Book review


**Purba Hossain**

**Purba Hossain** is the G.K. Roth Research Fellow at Christ’s College, University of Cambridge.

*Kala Pani Crossings* brings together fourteen scholars to explore Indian perspectives of the indenture trade and to use the *kala pani* – the black waters of the oceans – to frame literary and cultural legacies of indenture. As the editors point out, the aim of this collection is to ‘rethink indentureship through the prism of India today and not only that of yesterday, and to rethink India through the prism of indentureship’ (Bhardwaj and Misrahi-Barak 2022: 13). It achieves this by analysing literature, songs and films emerging out of India in reaction to the indenture trade, and by exploring literary and autobiographical works that help construct India’s place within diasporic memory. The authors are vocal in criticizing Indian diaspora studies for excluding indenture, and indenture studies for neglecting India and Indian perspectives. The three key achievements of this edited collection are in shifting focus on to the importance of India in indenture scholarship, in showcasing scholarship from South Asia (twelve of the fourteen authors are based in Indian higher education institutions), and in privileging colony–colony connections.

The *kala pani* as a conceptual framework appears front-and-centre in this collection. Vijay Mishra shows that crossing the *kala pani* had myriad connotations, encompassing a sense of separation, alienation and transgression, as well as a sense of freedom, choice and collapsing caste differences. As Mishra concludes, ‘*Kala*
*kala pani* has to be read as something more than just a voyage. It stands for a particular mode of cross-cultural understanding that ‘decisively shaped modern nations such as Mauritius, Trinidad, Guyana, Fiji and others’ (Mishra 2022: 27). By juxtaposing the idea of the *kala pani* against Khal Torabully’s coolitude, Mishra helps tether the histories of indenture in multiple plantation colonies to India. Suparna Sengupta furthers *kala pani* studies by exploring the genealogy of the term from ancient sastric ideas to its constructions in colonial India. Sengupta argues that much of the fear of the *kala pani* was amplified, selectively appropriated and reinforced through colonial penal policies, even in the face of metropolitan criticism of its efficacy as a mode of punishment – turning exile across the *kala pani* into an act of terror and punishment.

It is increasingly becoming apparent amongst scholars that literature allows for filling the silences in history. Saidiya Hartman’s ‘critical fabulations’ genre has been instrumental in combining archival research with fiction and critical theory to make sense of the gaps in the archive of trans-Atlantic slavery and to recreate its history without substantial records from enslaved people (Hartman 2008). Retrieval narratives, novels and short stories, then, need to be studied alongside memoirs and historical sources to create a fuller understanding of the indenture experience and diasporic identity. Several chapters in this edited collection use literary works to reflect on questions of exile, identity, caste, movement and gendered experiences.

Nandini Dhar juxtaposes Amitav Ghosh’s *Sea of Poppies*, Ramabai Espinet’s *The Swinging Bridge* and Mulk Raj Anand’s *Two Leaves and a Bud* to show the power of literary works to counter the incompleteness of indenture narratives and to create realistic and complex characters that are easily consumable to the global Anglosphere. Dhar argues that works like that of Espinet can act as an allegory for the silence around indentured women, since it highlights ‘the impossibility of writing a novel about indenture that would provide the reader with a smooth-selling, transparent, authoritative narrative’
(Dhar 2022: 32). In many of these works, India emerges as the primordial, mythical point of origin – a geography of remembrance and nostalgia – that exists only in relation to the socio-cultural imaginary of the diaspora. At the same time, Ghosh’s novel connects indenture to the destruction of the rural agrarian economy in eastern India (Dhar 2022: 39). As it deconstructs the tether to the slavery-indenture dyad, thinking through such literary works allows for alternative framings of the story of indenture. Ritu Tyagi uses Ghosh’s *Sea of Poppies*, Ashwini Kumar Pankaj’s *Mati Mati Arkati* and Nathacha Appanah’s *Les Rochers de Poudre d’Or* to understand how journeys and crossings shaped diasporic identity. Joshil K. Abraham delves into V.S. Naipaul’s oeuvre to argue that although many scholars understand diasporic identity to be centred around their connection to Indian culture and heritage, Naipaul’s identity was intimately tied to his sense of Brahmanical supremacy, which in turn ‘turned him into an Islamophobic [sic.] and a racist apart from being a casteist’ (Abraham 2022: 93).

For Kusum Aggarwal and Himadri Lahiri, fiction interacts with non-fiction in exciting ways. Aggarwal meditates on the importance of travel narratives and memoirs, using Totaram Sanadhya’s *Twenty-One Years in the Fiji Islands* and ‘The Story of the Haunted Line’ to illuminate the life of indentured migrants ‘from within’. Lahiri studies *The Swinging Bridge*, *Coolie Woman* and *Twenty-One Years in the Fiji Islands* – one novel, one speculative non-fiction and one life-writing – to explore different ways of approaching indenture studies. For Espinet and Bahadur’s research-based retrieval narratives, India is a place steeped in nostalgia and ancestral memory, but not directly familiar. Sanadhya, on the other hand, performed a dual role as author and activist and offered documentary evidence on indenture that helped create public and political support for the abolition of indenture.

Although many chapters touch upon gender, four authors focus specifically on the lives of indentured women. Udita Banerjee compares Olive Senior’s protagonist in ‘Arrival of the
Snake-Woman’, an unnamed Indo-Jamaican woman known only as ‘Miss Coolie’, to the powerful witch from *The Tempest*, Sycorax. This juxtaposition helps explore how women transcended roles of gender and race in colonial Jamaica, and in the process questioned, dismantled and challenged patriarchal hierarchies. Kanchan Dhar summarizes women’s experience of recruitment, focusing particularly on social and legal controls that regulated women’s movements and choices. Arnab Kumar Sinha explores manifestations of women’s agency in Espinet’s *The Swinging Bridge* and Peggy Mohan’s *Jahajin*. Both novels act as retrieval narratives, where Espinet’s Mona and Mohan’s narrator engage with historical records and oral sources to create a part-imaginative history of their ancestors. Praveen Mirdha, on the other hand, uses Espinet and Bahadur’s works to explore female subjectivities. For the narrators, Mona in *The Swinging Bridge* and Bahadur in *Coolie Woman*, retrieving the lives of their female ancestors showed that indentured women’s lives were marked by exploitation, vulnerability and coercion while at the same time being spaces of subversion, defiance, choice and female adaptability. For Mirdha, oral traditions in Guyana and Trinidad act as testimonies of these women and as metaphors for female courage, endurance and subversion. The *kala pani* – the space of un-belonging, exile, trauma and alienation – thus also emerges as one of subversion, transformation, and carving out of new identities.

Still other authors use films, religious traditions and songs as their way into the cultural legacies of indenture. Kumari Issur argues that Mauritius has been portrayed in Hindustani cinema as ‘an Eldorado, a land of new possibilities, of remission and salvation, or as a hostile land, the land of the *mlecchas*’ – a portrayal that Issur attributes to memories of the indenture trade rather than the well-established island-nation-as-paradise trope (Issur 2022: 136). Vijaya Rao explores the cult of Draupadi among the Malabar Réunionese. Drawing upon Hiltbeitel (1988), Marimoutou (2014) and Muthuswami’s (1985) works, Rao shows how the theme of
exile or vanavasam comes up in performance and recitations in Réunion. Indic epics in fact find wide currency in plantation colonies – while Draupadi of Mahabharata and Sita of Ramayana represented exile and ideal womanhood (satittva), Surpanakha represented disfigurement and punishment for transgressing social norms. As a result, indentured women who challenged mythic definitions of moral choice and ideal womanhood could be mutilated and dismembered, while those who resisted improper advances of overseers and planters were valorized as upholding her satittva. Finally, Ridhima Tewari analyses bidesia songs, where bidesia (from bides: foreign) is a motif for the male traveller visiting foreign lands. Folk songs of this genre recorded economic, ritualistic and leisurely activities performed by women in the absence of their husbands, capturing how women negotiated their own identities through motifs of separation, work, domesticity, self-sufficiency and the feeling of being left behind.

Kala Pani Crossings, then, asks all the right questions and fits squarely within new and emerging works that are moving away from the slavery-indenture dichotomy and from siloed colony-focused studies. However, this edited collection lacks consistency across its chapters. While some chapters are analytical and incisive, others offer summaries and draw largely upon previous works. Dhar’s chapter simply summarizes published works on indentured women’s recruitment, drawing heavily upon Gaiutra Bahadur and Rhoda Reddock. In another chapter, a short paragraph matches a Wikipedia entry verbatim (Tyagi 2022: 61n7). Many of the authors assume previous knowledge and provide contextual information on the indenture trade without citing sources. Since the indenture experience changed over time and varied across the different plantation colonies, these become serious omissions. There is often a blurring of the boundary between fiction and evidence-based research as some authors combine novels and historical works to describe histories of the indentured. Though few, such blurring weakens the analysis. In
some chapters, historical works are challenged as simplistic, sweeping and mundane (Sinha 2022: 197; Banerjee 2022: 212) as against the more encompassing and nuanced approach of literary works – juxtaposing the two as opposite approaches rather than encouraging one to learn from the other. Dhar laments that postcolonial literary studies have avoided the question of labour and capital, urging that ‘indenture, like studies of slavery, requires attention to labour’ (Dhar 2022: 45). This lacuna can be avoided by engaging with historical works on indenture. Finally, there are multiple typographical errors throughout the book, and names such as K.L. Gillion (pp. 2 and 159), Vijayalakshmi Teelock (p. 6), Totaram Sanadhya (pp. 8, 13, 166), John Scoble (p. 57), I.M. Cumpston (pp. 63, 72) and Baba Ram Chandra (p. 163) are misspelt. ‘Coolie’, which remains a contested term, appears within quotes in the works of Mishra and Lahiri, but scholars such as Dhar, Tyagi, Aggarwal, Mirdha, Sinha and Banerjee use it without contextualization and acknowledgement of its contested historical usage.

**REFERENCE**
