Book review


Atreyee Phukan’s *Contradictory Indianness: Indenture, Creolization, and Literary Imaginary* invigorates both the fields of Caribbean Studies and Indenture Studies by turning to lesser-known Indo-Caribbean narratives (fictional and autobiographical) to show that current evaluations of Indo-Caribbean fiction prioritize specific notions of home and nostalgia, thereby ignoring distinctly creolizing impulses in the canon. While demonstrating a thorough understanding of the limitations of the concepts of hybridity and creolization, Phukan’s text effectively works to rejuvenate and lend new rigour to these terms. At the same time, the monograph tackles key terms in indenture studies, including the much-discussed idea of the *kala pani*, to show how discourse around indenture prioritizes concepts of return, home, and purity, often ignoring or minimizing narratives in which the *kala pani* is seen not as a threat, but as an opportunity to find new forms of belonging. The net effect, she suggests, is that the Indo-Caribbean canon has been shaped and formed in a way that prioritizes a few key texts, which are taken as representative, while excluding novels and narratives that do not fit genre expectations. These oft-ignored narratives, she argues, are part of a specifically Caribbean project of creolization. In doing so, Phukan also suggests new and productive ways to place Afro-Caribbean and Indo-Caribbean texts in dialogue.

Along with stating her own argument, Phukan’s well-researched Introduction offers an informative and readable account of the field of postcolonial Caribbean Studies, and the place Indo-Caribbean literature has occupied within it. The substantive
Introduction is self-contained and can and should be a new staple on any introductory course on Caribbean Studies,Indenture Studies, or the South Asian diaspora.

*Contradictory Indianness* focuses primarily on postcolonial Indo-Trinidadian authors, in order to 'highlight symbolic, thematic, and political synchronicities' (44) in these texts. All three of her main authors, Ismith Khan, Harold Sonny Ladoo, and Shani Mootoo, also migrated to the United States, further differentiating them from more well-known Indo-Caribbean authors who moved to England.

That being said, Phukan starts, in the first chapter 'Indenture Passage and Poetics in Totaram Sanadhya and LalBihari Sharma’, by examining early indenture narratives from Fiji and Demerara: Sanadhya’s *Fiji Mein Mere Ekkis Varsh* and *Bhut Len Ki Katha: Totaram Sanadhya Ka Fiji*, and Sharma’s *Damra Phag Bahar*. This chapter was particularly exciting, since, as scholars of indenture will know, these three narratives are frequently invoked in studies of indenture, but rarely analyzed: particularly Sanadhya’s autobiographical works (Rajiv Mohabir’s catchy 2019 translation of Sharma’s text, *I Even Regret Night: Holi Songs of Demerara*, has made it much more accessible). Though I would have enjoyed even more of an excursus on Sanadhya’s texts, Phukan does convincingly show the “radical transnationalist, anti-colonial, and anti-caste sentiments” (50) in narratives that are frequently read as simply demonstrating indentured nostalgia and notions of return.

Chapter Two, ‘Repatriation and the “Indian Problem” in Ismith Khan’s *The Jumbie Bird* (1961)’, examines Khan’s novel *The Jumbie Bird* by focusing on notions of pluralism and pan-Caribbeanism. Through a sensitive reading of the symbolic fusion of the Indian Muslim festival Hosay with the titular Afro-Caribbean jumbie bird, Phukan argues that *The Jumbie Bird’s*’ unique global south paradigm…contextualizes Caribbean decolonization alongside India’s own independence…to deliberately invoke repatriation as an anachronism (rather than a right) and to disassociate Indianness
in the Caribbean from that of South Asia’ (46). Chapter Three, ‘The Trope of the Rice Field in Harold Sonny Ladoo’s No Pain Like the Body (1972)’, focuses on Ladoo’s No Pain Like the Body to investigate the use and subversion of two prominent Caribbean literary figures, the peasant and the plantation, to present what she calls ‘New World Indianness’ (120). Chapter Four, ‘(En)Gendering Indenture in Shani Mootoo’s Cereus Blooms at Night (1992)’, looks at a more well-known text, Mootoo’s Cereus Blooms at Night, and rereads indenture into what is often celebrated as the Caribbean’s first queer feminist novel by focusing on the ‘intergenerational trauma due to the Christianization of Indians in the Caribbean’ (47). The Conclusion focuses on the idea of ‘arrival’ rather than ‘return’ to show how this book forms part of a larger project of new (post)indenture poetics (in the author’s terminology) that focuses on belonging and creative evolution. In each chapter, Phukan also briefly puts her primary texts in conversation with more well-known works from the same period by authors like V.S. Naipaul, Samuel Selvon, Kamau Brathwaite, George Lamming, and Jan Shinebourne.

Phukan’s Contradictory Indianness is thus an important new contribution to literary studies of indenture. Hopefully it can also influence syllabi and expand the canon of Indo-Caribbean works assigned and the frameworks within which they are read. One unfortunate aspect of the monograph is that it suffers from cursory proofreading, leading to the misspelling of names and other errors: but this should only annoy the most curmudgeonly of readers, like this one.

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