Stories of reclamation, speculation and joy:
An interview with Dutch-Surinamese Artist, Nazrina Rodjan

Nazrina Rodjan and Amar Wahab

Nazrina Rodjan is a Dutch-Surinamese visual artist.
Amar Wahab is Professor in Gender and Sexuality at York University, Canada.

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ABSTRACT
Co-editor of the Journal of Indentureship and its Legacies, Amar Wahab, interviews Dutch-Surinamese visual artist, Nazrina Rodjan, about her recent exhibition, Kala Pani:1873–2023, which creatively intervenes in discourses about race, gender, queerness and indentureship in the Netherlands. Rodjan’s work is a critical response to the gendered racism within the Dutch archives and artworld, including its silencing of indentureship and its legacies. As such, the artist’s work is focused on ‘telling the stories and amplifying the voices of underrepresented communities,’ to counter the racism that is embedded within Dutch nationalism and homonationalism.
Thanks very much for agreeing to do this interview for the *Journal of Indentureship and its Legacies*. The journal is trying to broaden the scope of its engagement with studies of indentureship in a more global context, as a lot of our publications have focused on the Anglo-Caribbean. So, we’re really honoured to feature your work here. Can you please tell me a little bit about your background, in terms of your art?

In terms of my background as an artist, I actually started as a designer and an illustrator. I first went to graphic design school, and after that, to art school, where I focused on illustration and painting. I think what really started my interest in exploring the histories of indentureship in my art was not finding anything about it in the Netherlands, in museums or books. And not really knowing anything about my own history. I was asked to illustrate or create art based on Dutch history. And this (indentureship) is a part of Dutch history! So, that was my motivation. Back then, to just find out more about myself and about this history and make it more visible in Dutch mainstream conversations.

As an artist, how do you situate your work within different artworlds, especially since your work seems to emerge from and address a diasporic, queer, BIPOC and feminist consciousness. So, I wanted to get a sense of how you tell your story.

My intersecting identities make it so that my art inherently embodies these different artworlds that might be
seen as separate categories by others, but to me are all parts of who I am. So I wouldn’t say I’m situating my work within different artworlds, but rather these artworlds manifest within the multitudes of my existence. I like to think of my art as having a role outside of the artworlds I’ve seen that rarely reflects how inextricably intertwined all of these aspects of my identity are in my work.

AW: In terms of the work featured on your website (https://www.nazrinarodjan.com/) and on social media, I see your work as intervening in the history of colonial silencing that is produced by the Dutch archives and the Dutch national story. On the website, you distinguish between fine art and studio (Studio Naz) practices. Can you please talk about these two different areas of your work.

NR: My entire art practice (my illustrations, designs and paintings) has always revolved around telling the stories and amplifying the voices of underrepresented communities.

The reason I distinguish between fine art and Studio Naz online is because I work in many different styles and I want people to easily see what kind of works I create. My studio is my main source of income but the types of projects I take on or how I utilize my artistic freedom within assignments are always a reflection of my intersectional approach.

AW: Are there particular kinds of challenges related to surviving as an artist, especially around making space for the art you want to create as a racialized queer person of colour in the Netherlands? Does this entail different kinds of challenges as well?

NR: Being a full-time artist has been very challenging. Especially being a queer artist of colour, I’ve had to
deal with a lot of racism and homophobia along the way. My art has never fit into the white Dutch mainstream, which has made it hard for me to be taken seriously as an artist in the Netherlands. It’s a struggle for visibility and representation when most art spaces in the Netherlands have a mostly white organization catering to a white audience. This has made me want to explore opportunities elsewhere to display my art.

It’s also been a long journey figuring out a balance in how to stay standing in a capitalist society versus using my art as a tool for my activism. Another challenge has been being a creative entrepreneur as someone who is autistic. For me this removes the option of having my main source of income be something else while doing art on the side. So it does feel like the stakes are high in terms of making a career as a full-time artist work for me.

**AW:** Thanks very much for sharing. In terms of the work that you do - like your exhibitions, the collections, and your illustrations – what kinds of conversations drive your work? What are some of the questions that you’re interested in? What kinds of ideas are you thinking through in your work?

**NR:** When I create art I am not necessarily reacting to certain discourses. I do take part in conversations in activist and cultural spaces but they don’t always drive my work. I create art based on my own experiences and perspective and I would describe my artistic process as being very sensorial. A process that engages the entire body and what I am sensing, rather than a more colonial approach of needing a theoretical framework before creating art. I draw inspiration from family, my communal relationships and what to me is lacking in terms of representation. Queer, BIPOC individuals exist, have always existed and will continue to exist
and my work centres that idea. So what could that history have looked like? What does that present look like? And what does that future look like?

A lot of times my work does align with thoughts and discussions happening within the cultural landscapes right now, but I feel like queer BIPOC artists, activists, writers have been saying these things for a long time and the fact that the cultural landscape is finally listening doesn’t mean this is the beginning. I see my art as a part of/continuation of the decolonizing work that still needs to be done in the world.

**AW:** I read in one of your recent interviews that you had visited the University of Pennsylvania archives to view postcards and images of indentureship, which became the frame for your conversation in *Kala Pani*?

**NR:** The *Kala Pani: 1873–2023* series started when somebody gifted me two postcards depicting indentured Indian women on plantations in Suriname.

I had been collecting these images online since 2020 and had this idea of painting their portraits on large canvases.

But even before that, I was researching my own family history. I heard that there was a photo of my great-great-grandmother, an indentured Indian woman brought from India, somewhere in an album in Suriname. But it was in a family friend’s album. I became really curious, and just asked everyone in my family. I knew nothing about it or about how to get to it. I tried to go to Suriname to see if I could find it. And then one of my aunts told me that the lady who had it in her album was a friend of hers – like a friend of my great-great-grandmother. They had a picture together, but the lady had recently died. So, the album was gone. And so it was the only known photograph of the ancestor I so deeply wanted to know. So that was how this project started - through questions
about this ancestor of mine. I had a lot of questions just wanting to see her face based on the stories that I heard from my mother and my aunts about her. They were always telling me about this very old lady with lots of jewellery – like what you see in the postcards. Very strict. They had some vague memories of her, and how she was as a person. I wanted to know more but was left with all these questions. So, it started with me, just painting a really big portrait of what I thought she would have maybe looked like. It was a portrait based on different photographs of the different women in my own family – like a mosaic of all these different women in my family! After I got these two postcards I learned more about the history of Indian women in indenture and the violence on the plantations. Their stories were just never told and if they were mentioned it was always from colonial perspectives or the perspectives of men. Being a queer Hindustani woman, I wanted to recreate these images of them from my own perspective to reclaim them.

AW: Yeah, that’s interesting. When I saw the four images in the *Kala Pani* exhibition, three of them stood out as a kind of re-invention or reclamation of the postcards. The titles of two of the images are questions (‘Where are you?’ and ‘Who are you to me?’) and the third image’s title (‘You look a little bit like me’) also seems to be a kind of question – there is a kind of questioning there, too, and I thought you’re doing something disruptive with the postcards. It’s like you are staging an intervention. You’re provoking, through these questions. And then the fourth image is that of the ‘Milk Maid’. Can you talk a little bit about your thinking behind the ‘Milk Maid’?

NR: I first saw that postcard at the University of Pennsylvania. It was of an indentured Indian woman in Trinidad holding a milk pot. Being a Dutch painter, I think about all
the old Dutch masters like Vermeer. So, when I saw this postcard, I immediately thought of ‘Het melkmeisje’ (The Milk Maid) by Vermeer. I saw a contrast and similarity between the two images that I felt needed to be
visualized in a new painting. Vermeer was known for his extensive use of ultramarine, which was once known as a pigment more costly than gold. He then used this to paint everyday Dutch women doing everyday tasks. But large-scale, full-length portraits in oil were historically reserved for wealthy or powerful individuals. So instead of only seeing these indentured Indian women on small postcards, copied and distributed all over Europe, I wanted to use the medium of oil to create portraits of these women because I feel like there’s something about oil paints that makes an image come to life in a way like no other medium can. I wanted to make sure that their stories and voices could not be ignored anymore and the scale of my paintings represents that.

**AW:** Yes, those were two things that stood out for me when I first saw the images on the website: how big they were, like you were magnifying the postcards and also how this magnification seemed to be staging some kind of intervention or disruption – not just replicating the postcards. And the other thing that interested me was that you were doing this disruption in the medium of oil – traditionally the medium of the art masters that was reserved for bodies considered civilized or human. It’s almost like you are decolonizing oil at the same time that you are staging this intervention into the historical entanglements of Dutch histories of indentureship and Euro-centric artistic conventions. I find this very interesting. What has been the reception of your work – in Suriname, in the Netherlands or other places that you’ve exhibited?

**NR:** In the Netherlands, there’s a big community of Surinamese people, but there wasn’t any real representation in the arts for a very long time. So the idea of a Hindustani artist, doing this work full-time
and exhibiting her work is still pretty new to people and the reactions have been mixed. Most people express excitement about finally seeing Hindustani women centred in this way through paintings. In the US the reception has felt very positive and it feels like some conversations are more readily possible here because of a history of various civil rights movements.

Now I’m part of multiple collectives of artists, one of them is an Indo-Surinamese/South Asian collective called the Masala Movement Netherlands. We exhibit our works together frequently there and I feel like the history of indenture in Suriname is slowly starting to get more visibility back home.

**AW:** It’s interesting that you’re situating this work on gender, race and indentureship in the Netherlands. And you are also working at the intersection of race and queer identity as well. So I wonder, how do you see your work on indentureship as connected to your work/activism in the queer BIPOC community? How do you relate it to queerness?

**NR:** I mentioned earlier how my work is about representation of queer BIPOC. We have always existed. So what did that look like in the past? There’s a history of erasing queerness in the archives and when I look at these postcards, as a queer woman of colour, I imagine what life for a queer person would have looked like on the plantations. What did their relationships look like? Could there still be traces of that visible in these photos? So two of my paintings depict indentured Indian women holding each other. One of them is titled ‘Tu tani se lage hai hamaar jaise’ which translates to ‘You look a little bit like me’.
All of the works in my *Kala Pani: 1873–2023* series are titled as questions that the women might have for me as the painter, but also questions that I have as a descendant of indenture looking at their pictures. So when I say ‘You look a little bit like me’, I mean that in the way that I am queer.

**AW:** Is that part of the thinking behind the mural *Jahajee Sisters*?

**NR:** So Jahajee Sisters (a gender justice organization for Indo-Caribbeans in New York City) actually invited me to create that mural. And they asked me to kind of depict the activist community in Richmond Hill, not just from the Caribbean, but also other South Asian activist communities there. Where did you see that mural?

**AW:** It’s on your website. Oh, but it does not say where it is located. I thought it was staged in Suriname or somewhere else in the Caribbean.

**NR:** This was in New York which has a large Indo-Caribbean diaspora community alongside a large immigrant population generally.

**AW:** There is also a kind of conversation around diaspora that is happening in terms of how diasporas are relating with spaces in the Caribbean, but also to racist nationalism within states of the Global North. I wonder how you see your work as being in critical conversation with Dutch nationalism and especially Dutch homonationalism? Are you in critical conversation with the Dutch mainstream queer community?

**NR:** Yes. I have a long and deep history in the queer community – building and organizing. We’ve dealt a lot with Dutch homonationalism. I was a part of a queer BIPOC organization in Rotterdam. We organized protests and all kinds of events to talk about all these
Figure 2  Tu tani se lage hai hamaar jaise / You look a little bit like me (courtesy of Nazrina Rodjan)
issues in the Netherlands. And we were often silenced or dismissed from mainstream platforms when trying to spotlight the multitudes of systemic discrimination and oppression at play, even within already marginalized communities. So yeah, my work is certainly in critical conversation here. It has really influenced me in my work and in the kind of illustrations and art that I make and who I make it for.

**AW:** In the Canadian context, there are so many different conversations under the umbrella of queer BIPOC politics and activism, but it seems like diasporic Indo-Caribbean queerness never really signals as a viable platform of consciousness or politics, especially within the mainstream gay and lesbian community. There is very little visibility, and there is also not a desire to know. So, there is racism within the mainstream white queer community, but also within the BIPOC community. That history of indentureship seems to not matter. So, this makes me wonder about the different audiences of your work, like who you’re speaking to or having a conversation with.

**NR:** In my work I’ve always tried to decenter whiteness. There’s a book that I made a few years ago with another queer friend of mine, who is also Surinamese. It’s called *Queer in het Licht* (2021) and we really made it a point in that book to only feature BIPOC queer people. I think an important thing in my work is depicting the joy of BIPOC people. There are a lot of images and stories that highlight the hardships we go through as queer BIPOC. I think it’s also very important to acknowledge joy as resistance.

**AW:** In terms of your future work, what kinds of questions or thoughts are guiding your future creative work? In what directions would you like to push your work?
NR: Right now, I’m working on a book project. I went to Suriname to do research for a future graphic novel. So that’s going to be about cultural heritage and family history and migration. Something that’s always guiding my creative work is the urge to preserve parts of my culture and heritage. Some examples would be the language and the food, specifically the way that a lot of the communication between my mother and I happens through food. Like in Suriname my mother taught me how to make daal roti in the same neighbourhood she grew up and learned. I think most people can relate to that feeling of fear when seeing your parents get older and the idea that so many stories and all these parts of my family history and culture would be lost only further motivates me to capture as much as I can.

AW: Because your art is activist art, I wanted to get a sense of whether you have found a community – beyond the Netherlands – of artists engaging creatively with the legacies of indentureship. I saw that you were featured in collection – *From Surviving to Thriving*.

NR: It’s funny because it was only during the COVID-19 lockdowns that I was able to find community outside of the Netherlands. Suddenly everyone had to get their events online and this actually opened up the world to me. I found Jahajee Sisters in the US, I found other Indo-Caribbean creatives and organizers in Canada and London. People of indentured descent from South Africa, Mauritius, Fiji. I found out it’s not just us who play baithak gana/chutney songs.

The *From Surviving to Thriving* zine is actually a project I started together with my then-wife and a friend. We wanted to showcase works by very talented Indo-Surinamese artists and writers in the
Netherlands and if the mainstream wasn’t platforming us, then we would find ways to do it ourselves.

AW: Can you tell me a little bit about what that zine was about?

NR: This book started with me and my then-wife, talking about how we know all of these really talented Hindustani artists here. But none of us is really making it to the mainstream or the wider public. The first idea was to create some kind of event and bring all these artists together, and then just showcase our work and meet each other, and then that turned into the idea of creating a zine, asking everybody to contribute to be able to showcase the collection of artworks.

AW: Do you find that there is a space of opportunity for different artists working on indentureship to connect? Have you had the opportunity to interact with artists, for example, those working within the Anglo-Caribbean or perhaps even parts of the Spanish Caribbean or even in the diasporas? Do you find that there is enough of that ‘coming together’ or connection?

NR: The last couple of years I have seen a lot more collaborations happening between artists working on indentureship.

Social media has made it easier for me to connect with like-minded people around the globe and I’ve been lucky enough to travel to places like the US and Canada and Suriname for work, so I’ve gotten to interact with many people working on indentureship in their own ways. Two places that I feel like really brought Indo-Caribbean art together were the exhibits *Remnants of Another* in Philadelphia and *A Sense of Brown* in Amsterdam.
AW: Yes, it’s picking up momentum. I’m seeing glimpses of it (the ‘coming together’), you know. But I wonder what more is possible. What can be done to facilitate that kind of connection, that exchange across global contexts? I want to thank you very much for your time and for sharing your work and thoughts with me through this really wonderful interview. I’m very honoured.