



Footprints Of Coolitude: Tracing Identity And Pain In Select Poems Of Khal Torabully And Sudesh Mishra

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Abstract

Pitched uneasily between political exile and promising life, the girmits created a history of being a stranger estranged by their own strangeness. Indentured servants from India were taken to far away lands to work on plantations, with little or no pay, for a specific period of time. It was imposed involuntarily other judicial punishment, sometimes a voluntarily for purported eventual compensation of debt repayment. The lives of these people changed terribly and underwent transformation which was addressed rarely. The ancestral trauma of dislocation, the treacherous journey across the sea, hardships upon their arrival, and the ongoing process of loss of identity in the diasporic setup, resulted in the direct impact on the present experience of post indenture Indians across the world. Torabully takes on the journey for self-exploration to the first stone of memory where humans were treated as 'coolies' bound for plantation colonies. He coined the term 'coolitude' to feature an extended narrative and dwell on the necessities of the memories of homeland. In this paper, I will talk about the loss of identity and pain, as found in the poems of Khal Torabully and Sudesh Mishra, who have captured this essence of indentured servants.

Keywords: indentured labour, diaspora, loss of identity, pain, coolitude

In many regions the migration of over 2.2 million Indians, Chinese, Africans, Japanese, Javanese, Melanesians, and other colonial subjects, under long-term written contracts occurred between the mid-1830s and the early 1920s. The migration of mostly British indentured “servants” to North America and the Caribbean established the precedent for the indentured labor trades that flourished during the 19th and early 20th centuries. At least initially, many of these laborers were supposed to return home after serving the legally required number of years as “industrial residents.” Nevertheless, tens of thousands of these men and women continued to live and work in the colonies where they were employed, contributing significantly to the local community. This diaspora of indentured laborers may generally be linked to the desires of British abolitionists to eliminate slavery by proving that “free” labor was preferable to slave labor in the production of tropical goods, particularly sugar, for imperial and international markets. Scholarship on the “great” or “mighty experiment” of using free contractual labor after the British Empire freed its slaves in 1834 highlights how events in Britain and the Caribbean contributed to the employment of indentured labor in its case. The use of indentured Asian labor in the colonial world predated the employment of such labour workers in the Mascarenes by more than twenty years. In the first decade of the 19th century, several Europeans made an attempt to hire Asians as contract plantation laborers when, in 1806, British authorities organized the hiring and transfer of 200 Chinese immigrants to Trinidad in an attempt at using such labor that ultimately failed. Soon afterwards, Chinese laborers were subsequently brought to the British East India Company's South Atlantic colony of St. Helena. Six hundred forty three Chinese people were on the island by the year 1817, where one hundred eighty four of them were referred to as “mechanics,” and the remaining were employed in various roles as laborers. Two futile attempts to create Chinese labor villages close to the British naval base in Trincomalee were also made during that same period.

Coming to India, the population here offered the British empire already supply of in expensive and movable labour during the colonial era. In order to avoid the pervasive poverty and starvation of the 19th century, many Indians consented to become indentured labourers. While some went alone, Others brought

their families along with them to the colonies where they were employed. Following the abolition of slavery in year 1834, there was a sharp rise in the demand for Indians as indentured labourers. They were occasionally send in large groups to plantation, colonies in Africa and the Caribbean that produced high-value crops like sugar. The majority of the labourers were physically fit, youthful and accustomed to working long hours, but they frequently had no idea where they would be working or what obstacles they would be facing. Before 1840, a large proportion of labourers, signed, indentured, labour contracts and over 41,000 labourers were sent to Mauritius in 1834. The last indentured labourers went to the West Indies in the year 1916 and the last ship carrying returning immigrants, left the West Indies for India in 1954. With this small history of indentured labours, let us see what coolitude is.

The theoretical term coolitude was coined by poet and scholar, Khal Torabully, which emerges as aesthetic and cultural paradigm of indentured Indian identities. “The Beyond is, first of all, for the coolie who settles, a confused poetics, pregnant with silence looks, unsaid words” (Coolitude 17). It provides a framework for theorizing poetics that emphasizes the lack of the enslaved Indian identity in the dominant Caribbean identity, as well as a cultural identity. It proposes an anti-essentialist identity, construction through the ancestral history of indentureship, encapsulating the transoceanic genealogy of enslaved Indians throughout the Caribbean, Indian and the Pacific Oceans. Drawing on both, negritude and creolite, coolitude highlights an innate hybridity that reinterprets a link to India in the context of adoptive homelands. Torabully says that cross cultural vagabondage is at its heart. This focus on the language play of vagabond marks people affected by the legacy of indenture as bodies that orient their identities and poetics through a relation that is constantly shifting around what it means to be Indian, as opposed to merely invoking a static sense of Indianness. Torabully states that coolitude was meant to “do something for India, but for the people of the West Indies, and elsewhere, indeed, for the ‘Indians’, born or living abroad.” He further says that it is impossible to understand the essence of coolitude, without charting the coolies voyage across the seas. That decisive experience, that coolie odyssey, left an indelible stamp on the landscape of coolitude. This transoceanic focus serves as the theoretical and literary foundation for coolitude, as the indenture

metaphorically severs their links with India. Stories of relocation that recur, frequently characterise the history of the indentured. Indentured Indians, exile, in other places, subject to the brutality of plantation labour, and many of them separated from their families as they struggled to adjust to the appalling conditions of the New World, are some of the main subjects of the narratives in coolitude. Themes of loss, identity, ancestral trauma and exile, are all dealt in when we talk about coolitude.

Khal Torabully is a Mauritian poet, essayist, film director and semiologist who was born in 1956. His father was a Trinidadian sailor and his mother was a descendant of migrants from India and Malaya. He writes in French and Mauritian Creole and has authored over 25 books. Aimé Césaire the great poet from Martinique, praises Torabully's work for 'containing all of my humanity.' he is well known for his epic poem *Cale d'étoiles: Coolitude* was written in 1989 and published in 1992. It was translated into English language by Nancy Naomi Carlson with the name *Cargo Hold of Stars*. It is an ode to the forgotten voyage of forgotten people. Millions of men and women who were brought to Mauritius between 1849 and 1923 as indentured, servants, primary airily from China and India, are given a voice by Khal Torabully. Many were sent abroad to reside in other European colonies. Many perished wild house in cramped quarters in the ship's cargo hold. In other words, the majority never went back home. With this book, Torabully introduces the concept of Coolitude which echoes Césaire Negritude. He claims that regular language was unable to capture the variety of voices of indentured labourers, so he created a "poetics of coolitude"- a new form of French that is constantly melodic and laced with puns, neologisms and Mauritian Creole. He deals with the memory of certain forms of barbarous exploitation. Not only this, he also talks about relationality, that is both historical and constitutive of the space of intersecting movements of migration. He writes,

You from Goa, Pondicherry, Chandernagore

Cocan, Delhi, Surat, London, Shanghai

Lorient, Saint-Malo, people of all the ships

Who took me towards another me, my ship-hold of stars

Is my travel plan, my space and vision of an ocean which

We all have to cross, even if we do not

See the stars from the same angle. (Torabully 92)

Torabully makes a point of never defining the concept of 'coolie' in the terms of exclusion, instead, he uses it in a metaphorical sense and illuminates the phenomena of globalisation by creating a single identity of the labourers sailing across. He talks about the single identity of migrants who traverse the sea in search of work. By the means of these types of lyrical condensation, he creates a worldwide network of those travelers who became objects of extreme exploitation, connecting the island and cities of India, China and Oceania with the colonial ports of Europe. He creates an umbrella for the people who migrated in search of work as labourers to plantations, from where many of them never returned.

For when one crosses the ocean to be born

Elsewhere, the sailor of the one-way voyage likes to plunge back

Into his history, his legends, and his dreams.

Even during his absence of memory. (Torabully 92)

The identity of a person is formed by the perception of the world surrounding him. The individual individual carry a baggage of memory when they travel to a new world, where, along with the new challenges, the old memories start to haunt them. The displacement gives rise to the concept of double consciousness and unhomeliness. The distance from their home set them apart and highlights the difference in their daily lives. This double consciousness or unstable sense of the self is the result of migration. The feeling of being caught between the two different cultures, that is, one of the homeland and the other of the host land. The journey of the labourers was something more than exploitation. Not only their dreams to become successful shattered, but also the deception made them psychologically broken. He talks about the experiences of these indenture workers, who cast across the wide world and caught in a net of circumstances,

which insists that they formulate new ways of existence, while at the same time, struggling to preserve their heart links to distant homes. The result is yearning for what is lost, nostalgia for loved ones, memory of lost places and drawing on nautical imagery. The preservation of cultural identity was indeed a complex challenge for the labourers in the diasporic setting. The economic exploitation of the labourers in foreign locations resulted in many adversities where their own culture and identity became alien. The social isolation in the new environment created a sandwich situation where they felt suffocated. Despite facing adversities, this somehow managed to retain elements of their identity through practices, such as maintaining, communal ties, cultural and religious traditions. Fostering a sense of solidarity among the Indian diaspora, help them sustain in the host land. The resilience of the indentured labourers in preserving their cultural identity and contributing to the rich tapestry of diversity in the British colonies, helped them build a life.

The pain endured in the hearts of the labourers cannot be expressed in merely a few lines. “My wife is invulnerable /To free my hands/ to handle the sugars”. Their lives revolved around the harsh and inhumane conditions at work in the plantations, and then taking care of their families. Starting from their journey to the host lands, which approximately took 10 to 20 weeks depending upon the destination, their lives were challenging. It is said that the conditions on the ships for the indentured labourers were same to those on slave ships, since the average death rate for the Indians travelling to the Caribbean was approximately seventeen percent conditions at work were quite harsh, with long working hours and low wages. Many workers tried to escape these harsh living conditions but were re captured and imprisoned. Sometimes their initial five year contract was doubled to 10 years for attempted desertion. At the end of the contract, some of the workers decided to return, while others decided to stay where they were, particularly woman who had left home, following a disagreement with their parents, because they were unlikely to be accepted back into their family after several years of being away in a distant country. Some woman got married there, while others accompanied their husband to the plantations as labourers. Some women saw Indenture as a voyage

of opportunity, which gave them the ability to map out a new life for themselves away from their traditional patriarchal practises.

Torabully rights about the threats, women faced on the ships as well as on work locations, if reached. Many documents show how women faced sexual harassment, inappropriate, touching, and in some cases, even rape. The gender discrimination followed them overseas, and this time it was either a British official or a master. Unknowingly, through signing up for the indentured labour system, the woman had positioned herself in yet another male dominated society. The British colonial sexist stereotypes also impacted Indian women's autonomy through dictating the proposed identity of all indentured woman and branded them as meek and subservient. However, a lot of women decided to challenge this and create their own identities and families purely based on their own terms.

When talking about the experiences of indentured labourers, the indication towards Sudesh Mishra becomes a compulsion. He is a Fijian-Australian poet, and academician who was born in Fiji into an Indo-Fijian family in Suva. He has published several volumes of poetry and received the Harri Jones Memorial Price for Poetry in 1988. He commonly writes about the events in his home country from an ironic point of view. Having done some notable work in the field of diaspora, he feels the pain and agony of the people, living abroad, away from their homeland. Migration doesn't come back alone, it brings a baggage of pain and memory into the lives of the individuals struggling to make a living as labourers. Recollecting and reminiscing the old days became a very prominent element in the lives of the people who belonged for their homeland. While working on the plantations, the recollected those rustic old days. They tried to preserve their culture by celebrating their festivals, their rituals, folk songs, and dance forms. Sudesh Mishra vividly writes about the lives of Indian indentured labourers in sugar plantations in Fiji. They lose the protection of their home and struggle to retain the carried cultural traits of their homeland. Mishra writes about how a woman sang "bidesia"- lament for a lost homeland. He says that the lost homeland is relived in alien country by singing folk songs and lamenting their situation. The grandparents of Mishra were indentured labourers and it happens to be a reason for him writing about the exile situation. At the turn of the

20th century, the Britishers took Indians, specially from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar to colonies like Fiji to work on sugar plantations as indentured labourers. And once they reached the plantations, they kept longing for their home and sang songs like, “Pardesiya ke aae, durgati hue gae re”. Mishra says that one can imagine the pain in these lines where a woman is lamenting, her lost country, homeland, village, house, family or maybe lover. Bidesia means someone from a different place, a foreign land. In his poem, “The Hula Hoop” he describes how a woman is longing for her homeland, which becomes an embodiment of her lover. The Melancholy and sadness these songs brought into the hearts of the listeners, clearly resemble the struggles of the people living as a diasporic element in an alien host land. Longing is an intense desire, anticipating a way to pay days, months and years once that one will visit his country. The people living within the diaspora once, go back to their homeland for numerous reasons, only in their memories. The host land and Homeland, both exist within themselves, and thus create a blend of culture, a blend of language and a blend of life and memory together.

The working conditions were quite harsh and that case were longer. The woman were either allotted jobs on the plantations along with men or took care of other works in the different locations. They were even punished for making mistakes. Mishra perceptively describes in poetry the pain of woman. He also captures the transoceanic journey off the labourers in the poetry, “The Rowers”:

Increment weather. We are rowing between two rocks

For a third which is palpable yet unreachable.

We had foreknowledge of this before setting off

From a port with the name to flattery to pin down.

Before us, the channel sticks out a tongue,

Raw, wildly gangrenous, and vows to steer us

Safely beyond the cape of pulsing knives.

He creates an imaginary of horror and uncertainty in his poetry, which not only creates an illusion of death and fear, but also of parting from something which is quite dear. It becomes difficult for the traveller to even mention the name of the port from which they began the journey into the unknown. Mishra talks about the condition of being a stranger, estranged by his own strangeness. In “The Black Pagoda: Konark” Mishra says, “ I have learnt to measure human art/ Through the eyes of slaves in a carrion cart”, thus presenting his unwavering refusal to allow the moral question to be blurred by the aesthetic, his poetry retains a passion and fierceness of critique.

In another poem, “Confessions of a Would-Be Brahmin”, Mishra writes, “O Shiva O Parvati O Durga/ Though I have crossed the kala pani/ And lost caste/ Forgive me my trespass”. The vast cultural distance that he feels from his ancestors caste becomes a weight on him that is contained in his name. While sharing the experiences of others, Mishra never forget to mention his own identity as a descendant of indentured labourers. The distance that he feels from his homeland and the crisis of identity are both grappled together into his poems. A large number of indentured labourers decided to stay on in Fiji because they could not afford to return back to India, maybe because of the low wages they were given in exchange for the labour. After the abolition of indenture system, in 1921, only twenty five thousand people returned to India. And that is why, when one is dislocated, and far removed from their people, one finds refuge and solace in anything that makes them feel closer- even the folk songs like “bidesia” or poems like “Confessions of a Would-Be Brahmin”.

Conclusion

The promises that led indenture labourers into a life full of challenges, left a stain on their hearts. Members in the dysphoric communities left their country, in order to find better opportunities, but ended up differently with a huge baggage of memories, nostalgia, pain, identity crisis, and homelessness. It was not easy for them to survive in the adopted homeland, but they carved the way out. They created an identity for themselves which was different, but was their's! It is unfortunate that the greater history of India muffles the

Girmitiya's history. Our forefathers are now merely statistics, reduced to footnotes in history. Even now, their descendants struggle with what it meant to be home. However, there are no memorials honouring the woman, men, and children, who braved the seas, to reach far away alien lands, unintentionally, leaving behind any feeling of identity, only to retire into permanent displacement.

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