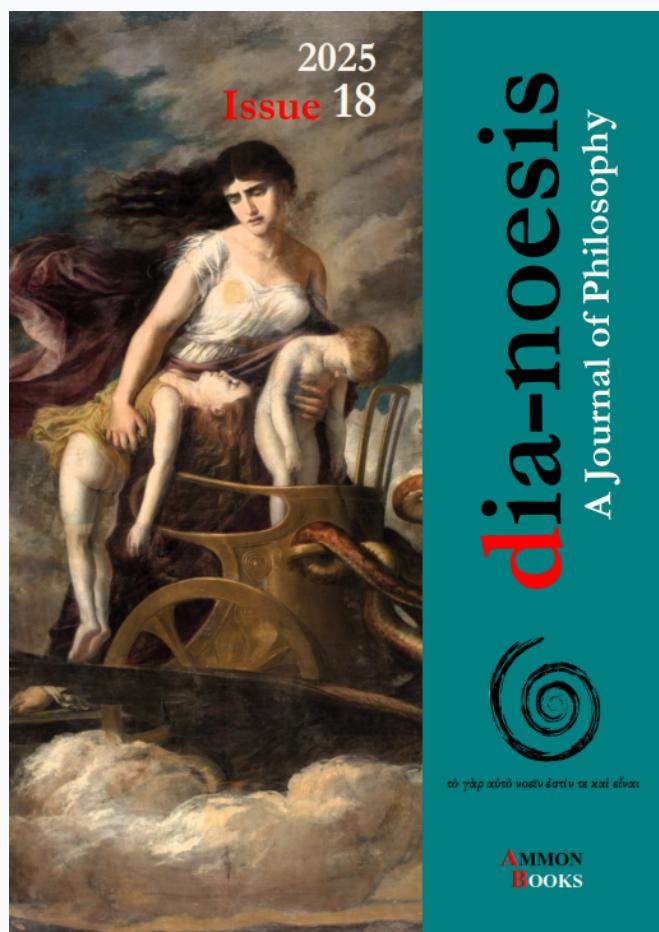


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The ‘C’ Word: Testimony and Trauma in Gaiutra Bahadur’s *Coolie Woman:* *The Odyssey of Indenture*

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Abstract

Gaiutra Bahadur in *Coolie Woman: The Odyssey of Indenture* has chronicled the stories of indentured ‘coolie women’ who suffered severe domestic abuse, bodily mutilations, and even murder. Bahadur’s quest for unearthing her great-grandmother Sujaria’s story becomes an exercise in bringing the history of a quarter million other ‘coolie’ women into the light. By employing an interdisciplinary lens, the paper aims to unravel the experiences of such oppressed women in the Caribbean context during the period of colonization. The paper additionally aspires to scrutinize the text as a testimonial writing that accentuates the voices of the voiceless through the author. This will be achieved by analyzing the primary sources and employing a theoretical framework associated with gender, diaspora, and postcolonialism. Not only does the research disclose various marginalized aspects of history, but it also offers valuable perspectives to enable contemporary discussions associated with gender and social injustice.

Keywords: *displacement, gender, identity, postcolonialism, testimonial writing, trauma*

Introduction

The text *Postcolonial Studies: The Key Concepts*, defines the ‘Caribbean’ as: “the island nations of the Caribbean Sea and territories on/the surrounding South and Central American mainland (such as Guyana and Belize). It also refers to all island nations in the area (and mainland Guyana and Belize)”. The rise of the European powers in the late 15th century led to various colonies serving as lucrative lands for the cultivation of cash crops. This utilized a huge labor force system, which included African slavery and indentured labor from Asia. Colonization of the Caribbean led to assertions of themes of race, history, identity, and resistance through literature as attempted by Caribbean postcolonial writers.

In the 1980s and 1990s, Postcolonial studies started looking at issues of ethnicity, displacement, and gender (Cf. Kakolyris, 2025). Along with understanding oppression and resistance during colonial rule, postcolonial studies sought to analyze the nuances of multiple postcolonial spaces existing in a single nation. In the post-colonial Caribbean nations, the people formed a multicultural rubric. Although authors from diverse cultural contexts shared the legacy of colonialism, reconstructing a single national history in the Caribbean context remains problematic. Gaiutra Bahadur, a third-generation Indian-Caribbean, settled in the United States, writes from one such space, bringing in the issues of diaspora, history, gender, and nationality.

Colonial discourse often reflects racial stereotypes, and it is no secret that Indo-Caribbeans and African-Caribbeans had their own ways of being ‘Othered’ by the mainstream. The ‘hardworking Indian’ stereotype was furthered by Immigration Agent General James Crosby, who reported them to be ‘contented, happy and cheerful’ as Bahadur observed in her book. Bahadur’s study of colonial records also revealed several aspects of trauma and abuse suffered by the indentured women aboard on ships. The trauma records included suicides of women aboard the ship, along with observations of ‘melancholy’. A little girl around eight had also been sexually abused by a sailor and was unable to state because

of extreme fear. There were incidents of new mothers leaving their newborns, fearing the fact that they would end up as the system's 'collateral damage.'

The paper focuses on highlighting the intersection of gender, displacement, and inequality. Gauitra Bahadur combines the genres of biography and testimonial writing in her book *Coolie Woman: The Story of Indenture*, published in 2013. The author has attempted to chronicle the traumatic history of a quarter million coolie women like her great-grandmother Sujaria, who were sent from India to the Caribbean as indentured laborers. Bahadur's quest started for unearthing her grandmother Sujaria's story. As the author delved deeper into colonial archival records, she was able to discover several stories of coolie women who were testimonies to the trauma of colonialism, the caste system, and gender violence. In addition, the author addresses the inherited trauma of her generation as an attempt to locate herself in her homeland's history and hate. She attempts to find answers in the personal, along with the political. LaCapra in *Writing History Writing Trauma* brings up the concept of "working through", which aligns with Bahadur's narrative. (LaCapra, 65). Bahadur discovers that:

One woman was hacked to death by her husband in 1890. The magistrate described it as a 'fit of jealousy', as though the act could be excused as a temporary lapse of reason rather than the culmination of years of domestic terror. Many other women suffered mutilation, abandonment, or death, and the official documents treated these tragedies as trivial footnotes in the labor record, erasing both the cruelty and the humanity of their experiences. (Bahadur, 122).

Bahadur's narrative seeks to restore dignity to these women who tried to survive against all odds in a strange land that did not release them from the shackles of patriarchy.

The 'C' Word: Exploring the burden of history

Bahadur's Preface to *Coolie Woman* begins thus-

*Oh, cooly girl with eyes of wonder!
With thoughtful brow and lips compressed!
I know not where your thoughts do wander;*

*I know not where your heart doth rest...
...why so foreign? Why so strange
In looks and manner, style and dress –
Religion, too, and social ways? (Bahadur, xix)*

Bahadur states that the source of this ‘anonymous’ poem is a British Guiana newspaper of the year 1893. She also clarified in this section the reason for choosing ‘coolie’ in her title despite the offensive overtones the word might carry in today’s context.

*‘Coolie’ comes from the Tamil word *kuli*, meaning wages or hire. It was first used, beginning in the late sixteenth century, by Portuguese captains and merchants along the Coromandel Coast in India, who passed it on to the other Europeans who vied with them to control the lucrative trade with the subcontinent. They all described the men who worked for them, carrying loads at the docks, as coolies. Gradually, the word took on the broader meaning of someone paid to do menial work. When, after the enslaved were emancipated in the 1830s, the British began to rustle up replacement workers for plantations worldwide, this was the epithet they used for the indentured laborers they enlisted. Ultimately, over the course of eight decades, they ferried more than a million “coolies” to more than a dozen colonies across the globe, including British Guiana, Trinidad, Jamaica, Suriname, Mauritius, and Fiji. (Bahadur, xx)*

Bahadur’s deliberate choice of the term ‘coolie’ in the title becomes a kind of forthright rebellion in itself; an attempt to de-romanticize the idea of the diaspora of indentured laborers whose lives were decided by the colonizers. In Pramod K. Nayar’s *Post-colonial Literature: An Introduction*, women’s life writing from postcolonial nations is said to have strategic importance as they have “a sense of immediacy and authenticity that fiction, even realist fiction, does not possess” (Nayar 150; Cf. Rupčić, 2023). He further states that women in postcolonial societies are doubly marginalized and placed much down the hierarchy of structural oppression. Bahadur’s account of her great-grandmother may not be first-hand. However, it attempts to reveal the traumatic experiences of indentured Indian women of the Caribbean who could not reconstruct their ‘self’. Bahadur states how the ‘C word’ was used

to sting Indians in general because no matter what profession they practiced later on, they were always referred to as ‘coolies’.

In an interview with Fountain Ink, Bahadur opined that one cannot sanitize history by scrubbing ‘words clean’. Hence, acknowledging the stigma of the ‘C’ word in the title was essential for her to portray the burden the indentured women carried. The ‘C’ word is more problematic when it comes to women, as they were triply marginalized and dishonored because of their gender. As hard as it is to unearth painful histories, it also becomes imperative to acknowledge the deep-rooted issues that lie embedded even to this day.

Bahadur’s narrative discusses the identities of these Indo-Caribbean female migrant workers as disregarded because most of them were considered ‘fallen’ women. They were either runaways, widows, or outcasts. To add to their economic inequality, many of them were victims of domestic abuse, suffering bodily mutilations and even murder by their husbands. Brenda J. Mehta states in her paper titled “The Colonial Curriculum and the Construction of ‘Coolie-ness’ in Lakshmi Persaud’s *Sastra* and *Butterfly in the Wind* and Jan Shinebourne’s *The Last English Plantation*.

The term ‘coolie,’ as an original signifier of caste and class disparity in India and China, refers to the porter class of unskilled, cheaply-employed laborers, a readily exploitable mass labor force whose only value was located in its utilitarian capacities... The colonial appropriation of the term to characterize Indian indentured history in the Caribbean, South Africa, and the islands of the Pacific and Indian Oceans added a level of racialized marginalization to an already disempowered social categorization (Mehta, 115).

This added layer of meaning to the word ‘coolie’ brings to light the strategic oppression of the colonized people, and in the context of Bahadur’s work, the ‘coolie women’. Thus, the British Guiana newspaper of 1893 featuring the poem on the ‘cooly girl’, which attempted to ‘understand’ the ‘mysterious’ foreign girls with “eyes of wonder,” would just be conforming to the stereotypes created by colonial discourses. Her foreignness is vexing, her homeland in literary shambles, her present home just another ‘land of mud’. This is much reminiscent of Edward Said’s observation of the ‘exotic Orient’ in his seminal work *Orientalism*. Here, the ‘coolie girl

‘is stereotyped by the Occident but is still ‘foreign’ in the Caribbean. The reality is undoubtedly a far cry from this romanticized version of the coolie girl. The colonial gaze possesses the ability to transform her into an object of desire, in spite of being disrespected. Her visibility is confined to racial stratification and eroticized gaze. The ocean that carried them to the strange land is therefore transformed into a site of silenced diasporic rupture.

To cross the kala pani was to cross not just the sea but the boundaries of caste, community, and belonging. For most women, it meant a rupture from everything familiar – an exile without the promise of return. The ocean became both a witness and a tomb, carrying their unspoken fears, their violated bodies, and their unclaimed stories to a land where no one would call them daughters again (Bahadur, 23).

Bahadur conveys the dubious phenomenon of freedom- the idea and hope associated with return. The first indentured contracts guaranteed a free return passage to India after five years of work. Several women have been reported to choose to leave Indian because they assumed it would ‘liberate’ them and give them independence of a different kind. The capricious colonial promises did not disclose the alarming facts that there would be cheating, rape, exploitation, and other forms of violence, both physical and psychological.

The author also discovered that madness was often used as an excuse by indentured Indian men to either subject the women to extreme violence or even kill them. Bahadur narrates the plight of Laungee, a coolie woman- “Though still alive, Laungee looked beyond saving, too. More than thirty-five wounds covered her body...On that one arm alone, Laungee had been cut in eighteen places...Bruises covered Laungee’s entire body. While being hacked to death, she had been beaten” (Bahadur, 133).

Laungee and her husband, Badal, had been indentured to Vriesland, a Demerara River plantation. He frequently abused her physically and verbally, finally murdering her brutally. During the trial, Badal professed his innocence by quoting an ‘Eastern law’ that unfaithful women deserve severe punishment. However, his strategy did not work, and he was given capital punishment for mur-

dering his wife. Despite Badal being proven guilty of murder, several other women were hacked to death, and some crimes went unpunished.

Bahadur's study of the archives further brought to light the reasons for the emergence of such gender patterns. When women sometimes exercised their autonomy in relationships, their partners considered their independence a threat. This left women to be victims of extreme violence as the men felt emasculated and betrayed. Colonization and patriarchy went hand in hand when it came to the suppression of coolie women. Bahadur does not call them passive victims; instead, they were like the survivors of a system that sought the erasure of their experiences.

Trauma and Testimony: The Author as Ethnographer

The author has admitted that 're-writing' about the history of women who have been barely acknowledged, or rather just seen as 'a heap of broken images', has been challenging. In the narrative, her own diasporic identity came to light as she made her way through unfamiliar - yet very familiar - faces in Bihar, India, where her ancestors belonged.

I was almost seven, old enough to have memories of Guyana and young enough to be severed in two by the act of leaving it. Emigrating was like stepping into a magician's box. The sawing in half was just a trick. In time, limbs and coherence would be restored, and a whole, intact self sent back into the audience (Bahadur, 4).

Though the author spent significantly less time in Guyana, she draws a vivid picture of her lived experience. Bahadur's experience is suggestive of Salman Rushdie's *Imaginary Homelands*, wherein the confusion of the diasporic imagination comes to the fore, along with problems of belongingness and incomplete memory. The angst of diasporic belonging is not an unknown concept in contemporary times. The first section of Bahadur's book is titled 'The Magician's Box'. The title has a fairy-tale feel to it, when wide-eyed children wait in anticipation for things hitherto unexplained. However, the magician's box referred to here is the

concept of emigration. The section ends with Bahadur's self-reflection on whether leaving Guyana for America had been liberating or was it a double-edged sword. Bahadur's coming to terms with her identity can be compared to that of her ancestors, who were sent to the Caribbean as indentured laborers. The magician's box of emigration may have liberated her, like it may have liberated women who left India decades ago.

Various glimpses into the author's process of growing up reveal memories of Guyana, which slowly seeped into her transition as a diaspora in the United States. According to the author, the America she arrived in was 'too cold' to continue their old way of living, and they had to leave behind. The various challenges she faced in America, being an Indo-Caribbean, especially the harsh racism, also showed the difficult side of migrating to the 'New World'. Her trip to India, where she felt, she was expected to 'act Indian' because of her brown skin and despite an American passport, also poses problems associated with identity. She confesses that she wanted to be seen as an American when it suited her, but at other times wanted to blend into the background as an Indian. At this juncture, it is critical to analyze the precarious position the author holds as an ethnographer.

Bahadur's text, *Coolie Woman: The Odyssey of Indenture*, attempts to bring together the genres of memoir, ethnography, and history. Bahadur's narrative has a very personal touch to it as she is a member of the post-indenture generation. Her narrative technique articulates agency against the structural limitations of an autobiography since it serves as a collective testimony. She brings to the limelight the silenced histories of endangered women conceptualized through the interrelation of trauma and testimonial narrative. Bahadur herself is a product as well as an interpreter of the collective memory of the diaspora. She attempts to recover forgotten stories about women who want to travel from India and fall prey to the objectified indenture system in the Caribbean. This is how one can say that Bahadur takes on the role of an ethnographer, having suffered due to her ancestral trauma.

Her role as an ethnographer is marked by a double-consciousness. Bahadur is simultaneously an insider and an outsider, further positioning her as a subject of intergenerational transmission and a phenomenon under investigation. Bahadur's ethnographic

impulse is evident when she attempts to “peel back layers of forgetting to find what was never recorded” (Bahadur 14). This act supports the framework of Cathy Caruth’s perception of trauma as an “unclaimed experience” in the text *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Trauma functions as a wound that eludes direct representation yet requires mediated expression. (Caruth 4). Bahadur’s narrative is transformed into a site of unraveling unspoken and underrepresented histories of indentured women. The trauma and suffering of these women are channeled through Bahadur. Her decision to unravel forgotten history transforms archival erasure into ethical witness. Bahadur’s narrative begins on a very personal note. However, she states:

I went looking for my great-grandmother Sujariya and found a quarter of a million other coolie women. Each of them had crossed the kala pani under circumstances that erased their names, their desires, and their identities. The ship logs, the indenture contracts, the magistrate reports- all recorded only numbers, not lives. In trying to reconstruct her story, I realized I was piecing together a history that was meant to be forgotten (Bahadur, 3).

This discovery synthesizes the intersection of Bahadur’s primary narrative technique, bringing together the individual and collective memories. Her ethnographic inquiry begins with an attempt to unearth and trace Sujaria’s story. It is gradually transformed into an act of acknowledging the heterogeneous experiences of women under indentured labor. Their histories brim with instances of structural violence, epistemic erasure, and territorial displacement. It validates Dominick LaCapra’s notion of trauma in *Writing History Writing Trauma*, which involves the “transference of effect and implication across generations” (LaCapra 41).

Gaiutra Bahadur’s position as a diasporic subject highlights how trauma has its effects across generations, forcing descendants to bear witness to the unarticulated trauma of their predecessors. Bahadur’s ethnographic approach questions colonial archives and misinterpretations. She opines:

The women who crossed the kala pani were written about as a moral problem, not as people. They were reduced to descriptions that emphasized sexual impurity, laziness, or disobedience. The records rarely acknowledged the harsh

conditions of the plantations, the abuse at the hands of husbands, or the exploitation by colonial overseers. The archive created a portrait of women that obscured suffering and erased agency” (Bahadur, 57).

This powerful statement underscores the systemic dehumanization embedded in colonial bureaucratic structures that tag indentured women as ‘fallen women’, sex workers, and other stereotypes. This perception also aligns with Spivak’s concept of “strategic essentialism” in her text titled *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (Spivak 13). It unites the nuanced experiences of all the women tagged as ‘Coolie Women’, in order to re-narrate the colonial archive.

Socioliterature and Marginalization: Exploring Paths to Social Justice

The term ‘Socioliterature’ can be understood as an interdisciplinary approach that combines the fields of both Sociology and Literature. In that light, literature also becomes a social document to chronicle the various issues in society, including the position of women, which places them within the politics of gender. Bahadur’s work deeply interrogates power hierarchies (Janssen, 2024) and injustices when it comes to indentured women in Guyana. She has focused on intergenerational justice so that the struggles of women like Sujaria are known to the world and become a part of history.

In the introduction to *Displaced: Literature of Indigeneity, Migration and Trauma*, Kate Rose introduces the term “socioliterature” in the context of trauma narratives.

Socioliterature is an analytical current I have named to highlight literature’s impact on society. It represents and defines a growing current of engaged scholarship crossing national, ethnic, and genre boundaries. Too often ignored, social justice through research is of urgent importance in an increasingly unequal world. (Rose, 5)

Rose’s introduction is aptly titled “Socioliterature: Stories as Medicine”. She suggests the possibility of healing and recognizing the effects of both individual and historical trauma. In this context,

Socioliterature becomes a key element in recognizing the traumatic elements embedded in narratives that explore issues like gender, displacement, and migration. Bahadur's attempt at Socioliterature can be seen as giving a voice to the subaltern, as the idea itself grapples with hazy pages of traumatic history. The exploration of trauma in Coolie Woman highlights both the significance of testimonial writing and the challenges it entails. Crafting a narrative like Coolie Woman can be understood as an act of "socioliterary resistance," contesting dominant assumptions perpetuated by mainstream representations.

In the epigraph to her book, Bahadur has included Adrienne Rich's poem "Cartographies of Silence" as thus,

*Silence can be a plan
Rigorously executed
The blueprint of a life
It is a presence
It has a history of forming
Do not confuse it
With any kind of absence* (Bahadur, ix).

The 'silenced' coolie women also had untold stories of trauma, which Bahadur sought to bring to light. Bahadur's narrative is divided into three parts- 'Embarking', 'Exploring', and 'Returning'. Therefore, as a fourth-generation descendant of coolie women, she sought not just to explore but also to offer a space for old injustices to be rectified through narratives of the marginalized. Bahadur's declaration —"I am the descendant of a woman who was both exploited and brave, broken and bold; her story is my inheritance" (Bahadur)—serves as a key to understanding her legacy of indenture, diaspora, and the trauma they engendered.

In addition, she mentions how various Indian tongues have been lost in Guyana because the missionary-run schools during British rule did not consider any languages other than English. She points out that by taking away the language, an attempt to block access to untold stories of trauma also takes place. Bahadur's observation of how people like her grandmother were absent from records except as a number points out how colonial records silence the marginalized voices.

'Socioliterary resistance' can be seen where Bahadur challenges the statistics given by colonial records. According to the archives,

the coolie women were at fault for being ‘morally degenerate’. It does not criticize the system for forcing the women into indenture. The partners of the women often suspected them of infidelity and hence subjected them to violence. Between 1859 and the end of 1917, more than 167 women were killed by intimate or would-be intimate partners in Guyana. Infidelity or the fear of it motivated the crime in most cases, colonial authorities claimed. The first formal sign of a problem was a proclamation in ‘The Official Gazette’ in 1863 (Bahadur 108).

It is also interesting to note how Bahadur does not vilify all men but merely observes the different power dynamics. The archives show that a few suicides among men in Guyana occurred because they had been “deserted by romantic partners”. The men are mostly oppressors, but sometimes victims as well. However, the statistics of domestic abuse by men outnumbered such incidents. Some Indian men were “middlemen” who helped recruit women from India, thereby exploiting the women of their own country for the British. Some women were forced into indenture because their husbands abandoned them. During a time when men could leave marriages without social punishment, such a situation meant the blame was put on women. Men’s abandonment is not only a personal betrayal but part of a larger social pipeline that feeds women into exploitative labor systems. The colonial economy benefited from this by recruiting socially “unwanted” women for plantation labor. Bahadur suggests that colonial and patriarchal systems worked hand in hand to ensure that men had mobility and choice, while women bore the burden of shame and survival.

The women who left India broke more than social codes; they shattered caste hierarchies by stepping onto ships forbidden to their kind. The act itself was defiant, but society read it as defilement. They became ‘fallen women,’ stripped of their virtue before even setting foot on the foreign soil. Indenture began with shame, not work, and that shame followed them like a second shadow across the seas (Bahadur, 41).

A few women in the colony, like “Baby,” were headstrong and rebellious. Exposed to injustices at a young age, she tried to take matters into her own hands by choosing a lover. Her actions led to severe backlash, and the authorities kept watch over her. Her

abusive husband's actions led her to fight aggressively for her rights, even filing a petition citing police harassment. But such 'emancipated' women were an anomaly. In the end, being a female indentured laborer translated as involuntary slavery-

Indenture was not slavery, but it was not freedom either. The women labored, bore children, and endured beatings under the same sun that had once seen their ancestors toil in chains. They worked for survival, not wages; for food, not future. The contract promised return, but for most, it was a contract with loss- a bond that made them invisible even to themselves (Bahadur, 147).

Hence, one can understand how the trauma faced by these women is multifaceted. Along with social and economic constraints placed on them, there is also the reality of violence, silencing, and cultural dislocation. Their suffering extends beyond the physical, reaching into the psychological realm and producing profound fragmentation. The notion of identity and memory is therefore in constant flux. Injuries from the history of indenture echo across generations, which further shape the diasporic consciousness. In this process, the personal and the collective history of indenture and trauma are united. Bahadur's narrative technique provides visibility to the generational trauma that is not just remembered but also relived.

The adverse effects of colonization create a sense of psychological and internalized inferiority, forcing the upcoming generations to battle instances associated with fragmented identity in a biased society. There is also an ongoing struggle against the stigma of having descended from coolies. Furthermore, the fact that Guyana has one of the highest suicide rates globally also could be traced back to the violent, broken heritage of colonialism. In their paper "Reconciling a Broken Heritage: Developing Mental Health Social Work in Guyana", Halley and Cowden argue that the nature of Guyana's mental health issues is "sociogenic". They present the findings that the issues that persist till today are a direct result of the historic trauma related to the colonial legacy. They opine-

As a modern state, Guyana was formed through the dis-possession of the indigenous people and the introduction of slavery and indentured labor, and the lived realities of this were experiences of sexual abuse, rape, murder, poverty,

and deplorable living conditions... The internalization of the patterns of violence and control that developed during the colonial period on the basis of gender continues to manifest itself in contemporary Guyana. In Guyana today, there are estimates that as many as 50% of Guyanese women have experienced intimate partner violence (Halley and Cowden, 20).

This is a clear indication that although the days of indentured labor might be over, the remnants of such a problematic past are manifesting through such contemporary lingering issues. The trauma inherited from previous generations continues to resurface in subtle forms. It includes cultural estrangement, fragmented identities, and structural inequality. The colonial past continues to tamper with the contemporary functioning of societies. Bahadur's discovery of frequent suicides during those times underscores the present findings-

Plantation life was policed by numbers: how many women, how many births, how many deaths. The records show everything except feeling. Violence was disguised as statistics; a suicide became a line in a ledger. Yet in these bureaucratic remains, one can hear the echoes of despair, the cry of a woman who refused another day of humiliation (Bahadur, 88).

Such incidents of suicide and self-harm amongst indentured women indicate the psychological trauma faced by them. Within a violent colonial order, such trauma is a profound testimony to the silenced experiences of indentured women. As established by Halley and Cowden, the approach to healing should be 'sociogenic'. Such an approach is very similar to understanding the different layers of 'Socioliterature'. In their findings, they observe that sexual possession and subjugation that continue till today are mostly inherited dynamics, and these continue to "characterize and haunt contemporary relationships". Thus, one can see a strong presence of the idea of Socioliterature in the sociogenic approach suggested by Halley and Cowden. Further, their paper brings forth the role of social workers in mitigating mental health issues by encouraging open dialogues about social policies. The contemporary situation

in Guyana, especially regarding violence and suicide, must be understood sociogenically in order to facilitate healing from the grass-roots level.

Conclusion: Ethnography as Witnessing

Bahadur's *Coolie Woman: The Odyssey of Indenture* reconceptualizes ethnography as she positions herself as an insider enduring the wounds of ancestral history. Her narrative seems fictional and historical, objective and affective at the same time, which transforms archival engagement into testimonial writing. She provides a voice to the coolie women who were silenced by history. Instead of claiming authority over their story, Bahadur takes on the role of an active listener and serves as a testament to the trauma endured by them. She indulges in a counter-hegemonic act of post-colonial feminist witnessing that underscores the need for literary representations. Hence, writing serves as a form of remembrance, testimony as a form of resistance, and ethnography as an attempt to unravel the alternate history. In the current context, ethnography provides the author an opportunity to assert autonomy. As an individual suffering from indentured trauma, it gives the authority to transform silenced histories into narrative frameworks. Bahadur's attempt to narrate shadowed history is in itself a form of political resistance.

Bahadur's narrative emerges as an ethnographic counter-discourse, as well as a feminist re-inscription of agency. Unlike other traditional narrative patterns, Bahadur's personal association with traditional anthropology is evident in her unique narrative ability. It shares conceptual ground with Clifford Geertz's notion of "thick description" in *The Interpretation of Cultures*. According to Geertz, ethnography involves the interpretation of meanings grounded in cultural epistemologies rather than reproducing a distanced, hegemonic gaze (Geertz, 10). Bahadur goes through various forms of data, ranging from reading ship registers to visiting sites; in order to trace the origin of indenture that continue to affect their lives in diverse ways. It further connects with James Clifford's claim on ethnography in *The Predicament of Culture*. He asserts that ethnography is "a hybrid textual activity, entailing translation and mediation across cultures" (Clifford, 25). Bahadur's *Coolie Woman*

materializes this hybrid consciousness as she manoeuvres between the extremes of the enduring interplay of colonial legacies and postcolonial realities, silenced voices and discursive representation, trauma and the journey towards self-awareness.

Bahadur's ethical witnessing and her extended role as an auto ethnographer serves as a crucial narrative technique to provide a voice to the voiceless coolie women. Her bold and strong declaration serves as a testimony to the same.

I am implicated in the story I tell. I am not neutral. I am her kin, her descendant, and in that relationship, I inherit the responsibility to reconstruct her experiences as faithfully as possible. To write is to intervene, to shape the narrative while remaining aware of the gaps, the silences, and the impossibilities. In claiming her story, I am also claiming a collective history that had been rendered invisible, and through that claim, I am transformed as both writer and witness (Bahadur, 9).

Caruth's theorization of trauma is in complete alignment with Bahadur's *Coolie Woman*. The harsh history and treatment meted out to indentured women being erased from historical records highlights the biased side of history. The legacy of marginalization occurring due to colonial narratives continues. Bahadur's ethnographic account serves as a witness, providing a voice to the silenced and fragmented voices across generations. The following statement articulate Bahadur's role as an author as well as mediator, and her attempt to transform trauma into testimony.

I stand between the archive and the silence, between what was written and what was lived. My task is not to invent, but to interpret, to give coherence to fragments that history abandoned. Every testimony I reconstruct is both truth and imagination, an attempt to restore dignity where the record shows only disgrace (Bahadur, 139).

By revisiting and re-narrating her great-grandmother Sujaria's story, Bahadur attempts to unravel the collective history of indentured women. Such narratives serve as source of continued trauma as well as a source of healing. Writers like Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub in their seminal work *Testimony: Crisis of Witnessing*

in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History lay emphasis on the ethical listening and the methodological role of silence in ethnography. It resonates with Bahadur's narrative and findings:

I could not find her voice, but I could trace her silences. In letters never written, in names unrecorded, in the gaps between arrivals and departures, there were stories that refused to die. I read between lines, interpreted omissions, and imagined moments of suffering and endurance. The silences themselves became a language through which the women spoke, demanding that someone hear, interpret, and bear witness to what had been deliberately obscured (Bahadur 104).

The paper facilitates further research on areas associated with biography, re-writing history from the point of view of the marginalised. A comparative study of texts can also be attempted to enable contemporary discussions on various aspects associated with displaced identities. A thorough examination of intergenerational trauma can also be taken into consideration. Being a third generation descendent of indentured women, Bahadur might be at a slight disadvantage of not witnessing traumatic events first hand. However, her intense research which covered Guyana as well as India paved the way to the understanding the different layers of trauma embedded within indentured labour in the Caribbean. The dreaded 'C word' has been employed by the author as a mark of 'shared beginnings' which she claims is true to her subject.

Bahadur's work *Coolie Woman* therefore holds much relevance in the context of the current findings regarding mental health issues especially related to women in Guyana as observed in the earlier sections of the paper. This can further enable researchers can take up an intensive qualitative or quantitative study on the overlapping of historical trauma and mental health in the contemporary context.

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