM Montgomery wrote in *The Story Girl* "Nothing is ever really lost as long as we remember it".

Journalist, critic, and essayist Gaiutra Bahadur. Numerous periodicals have featured her work. *The Stained Veil*, a short tale by Gaiutra, was included in the 2018 Asian American literary anthology *Go Home!*, which was released in New York by The Feminist Press. Her personal account of indenture, *Coolie Woman: The Odyssey of Indenture*, was shortlisted in 2014 for the British literary competition known as the Orwell competition for masterful political writing. She is an associate professor in the Rutgers University Department of Arts, Culture, and Media, where she teaches writing and journalism.



: An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English
(A peer reviewed open access journal)

ISSN 2455-7544

www.daathvoyagejournal.com

Vol.9, No.1, March, 2024

Coolie Woman: An Odyssey of Indenture

A young woman set sail for Guiana in 1903 as a “coolie,” a term used by the British to refer to the indentured labourers who took over freshly freed slaves on sugar fields across the globe. Like so many other coolies, this pregnant traveller vanished from the face of history. In the 2014 Orwell Prize shortlisted novel *Coolie Woman*, Gaiutra Bahadur, her great-granddaughter, sets out to track her out by traveling across time. By traveling across three continents and poring over innumerable colonial records, Bahadur uncovers the hidden past of about a quarter of a million coolie women, shedding light on their nuanced lives in addition to her great-grandmother’s story. Often widows, outcasts, or runaways, many coolie women found themselves shunned by society and occasionally in grave danger. Many of them departed from their spouses and families to travel alone on arduous sea trips known as the “middle passages,” only to be met with a life of arduous labour, appalling living circumstances, and, most importantly, sexual exploitation. But as Bahadur demonstrates, the unique quality that sets coolie women apart as historical personalities is their sexuality. Despite being much outnumbered by males, they were able to take advantage of their overseers’ sexual advances for a variety of purposes. However, this practice frequently sparked greater labour uprisings against their masters and deadly coolie man reprisal. Even though it was complicated and unpredictable, sex was a really useful instrument. A study of survival, *Coolie Woman* explores this and many other aspects of these extraordinary women’s lives. It tells the riveting tale of a double diaspora, moving from India to the West Indies in one century and from Guyana to the United States in the next. It is simultaneously a quest for one’s origins and an investigation of gender and power, danger and opportunity.

Gaiutra Bahadur’s personal journey to identify one woman among the many persons who were relocated during the indenture period lies at the core of *Coolie Woman: The Odyssey of Indenture*. Bahadur, an American book critic and correspondent, was born in Guyana and moved to the United States at the age of six together with her family. She was a former Harvard Nieman Fellow in 2007–2008. Bahadur sets out on a quest under journalistic scrutiny to uncover the tale of her great-grandmother Sujaria, one of countless women lost in the annals of colonial discourse. She travels back to India to engage with a past that has influenced how people perceive her identity today because she is curious about



her Indian ancestry and wants to know how her great-grandmother's choice to cross the Indian Ocean in 1903 shaped her future. Her historical research reveals the atrocities and degradation that immigrants endured at the hands of colonial rule.

From the Tamil word *kuli*, which means wages or hire, comes the name "coolie." "Most likely, the word coolie is derived from south Indian Tamil word 'kuli', which means wages normally associated with work performed by people from a lower caste." (Gubili X). Throughout the eight decades that "coolies" were transported around the world, the term became a derogatory term against certain ethnic groups, flowing freely from the mouths of overseers and plantation administrators to remind indentured laborers of their low status and poor beginnings. According to Bahadur in the introduction, it was "a subtle challenge to their claim to belong." The c-word is rewritten by the author, who explains that it is accurate to her subject even if it may offend and hurt some people. "My great-grandmother was a high-caste Hindu. That is a fact. But she left India as a "coolie". That is also a fact. She was one individual swept up in a particular mass movement of people, and the perceptions of those who controlled that process determined her identity at least as much as she did. To them, she was a coolie woman, a stock character possessing stereotyped qualities, which shaped who she was by limiting who she could ever be." (p.xxii).

A generation of Indian women sought exile from their country and their men; *Coolie Woman: The Odyssey of Indenture* explores the depths of Indian diaspora and the struggle for identity as it traces the history of Indian migration down the Hooghly river, around the Cape, and across the Atlantic to the Caribbean. Although Gaiutra Bahadur does not bring the story that belongs to her great-grandmother back, she does bring the realization that identity is shaped by one's lived experiences just as much as by one's self-creation and beliefs. According to the story, a person's identity is always changing in order to fit in, and they are never fixed in the past. According to postmodernists and cultural critics, identities are fluid, unstable, and always under reformation. Hall Reminds us that cultural identity has become a matter of "becoming as well as being" ("Cultural Identity and Diaspora," Hall, 1990, p. 225).

Bahadur's writing delves deeply into the relationship between memory and history, providing a concise exposition of her experience of separation. By fusing personal and historical narratives, a coolie woman addressed the topic of trauma. In an article, Klein said that "for some scholars interested in memory as a



metahistorical category, ‘trauma’ is the key to authentic forms of memory, and memories shaped by trauma are the most likely to subvert totalizing varieties of historicism (Klein, 2000, p. 138); and the memories of the trauma are the most real. The life of the women whose men physically dismembered them is reflected in Bahadur’s own severance. The diasporic struggle of attempting to find oneself in the inside and outside of new world culture is expressed through the juxtaposition of the outside and inner settings she lives in. She narrates her arrival as “a tingling fusion of inside and out, an electric union of outside and in, a Sparks-flying soldering together of the soul” (9) in the Caribbean as a young woman, and her memories of a distant home are what pull her back. A return evokes an imagined wholeness, and the experience reflects a bodily memory that expresses the psychological essence of belonging.

Anh Hua (2005), a contributor to the book *Diaspora and Memory*, edited by social scientist Vijay Agnew, asserts that, “identity formation, the rewriting of home and belonging, nostalgia, mourning and a sense of loss frequently found in diaspora, exile and immigrant narratives” (Hua, 2005, p. 200). Overall, the story explores the ambiguity of self and belonging through an identification process that veers between cultural and geographical limits.

Bahadur excavates an object from the national archives of Guyana that only briefly describes her great-grandmother’s existence as an indentured servant. Sujaria, travelling alone and four months pregnant, boarded The Clyde in 1903 to sail from Calcutta to the Caribbean along with 560 other individuals. Bahadur’s investigation moves from the bumpy roads of Bihar to the archives of England, where she discovers a recorded multitude of coolie tragedies from the dark vault of the past. History records memory, the sacred clears its path from the memory space, the archives eat life, and memory becomes materialized. The story highlights the power struggles between indentured men and the oppressive legal system, which resulted in their conviction and imprisonment for minor labor violations. However, it also provides a broader perspective on the complex stories of women who fled their home countries and their husbands in search of better social opportunities abroad, only to encounter hardships along the way. Bahadur writes, “The reports they filled and diaries they kept provide fleeting glimpses of the women targeted to go. At times, it almost feels like these women are peeking through the women’s quarters from the rest of the house of official history”. These women, known as coolies, were recruited under the bonded system from



all throughout India. “The English Sahib (Sir) who is the head of this depot gets the requirement for the number of coolies from different places. He tells the sub depot agents to find the coolies. The agents at the sub depot depend on the Arkatis to find coolies like you and me.”(Gubili 66). The word ‘Arkatis’ is the distorted Hindi word originating from the word ‘Recruiter.’ (Gubili 60). The words of coolie women speak against the colonial setting and serve as a collective narrative for subalterns who have been erased from history by referencing geography and rebuilding the trauma of indenture. This alludes to the past and the potential for thinking about an identity, especially one that has experienced trauma. We learn of Maharani, who was married to a considerably older guy when she was five years old and got widowed when she was twelve. After being made to cook and clean for her in-laws, she suffered beatings for eight years until making her way across the seas to leave India: And afterwards from Doolarie, a widower who had remarried and left her permanently scarred after his new spouse beat her with a hoe for chatting to another man. Though she doesn’t say anything, Sujaria’s absence is a crucial element in the story. She emerges as an apparition for a brief moment. Bahadur makes an effort to find her by using rhetorical inquiries, “Did she look back over her shoulder as she boarded the ship? Was there regret in her glance?” (47). Though Bahadur’s guesses and conjectures are merely supposition about the moments that make up Sujaria’s life, the reader is able to visualize Sujaria moving between the different situations, residing in the shared areas, and going through similar injustices of an indentured life. Her voyage and investigation uncover the suspended voices of other coolie women who, like Sujuaria, left their communities and crossed the Middle Passage in order to recreate themselves in a new world, even though her excavation fails to unearth her great-grandmother’s tale. This fresh account, which was inspired by research and other coolie women’s tales, resurrects the history of coolie women who were suspended in time and forgotten via restorative literary techniques. The writing keeps the history of coolies from fading into the past by acting as a reformative and restorative force for memory. According to Nora, “history-memory has been lost due to the breakdown between memory and history. Considering the contradictory tendency of language and experience, Nora notes that —we speak so much of memory because There is so little of it left” (Nora, 1989, p. 7).



With the help of the memory keepers whose tales have been passed down through the centuries, the book tips the scales from official colonial archives to unofficial interpretations of indenture. The relationship between storytelling and memory's fallibility is explained by Bahadur. "The will to remember the past is undermined by an equally formidable will to forget" (18), and the stories that did descend often reveal as much about how families choose to see their histories as they do about the actual histories" (48). It is said that "Throughout history collective memory has been central to the creation of community, from a small unit such as a family to an entire nation. The social practices of collective remembering allow the members of a community to preserve a conception of their past" (Wang 2008, p.307). According to Bahadur, the ancient Hindu epic Ramayan, which has both religious and allegorical significance, was the "lifeblood" of the displaced Hindu population. "The epic, like the diaspora that identifies with it, is preoccupied with women who break the codes of accepted sexual behavior" (108). The acceptance and retelling of The Ramayan gave the enslaved a feeling of community and a social life, but it also might have had an impact on men's acts of violence against Indian women by acting as a potent warning to women about the consequences of unrestrained sexuality. The tales that Bahadur incorporates into her novel demonstrate the ability of language and story to convey meaning and a feeling of reality. According to Keightley, "Remembering is an active reconciliation of past and present. The meaning of the past in relation to the present is what is at stake here; memories are important as they bring our changing sense of who we are and who we were, coherently into view of one another" (Keightley, 2010, p.58).

Conclusion

A historical overview of personal narratives that offered insight into the women's tenacity in the face of domestic opponents was presented in *Coolie Woman: An Odyssey of Indenture*. The decision to change one's life and travel across the ocean in order to survive. In spite of history, the remnants of memory function as agents, preserving them. The thin line separating enslavement from indentured servitude. Bahadur's destiny was altered by the drastic decision her great-grandmother took many years ago. Granting a new identity to their family line, including all this it also examines other aspects of brave women's lives. It is a meditation on survival and a compelling tale of a double diaspora, moving from India to the West Indies in one century and Guyana to



the United States in the next. It is simultaneously a quest for one's roots and an investigation of gender and power, danger and opportunity.

Works Cited

- Brereton, Bridget. "The Experience of Indentureship: 1845-1917." In *Calcutta To Caroni: Clifford J Routes: Travel and translation in the late twentieth century*. Harvard University Press, 1997.
- Gubili, Krishna. *Viriah*. Notion Press, 2018.
- Hall, S. Cultural identity and diaspora. In J. Rutherford (Ed.), *Identity, community, culture, difference*. Lawrence and Wishart, 1990, pp. 227–237
- Hua, A. Diaspora and cultural memory. In V. Agnew (Eds.), *Diaspora, memory and identity: A search for home*. University of Toronto Press, 2005, pp. 191–206.
- Keightley, E. & Pickering, M. (eds) *Research methods for memory studies*. Edinburgh University Press: UK. 2013.
- Keightley, E. Remembering research: memory and methodology in the social
- Klein, K. L. On the Emergence Of *Memory* in Historical Discourse.
- Mishra, Vijay. *The Literature of the Indian Diaspora*. Routledge, 2007.
- Montgomery, Lucy Maud. *The Story Girl*. The floating press and its licensors, 2012.
- Nora, P. Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*. *Representations*, 26, Special Issue: Memory And Counter-Memory, 1989.Spring, pp.7-24.
- Olick, J. K., & Robbins, J. Social memory studies: From collective memory to The historical sociology of mnemonic practices. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 1998, pp.105-140.
- Radstone, S. Memory studies: For and against. *Memory Studies* 1(1), 2008, pp. 31-39.
- Representations*.69, 2000,winter, pp. 127-150.
- Sciences. *International journal of social research methodology* 13(1),2010,pp. 55-70.
- The East Indians of Trinidads*, edited by John Gaffar La Guerre. Trinidad and Jamaica: Longman Caribbean Limited, 1974.
- Wang. Q. On the cultural constitution of collective memory. *Memory* 16(3), 2008, pp. 305-317.



: An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English
(A peer reviewed open access journal)

ISSN 2455-7544

www.daathvoyagejournal.com

Vol.9, No.1, March, 2024