



A READING OF PEGGY MOHAN'S JAHAJIN AS A NARRATIVE ON INDENTURE

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Abstract: The history of indenture has always been narrated from a dominant male perspective. The subaltern status of women relegated them to a secondary position or even had led to the silencing and marginalization of women from the narratives. The contribution of women forming a diaspora needs to be acknowledged and this study aims to locate the valuable position of women in the Indo Caribbean diaspora as migrant labourers who fearlessly journeyed across the forbidden kala pani and recreated a new life in a far away land focusing on the novel Jahajin by Peggy Mohan.

Index Terms: Indenture, Diaspora, Subaltern, Marginalization, Home

Were we able to speak with each other now, what questions would we ask, what silences would fill spaces in our exchange, and what memories would we share? There are so many moments when I've wanted answers from the past, to gather the pieces that stitch together into "a body that walks in history." – Gabriel Jamela Hosien

Indo Caribbean women writing emerged with the advent of post colonialism. Marginalized and relegated to an inferior position under the "diasporic hegemony" (Mehta 2004) of South Asian writers from Britain, North America, male writers of the Caribbean as well as from their black counterparts the women writers contribution in the field of literature were barely paid attention. The socio-cultural life of women during indentureship and the changes brought about by post colonialism and neo colonialism were widely discussed by these writers. The stereotypical representation of women as passive, submissive and docile in the afro centric narratives and in the works by dominant male writers of the canon prompted women writers to raise their voice against the misrepresentation and inferior depiction of women in literature. When male writers confined them within domesticity, writers of black origin smeared them with the epithet coolie- a racial slur which further denigrated the status of women. The subaltern status gave rise to an invisible position which forbade them from participating in mainstream socio, economic, political and literary discourses.

While a handful of male writers of Indian origin like VS Naipaul, David Dabydeen, Sam Selvon, Neil Bissoondnath wrote, published and established their position in the Caribbean literary canon, the works of women writers remained neglected and obscure. It was with the publication of anthologies by certain women writers and critics resulted in the re materialization of Indo Caribbean women's writings. There was a significant contribution by women writers from Trinidad and Tobago, Guiana, Fiji, Suriname and Mauritius with a history of indenture ancestry as well as notable number of works was unearthed and published in anthologies. A remarkable feature of this anthology was the description of personal and political affirmations of indo Caribbean women, negotiation of racial identity and the realities of communal subjugation. It was a novel venture for the writers as it gave them a critical space to voice their opinions, share their experiences which remained silent for many years. Notable were the writers and critics like Ramabai Espinet, Patricia Mohammed, Rosanne Kanhai who toiled hard to publish these anthologies so that these writers could be exposed to the reading public and o show how women are constructed within the social framework of gender, race and patriarchy.

The portrayal of indo Caribbean women in literature was mainly through a male gaze which restricted them within the family unit. They were kept in the periphery, often as victims of patriarchy. Women were believed to be procreators, keeping the family alive and were denied freedom thus becoming passive agents in society. The idea of an independent, free woman which never appeared in canonical literature was questioned by emerging women writers. Ramabai Espinet – Indo Trinidadian writer in her famous essay "The Invisible Women in West Indian Fiction" remarks that the presence of Indo Caribbean diaspora has become subjects fit for fiction, but she is concerned of the fact that indeed almost all characters are predominantly male. She coins the term "phenomenon of invisibility" regarding the participation of Indian woman in Caribbean fiction and argues that "the Indian woman is invisible because no novelist had been able to regard her existence in the

West Indies and give voice to the peculiarities and perceptions of that particular existence.” (Espinet 2008) Indian woman has been conditioned by patriarchy to be submissive to the authority, framed rigid laws to maintain decorum and controlled them within their familial environment. But there has been a radical change in the situation as woman have now abandoned the rigid rules and have moved further towards the dominant western culture which offered them resistance and thus the attitude towards woman in the society began to change preferably.

The insignificant representation of woman in fiction has been challenged by many women writers and scholars who became prominent in the literary sphere of Indo-Caribbean writings like Ramabai Espinet, Peggy Mohan, Gauitra Bahadur, Patricia Mohammed, Brinda Mehta, Bridget Bereton, Rhoda Reddock etc who gave a new expression through their literary representation and scholarly works. The positions of Indo Caribbean women representation in literary works by writers of Indian descent cast off the Afro centric view based on race and offered a more post colonial perspective based on diaspora and transnationalism. Their works offer a gendered outlook on the realms of domesticity, cultural trajectory, bodily and sexual identity and their progression through Caribbean history where an intersection of Indianness and Caribbean leading to creolization of cultures. These writers vehemently opposes the “anti- Indian discourses” which is “demonizing Indianness” (Outar 2016) in explosive ways. So it can be understood that Indo Caribbean women’s writing slowly began to dominate the Caribbean feminism which shows the radical assimilation of Indians in the Caribbean. Ramabai Espinet in her essay “The Invisible Woman in the West Indian Fiction” states that “the Indian woman who exists in the Caribbean is very different today Caribbean today is very different from the figure which appears in the region's art. She is more varied and complex and has, like other human beings, a normal allotment of insecurity, fear, desire, neurosis and obsession and all of the other qualities which render human beings interesting.”(Espinet 1989). Brinda Mehta says that women writers from the Caribbean “have to resurrect woman from the clutches of ritualized myth and abstraction and by re-presenting them in accordance with their specific, ontological realities.” (Mehta 2014)

While observing the literary outputs of Indo Caribbean women writers one can easily perceive thematic similarities like the crossing of the Kala Pani, the Jahaji relationship, life in the plantations etc. They often talk about the displacement of ancestors from India who have travelled to recreate a home in the new place. Thus their homeland has become a mythical place of desire, of longing which resonate in their sensibilities and ethos. The resulted displacement have metamorphosed these people to adapt to the new environs, rebuild a community, develop a cross cultural identity bearing the traces of the old as well as the new values. The corpus of literary production by the writers of the Indo Caribbean traces the history of their ancestors and the subsequent reason behind their obliterated identities.

The writers who are descendents of indentured labourers oft give firsthand experience of their life in plantation and the younger generation of writers mirror the changes that have taken place in the society. They talk about the disintegration of plantation economy, their access to English education, increasing emigration to Europe and American countries for higher education and employment etc. Their narratives are replete with the differences between rural and urban diaspora and the set of beliefs and ideals imbibed by the two generations. They subvert the monolithic male dominated discourses, the afro Caribbean and creolese writings. They profusely talk about women, their progress to the centre from the periphery, their re-writing of history and work towards regaining a communal self consciousness or a collective identity which secure these women together in the society.

These ideas are very much evident in the work of Peggy Mohan’s *Jahajin* (2007) which connects India and Trinidad via the history of indenture. The young female narrator is a linguist who researches on the old and dying language of Bhojpuri used widely among the Indian community in Trinidad. To learn more about the language the narrator interviews Deeda, an elderly Jahajin who have daringly crossed the *kala pani* as a single woman. Peggy Mohan investigates the history of Jahajin women or ship sisters who have crossed the *kala pani* or the Atlantic “which serves as a record of individual female resourcefulness outside the restrictive bonds of familial duty and social propriety” (Phirbai 2003). The Jahajins or the ship sisters as they were collectively called were pioneers of a new form of migration as single women and the narrative discusses the role that they played in “formulating a community” (Alison Klein 2016) under the undulating effects of colonialism and migration. The narrative gives a detailed account of the process of recruitment, their onward journey and the inseparable bond of Jahajin in understanding the experience of women over centuries. The foci of *Jahajin* is the story of Deeda and her infinite strength and resolution to wheel the steering of her life alone in troublesome waters like the captain of the ship who fearlessly steered the ship through the stormy weather. She wants a complete control over her life which was only possible if she remained in the island.

Deeda has come to the Caribbean in the same ship along with the narrator’s great grandmother Sunnariya. The old woman recollects vivid memories of the past which the narrator records as it helps her to analyse the linguistic feature of the language and also the life of her ancestors. Deeda speaks of leaving her village in Basti with her four year old son Kalloo to escape the hard hitting famine which affected the village. They travelled to the town of Fiazabad where she met arkatiniya or the female recruiter who promised her to find work in the sugar plantation or chini-dad and offered her advance if she signed up. Deeda was falsely informed that the contract lasted for only a year and afterwards she would be sent back to India with handful of money. Along with other men and women, Deeda signed the contract showing her willingness to work in the Caribbean.

The journey across the two oceans had a significant impact on the lives of the labourers. It was the most traumatic experience of their lives. The longing for their lost homeland, the “homing desire” (Brah 1996) led to a critical self reflexivity about the homeland. The long and arduous journey erased the caste system by the crossing of the *kala pani*. People from different social background boarded the vessel Godavari from Calcutta during heavy monsoon. Most of them belonged to the lower hierarchical position and there were also very few from the upper castes also. It was a Hindu belief that by crossing the dark waters or the *Kala pani* would turn a person into an outcaste, but now all the people in the boat crossed the river shattering the age old myth of *Kala pani*. They were destined to live the rest of their lives in the distant country “I was never going back, that I would live and die across the *Kala pani*” (*Jahajin* 2007) The recruited people were ignorant of the dreadful situation awaiting them during the voyage and also in the plantation. While unhygienic conditions led to the spread of epidemics which caused the death of many in the ship, hard hitting labour and severe adverse condition in the plantation awaited them. Nonetheless these people formed a relationship- *Jahaji Bhai/ Bahin* and stood for each other during the times of difficulty which lasted for a life time and was further passed down to generations.

Indentured people were named as Girmityas or Coolies with regard to the place they were recruited. It was a derogatory term which rendered them same social position as the slaves. Mauritian writer Khan Torabully has coined the term Coolitude referring to the experience of Indians in the island and it shares a close association with the term Negritude. Now the term has acquired a historical significance as it defines a collective attitude shared by the Indian labour diaspora. Labourers or the coolies were kept in the same barrack occupied by the former slaves. The labourers stayed together in close quarters and at night they would assemble together and sing and dance merrily around the fire. On hearing the songs the women folk “floated off like we used to at night on the boat with the words of the song they were singing outside lapping like tiny waves against the barrack walls”(Jahajin 2007) Indentured labour became synonymous with exploitation. They had to toil day and night without being paid properly and take up another employment. Some women were excused from physical labour and they worked as Khelauni or the child minder who takes care of the kids while their mothers go out for work.

The labour usually started early in the morning and lasted until midnight. The newly recruited workers were divided into groups based on their physical fitness and ability. Both men and women had to perform hard physical labour. Men would cut the cane and women would strip off the leaves, clean and bundle them up and the overseer would come and take them away for weighing. Starting from early in the morning, these people had to work under scathing sun and many collapsed because of hunger and thirst and were even restricted from taking a break. Angry outbursts of the overseer “Go back to work! Don’t skylark! Strip cane. Make bundles. Move on” (Jahajin 124) echoed inside the heads of the labourers. Another central concern was the spread of epidemics like Dengue and Malaria. The sugar cane fields and the adjoining places were breeding houses for mosquitoes and the untidy barracks added to the malady. Fever was rampant and many labourers and children suffered from contagious diseases. Anyone of the workers who missed their work were not paid and eventually taken to jail. The rations were meagre and many went hungry to work which resulted in more casualties. Despite being taken care, the lack of adequate facilities culminated in a massive outbreak of the epidemic among the labourers which took the lives of many.

Jahajin depicts the plight of women labourers in the plantation. They had to endure the hardships of physical labour and also had to protect themselves from the sexual aggression or sexploitation (Sheperd2002) in the plantations. Domestic violence, unequal wage distribution etc added more to their misery. In the novel Jahajin there is an instance where Sunnariya or the narrator’s great grandmother was abused by one of the white overseer in a cane field. Same was the case with many women labourers. In *Coolie Women: An Odyssey* Gauitra Bahadur also shares similar experiences of women labourers who are violently exploited by white overseers which are promoted by the Imperialist hegemony. Innumerable cases are reported where women are abducted from the barracks and are kept by the overseers for their sexual pleasures.

Mehta’s Kala pani poetics and Phirbai’s jahaji bahai- bahin principle is another discourse which is an important feature in the novel. The labourers particularly women initiated a bond of sisterhood which continued for generations. The character of Deeda is the personification of Jahajin or the ship sister as she was a strong pillar of support for many women during their journey and also during the time of indenture. Now, she is the only woman from the old generation who could give a true account of indenture, migration and the effects of colonisation and how women played a major role in the formation of a community, a close knit of the society which they have left behind in their villages in India. They recreated or reformulated a new form of socialization Jahajin which began during the sea voyage and which continued through indenture and later passed down to generations. Writers like Mariam Phirbai and Brinda Mehta have appreciated the dynamic and transformative changes of the characters refashioning the subaltern status attributed to them. Deeda plays a pivotal role in the life of many jahajins. While the ship was passing through the rough sea and Ramdaye, another woman in the ship went into labour, it was Deeda who reached out and helped her deliver the baby. She had stood strong and steadfast like the captain who “had stood there all through the storm with the wheel in his hands, turning the boat to make it ride the waves and run with the storm” (Jahajin 69). The jahaji bahin principle according to Phirbai “promotes a poetics of resistance and agency but also politics of coalition - building with other women of colour”. (Phirbhai 51)

The impossibility to return to ones mother land also is an important theme found in the novel. The return journey was never out of question for them because they were offered a free return after the end of their tenure but only a very few people ever returned to India. The belief of losing one’s caste after the crossing of the kala pani feared many from returning and the most vulnerable were the women folk as they would be ostracized from the society and have to live under deplorable conditions. In the novel there is an instance when Mukoon Singh asks Deeda to accompany him on his journey back to India, she hard heartedly refused his proposal on the fear that people belonging to two different castes could not lead a peaceful life in India and also such people will be shunned by the society and will have to lead the rest of their lives as outcaste. She thought her life would be much better here in Trinidad because she could control her wheel of life unlike in India where a woman is forbidden and restricted within the patriarchal society. Deeda and other women characters are determined and resilient who withstood the severe circumstances to gain a respectable life in the society. They were determined to uphold their virtues and preserve dignity and shape their own life which they passed down to their successors.

The novel is a true narration of the wholesome representation of Indenture system and its consequences on the lives of the people. Based on an actual interview with an elderly jahajin, Peggy Mohan provides a factual account on the socio-economic condition which led to the rise of indenture system and how people were attracted or lured by the recruiters to sign the contract which changed their lives forever. The silent, barely mentioned indenture experience and the lives of indentured women are written with a critical self reflexivity. The paradigm of single woman and the benefits of autonomy gained as a wage earner have opened up a new space to redefine the identity of Indo Caribbean women. These women writers effectively traces the lost history of their ancestors and how the demographic displacement of their foremothers deeply influenced them to redefine the “Indo-Caribbean women’s sexual, social, ethnic, and cultural identities from a decolonial gendered perspective.”(Mehta 2004)

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