The epigraph that precedes this tale of the experience of indenture in Guyana is a quote from Reza Aslan on myth. Elsewhere Aslan points out that when dealing with myths we should not ask whether they are true but rather what they mean. And their meanings, as various as there are readers, may be as ungraspable as the threads of water in a turbulent stream. Some Amerindian peoples express their cosmological beliefs in the weaving of their baskets. Shah’s fascinating attempt to weave the fluid strands of myth to make a coherent story of recent Guyanese history is alluring but ultimately unsatisfying.

The mysterious Neela, born at the heart of a storm aboard the Ganges as it is bringing the last Indian indentured labourers across the kala pani to faraway British Guiana, connects the protagonists in Guyana’s main communities, Indian and African. Childless Rampat and Parvati, lured by promises of easy work and fortunes in an El Dorado colony, and escaping the conventions they have defied in India, adopt the baby when her unmarried mother dies in childbirth. Their jahaji Billa, a professional wrestler who fears he may have committed a murder, has had a vision that Neela is more than an ordinary child.

The dream of returning with easy riches to India to show off before envious relatives is soon shattered in the grinding labour
of the canefields, under the supervision of Sampson, the African overseer descended from plantation slaves. The antagonism between Samson and Billa leads to an epic fight, which both claim to have won in subsequent retellings. Gradually things become easier for the Indian immigrants as they establish small businesses, build houses, and enjoy modest contentment with their lives in the new world.

The girl Neela, however, whose name means ‘sea-blue’, is an anomalous element in this portrayal of rural life in colonial British Guyana. She spends much of her time singing to herself and combing her hair with a golden comb in front of a mirror, and every night she goes to the canal and disappears into the water until dawn. Each of the main characters observes her behaviour, but each has reasons not to communicate what they think to the others. While Rampat guards her jealously as his own, Parvati would like to believe she could anchor her to the solid ground of a traditional Hindu marriage to a successful Georgetown family. The potential bridegroom, though captivated by her beauty, is so shocked by what he discovers in her eyes that the plans come to nothing.

Tales of mermaids have long played a part in the mythology of the Caribbean, from the time Columbus’s sailors reported sighting them. Shakespeare’s Ariel shares mermaid attributes in the form of a ‘nymph o’ the sea’. In Guyana Evadne d’Oliviera retold an Amerindian legend in ‘The Lure of the Mermaid’, and the theme was taken up most recently in Monique Roffey’s The Mermaid of Black Conch. Shah ingeniously combines these archetypal themes with Indian beliefs in subcurrents of the sacred Ganges connecting the Indian diaspora as found in Trinidad, Mauritius and Guyana – personified by the goddess Ganga Mai – with African legends of ‘Mami Wata’ (examined in detail by Henry John Drewal in an article in African Arts); she is a figure who links populations scattered by slavery with their African homelands. This mythological underpinning recalls how Robert Antoni embroders together the beliefs and histories of diverse Caribbean peoples in his novel Divina Trace.
After the aborted marriage Neela disappears for much of the story as the political changes that take place in Guyana emerge through the perspectives of the different narrators, Rampat, Parvati, Billa and Billa’s son Krish (Krishna). The characters take on a representative function as they comment on or take part in historical events ranging through the killing of the ‘Enmore martyrs’, the rise of Cheddi Jagan, the initial cooperation and then estrangement with Linden Forbes Burnham, the coming of independence and the machinations of the neocolonial powers in ousting Jagan. The increasing tension and alienation between Afro-Guyanese and Indo-Guyanese is mirrored in the tragic confrontation between Sampson and Billa. Subsequently the violence in Mackenzie and its aftermath, the rigging of elections, the murder of Walter Rodney and mass emigration are all included in the novel. By using the figure of Krish, the author is able to include more recent developments: the death of Burnham and Jagan’s belated return to power fail to defuse the resentment and corruption in Guyanese racial politics. Here I have a major quibble: surely a female author, though it may not conform to her fictional scheme, is not justified in dismissing Janet Jagan and her presidency as ‘Jagan’s men’.

And what of Neela, the girl who had once said: ‘Ma, I can only ever see my face in the mirror. I’m only a reflection. I’m not real’? Like the archetypes of myth, she can only reflect what people see in her. Like those dangerous, alluring creatures of the mind, she may be all things to all people; they swim away in the water of fiction and return to the characters before their deaths as emblems of hope, of loss or of faith. Weaving them into the story in the first half of the novel involves the play of repetition and difference within the body of water itself, mythologizing the experiences of indenture and its legacies without distorting them; in the latter part, however, the material threads of history prove too intractable and do not completely cohere.