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A VOYAGE OF PARADOXES
Reconstructing Indian Indenture in the British Caribbean through the Lens of Narratives

> Where are your monuments, your battles, martyrs?
> Where is your tribal memory? Sirs,
> in that grey vault. The sea. The sea
> has locked them up. The sea is History.
> Derek Walcott, "The Sea Is History"

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In the opening stanza of his poem, "The Sea Is History" (2007), Nobel Laureate Derek Walcott suggests that History is a tangible document of memory preserved in the great vault of the sea. He compares the idea of the journey of the African slaves to the Caribbean to that of the journey of the Israelites to the Promised Land. Walcott challenges the idea that history only exists when memory and events are recorded and thus accepted as historical. Did the Promised Land referred to in his poem really exist, or was it a myth? While it finds reference in the Holy Bible, the book itself remains at the center of debates as to whether it is a religious or a historical text; with many terming it "interpreted history." In the Indian indenture discourse, the Promised Land alludes to the land of promises, or the land of dreams, which was "sold" as a pull factor to the Indians to convince them to indenture. To the hapless Indians, living under deplorable conditions owing to droughts and famines in British India, the British-owned plantation colonies in Mauritius and the Caribbean were projected as Paradise.[1] The paradox, however, is that *Hesperus*, which carried the first lot of indentured Indians to the American continent in 1838, was not sailing towards paradise. Instead, its deceived cargo was being sent to work on the sugarcane plantations of British Guy-

1 For a detailed list of factors inducing Indians to indenture, see Kumar 2014; Gillion 1973.

ana in the Caribbean. Shan Razack informs that *Hesperus* sailed from Calcutta on January 29, 1838, and over the next four months, "13 immigrants died during the voyage including two persons who fell over-board. Out of the 152 immigrants that came on board the Hesperus, were 135 men, 6 women and 11 children!" (2013). Did American poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow have the same ship in mind while composing his narrative poem, "The Wreck of the Hesperus" in 1840? Was he perhaps inspired by the great blizzard of January 1839 that had destroyed twenty ships of the north-east coast of the United States? While it is open to interpretation, it does seem plausible that Longfellow may have known about *Hesperus* and its precious human cargo. However, contrary to the title of his poem, *Hesperus* was not wrecked during the blizzard, and Longfellow's account was admittedly fictional.

During the almost century-long period of indenture (1833–1920), *Hesperus* made several transoceanic voyages, ferrying indentured Indians to the British plantation colonies in the Caribbean. Madhavi Kale reports that "Between 1845 and 1917, approximately 450,000 Indian indentured migrants left for the British Caribbean, the majority going (in steeply descending order) to British Guiana, Trinidad and Jamaica" (121). In his book, *Girmitiyas,* historian Brij Lal informs, "[B]etween the years 1838 and 1916, a total number of 238,909 Indians were indentured and sent to British Guiana. Trinidad received 143,939 indentured emigrants between 1845 and 1916" (13).[2] Following the abolition of slavery, the period between 1833 and 1920 witnessed many transoceanic migrations under the capital labour system of indenture devised by the British.[3] The British had been engaged in transporting African slaves to their colonies in the Caribbean and in North America before slavery was outlawed in all the British colonies by the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833 (Asaolu 67). The apprenticeship system, which was brought in to replace slavery, was largely unsuccessful, and the British felt the urgent need to compensate for the shortage of labor felt on their plantation colonies. This led to large-scale recruitment under the system of indenture, which displaced close to 1.3 million Indians, who were sent as indentured labor to the British, French, and Dutch plantation colonies across the globe. Colin G. Clarke reveals, "About 1.3 million indentured Indian workers migrated to the following colonies/countries: Mauritius, British Guyana, Natal (South Africa), Trinidad,

2 For more information on the numbers of indentured Indians sent to the British colonies, see Sen 2016.

3 Tinker 1974 and Saunders 1983 have detailed the entire system of Indian indenture and its immense global outreach.

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Fiji, Guadeloupe, Kenya, Uganda, Jamaica, Dutch Guiana/Suriname, Martinique, Seychelles, St. Lucia, Grenada and St. Vincent" (9).

In *Voices from Indenture,* Marina Carter induces that with a few exceptions pertaining to specific colonies, the rudiments of the indenture agreement (termed *girmit* by the unlettered Indians) were largely the same. Once a person agreed to indenture and became a *girmitiya* (someone who agreed to *girmit*)[4], they would be entitled to free transport to a plantation colony in exchange for a stipulated period of labor: "[A]n indentured migrant was an individual who had not paid his or her passage but had entered into an agreement to receive transported assistance to a colony in return for a fixed period of labour" (101). A ten-year labor term came with the promise of a free return passage to India, whereas a five-year *girmit* would entail the migrant paying his own return fare to India once the indenture was over. The contract also allowed for re-indenturing or working elsewhere on the colony if the migrant did not wish to return to India. In some colonies, migrants could also choose "[T]o receive a piece of crown land on the colony in lieu of the fare were also offered a piece of land in lieu of the return fare" (Carter 108). Briefly, the indenture process comprised five steps—recruitment, transportation to the depot, boarding the ship and undertaking the voyage, disembarking and quarantine in the colony upon arrival, and finally, being sent to work on a plantation. On paper, the process seemed simple enough. What it did not consider, and what in fact remains largely underrepresented in literature, is the inhumane treatment meted out to the migrants throughout the process. Their identity was erased, and they were dehumanized, with the colonists addressing them as *coolies* (a pejorative term for low-wage unskilled labor). Ahmed Ali informs that on paper, the indenture contract stipulated working for nine hours, five consecutive days of every week, with five hours on Saturday, in return for less than a shilling for a day's work (*Girmit* 7). In reality, the work hours were longer and arduous, with minimal wages amounting to barely ten cents per day. Further, if ration was supplied to the migrants, as it would be initially, it would entail a deduction of almost one-third in the payable wages (Klass 14). The migrants also learnt that a week's ration barely lasted five days, and hunger was a common occurrence.[5] They could be tried for any offence deemed proper by the British authorities,

4 I have used *girmitiya/s* in the article to refer to the Indians transported to the plantation colonies under the system of indenture. It is the accepted gender-neutral term of reference for the Indian indentured diaspora.

5 For more information on rations for the indentured on the plantations, see: Lal 1991.

and the fine would mean a further deduction in their daily wages. Punishments included being thrashed and beaten, with the women facing double marginalization and remaining vulnerable to sexual assault by the overseers. Further, the indentured Indians were not allowed to take recourse to legal measures.[6] Sudesh Mishra laments that "The act of becoming an indenture became an "atemporal ontology of suffering, hardship and deceit" (14). He further adds that the act of deception by the colonists began with the indentured Indians boarding the "[W] rong ship, to undertake the wrong voyage, to disembark at the wrong destination" (22). Madhwi informs, "Some recruits were not even aware about the exact location of the colonies, which they took it to be part of, or some land close to, India" (55). Thus, their voyage to the Promised Land turned out to be a sinister journey.

All journeys undertake two simultaneous movements, inward and outward. The voyage on the ships forms an essential component in indenture history, with the crossing of the *Kala pani* (black water of the oceans) becoming metonymical for the arduous transoceanic journey. This life-changing voyage is so crucial in the indenture process that all narratives on the subject devote considerable time and space to discuss not only the physical nature of the journey, but also its psychological dimension, including the loss of cultural and social identity owing to the crossing, the resultant state of inbetweenness, and finally, the origin of a new identity on the ships. Since crossing the oceans is a fundamental process in indenture, the ship became a metaphor for the process of migration; the site where identity was renegotiated. The indentured voices that chronicle these transoceanic crossings highlight the crucial importance of the voyage.[7]

Likened to the Middle Passage for the erstwhile slaves, the *Kala pani* crossings are seen as a symbol of social and cultural death for the indentured people. The reason for this is the construct of the concept of *Kala pani* for a Hindu. Bates and Carter have minutely researched the concept and found it "[T]o derive from long-held notions that sea crossings were antithetical to Hindu culture, entailing a separation of the traveler from the holy Ganges, thereby breaking the reincarnation cycle and engendering a loss of caste" (37).[8] Researchers and scholars of indenture have long believed that loss of caste owing to excommunication was among the chief reasons why Hindus did

6 For more information on the features of indenture, see: Kumar 2017.

7 For more literature detailing the voyage, see: Mohabir 2019; Kabir 2021; Dabydeen, Kaladeen and Ramnarine, eds. 2018; Phukan 2022; Singh 2022; Lal, ed. 2022.

8 For more information on the Hindu concept of *Kala pani*, see: Bindra 2002.

not willingly choose to indenture. Crossing the highly contested *Kala pani* would close all avenues of return to the homeland. As a result, the journey came to be looked on as punishment, with the ship being likened to a prison. However, it is pertinent to note that losing one's caste, and being excommunicated owing to the crossing would have negatively impacted only the high-caste Brahmins, who formed the elite and privileged class in India, and whose number in indenture was already very low. Daniel Bass notes, "[M]any Indian migrants would have been more than happy to lose their caste position, since caste was one of the many factors supporting their low-status and poverty in India" (27). This gives rise to another paradox about the voyage, since, instead of acting as a deterrent, loss of caste proved to be a pull factor, encouraging large numbers among the lower caste Hindus to indenture. To contest the "loss-of-caste narrative" that was associated with crossing the *Kala pani,* the indentured Indians belonging to the non-Brahmin castes launched a counter narrative, one which found many followers in India. Madhavi Kale quotes George A. Grierson, the British Collector in Gaya, who noted: "About caste, the people have invented a curious theory regarding ship-board life … a man can eat anything on board-ship. A ship is like the temple of Jagannath, where there are not caste restrictions" (128). This counter narrative found favor among the indentured, as is evident from the large number of returnees (Indians who re-migrated to the plantation colonies after the end of their indenture period) to British Guiana. K.O. Laurence informs that 5826 Indians re-indentured to British Guiana and 2619 *girmitiyas* re-migrated to Trinidad between the years 1875 and 1894 (127–28).

It is also noteworthy that, while in their writings, the successive generations of the Indian indenture diaspora extrapolate the experience of dislocation experienced by their ancestors, they also lay considerable emphasis on the new identity of *jahajis* ('voyagers' in Hindi) that was forged during the crossing. They reimagine the voyage as being both traumatic and liberating for the indentured, with the ship becoming the site of the initial transformation and reconstruction of identity. In their paper, historians Crispin Bates and Marina Carter refer to the *Kala pani* crossings as: "[P]hysical and spiritual dislocations – the journeying into feared encounters and the erasures of past attachments, a suspension of existence and an absence of belonging" (55). Almost as if choosing to indenture were an act of transgression, prior to boarding the ships bound for the Caribbean, the upper-caste Hindu men symbolically removed their *janews* (sacred thread worn around the upper torso by *Brahmin* boys as a rite of passage upon entering their youth), and immersed them in the waters

of the *Hoogly* river in Calcutta. Some of them changed their given names and chose a new name for identification on their agreement paper. Once on board the ships, they were met with a different social order than the one they had been accustomed to since birth. The ships were a remnant of the past of slavery, and even the clothes handed out to the *girmitiyas* had previously been worn by the manumitted slaves. They were all housed in cramped quarters in the cabins below the deck, where the social mores of caste hierarchy and cultural norms witnessed a complete breakdown.[9] Gaiutra Bahadur in *Coolie Woman* refers to a folk song sung by the indentured people in British Guiana:

> When we reached Calcutta, our miseries increased.
> We were stripped of all our beautiful clothes,
> Rosary beads and sacred threads.
> Bengali rags decorated us now.
> The sadhu's hair was shaved.
> And sadhu, Dom, Chamar and Bhangi,
> All were thrown together in a room (44).

In *Jahajin,* Peggy Mohan provides a description of the layout of the ships carrying the indentured migrants to Trinidad: "The single men's quarters were in the front of the boat, under the main deck, the married couples' quarters were behind that, and the single women's quarters were in the back, below the poop deck and the main deck" (53). Communicable diseases, such as typhoid, smallpox, dysentery, and cholera were common, and lack of proper sanitation facilities expedited their spread across the ship.[10] Deaths on board were a common occurrence. In their journal, the Swintons reveal that *Salsette,* a ship carrying 323 indentured Indians to the Caribbean, witnessed the death of 38 per cent of its human cargo due to an outbreak of cholera (10). Oral testimonies recounted by the indentured people refer to the dehumanizing experience of indenture; they were made to sit with animals on the ship, and were given "dog biscuits," which had to be "soaked in water" before they could be eaten (Sanadhya 36). Bates and Carter examine these writings as a "[D]iscourse on the liberation of borderlessness and a loss-of caste-that is paradoxically a gain" (56). In their anthology, *Coolitude*, Torabully and Carter see the voyage as an essential component of indenture and explore "[T]he concept

9 For first-person narratives detailing the experience of the voyage, see: Sanadhya 1991; Khan 2005.

10 For medical conditions of the *girmitiyas* on board the ships, see: Brown and Mahase 2009.

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of the ocean as a nodal moment of migration, a space for destruction of identity, yet also one of regeneration, when an aesthetics of migration was created" (17). Drawing upon Afro-Martiniquan French poet Aimé Césaire's concept of "Negritude," Mauritian poet, Khal Torabully, conceptualized "Coolitude" to disclose, "The coolie's story which has been shipwrecked ('erased') in the ocean of a Western-made historical discourse as well as a world of publication and criticism" (*Coolitude* 15).[11] In indenture literature, the voyage has come to be seen as a symbol of an interstitial site, where the loss of caste, paradoxically, is seen as a gain for the indentured people belonging to the lower castes. The transoceanic voyage managed to loosen the anchor of the homeland and allowed it to drift closer to the adopted land. In a sense, the ship became the site where the past was cremated and a new beginning was made. Almost all indenture voices agree on the ship becoming their point of origin.[12] In *Coolie Woman*, Gaiutra Bahadur marks the origin of her family genealogy thus: "In our beginning there was a boat" (64). A celebrated Caribbean poet of the indenture diaspora, Mahadai Das has titled her seminal poem "They Came in Ships" (1977) to mark the ship as the focal point of the origin of her forbears. "They came in ships / Far from across the seas" (25). In writing "They Came in ships" instead of "They came from India", Das negates the homeland, which witnesses an erasure in her poem. Instead, she focuses on the leitmotif of the voyage in the indenture history of the Caribbean. Her poem incorporates various "sites of memory" (from Pierre Nora's 1989 term "Lieux de Memoire") and serves as a poetic historical lesson on indenture to remind the generations that follow of their center of origin. Das suggests that the origin of identity for the present-day indenture diaspora in the Caribbean is the ship and not the homeland[13].

The ship thus became both the place of rupture as well as of alternate identity building for the Caribbean-bound indentured Indians. In *Girmit*, Ahmed Ali focuses on the life-changing journey, referring to it as a space where "Those recruited had ceased to be individuals, they were all labourers together, that was the only recognized common denominator; caste, religion and status by birth were of little or no consequence" (3). In *Chalo Jahaji*, historian Brij V. Lal hails

11 For more information on the concept of Coolitude, see: Torabully and Carter, eds. 2002.

12 For more information, see: Misrahi-Barak 2017; Soares 1994.

13 While the scope of this paper is limited to select narratives, the belief that the ship was the of origin their identity, has also been expanded and advanced in the poetry and fiction written by the successive generations of the indenture diaspora. Also see: Ballengee 2022.

the voyage as "[A] great leveller of hierarchy and status," and one where "[E]veryone is equal in the denial of their individual humanity" (13, 29). The ship, and, by extension, the long voyage itself, became "the third space," which provided the indentured Indians with a new cultural hybrid identity. "The Third Space" is defined by postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha as a space of hybridity that resists cultural domination and authority, and instead gives "[R]ise to something different, something new and unrecognizable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation." He further adds that "[T]he importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace two original moments from which the third emerges." Instead, he refers to it as "[T]he 'Third Space', which enables other positions to emerge into one cohesive whole" (211). Lal views the voyage as the "in-between" space from where a hybrid identity emerged from a "shared sense of servitude," and consolidated itself into becoming part of a cohesive cultural and social group (*Chalo Jahaji* 47). The ship, called *jahaj* in Hindi, bound the Indians together as *jahaji bhais* (ship brothers) and *jahaji behens* (ship sisters), and created the essence of jahajihood, which was born in that liminal space, and which continued to impact the later generations of the indenture diaspora. Peggy Mohan extrapolates, "Those on the same boat were looked on as apanpalwaar (our family) and they started addressing each other as *jahaji bhai* and *jahajibehen*. Their new identity, the one they chose for themselves, was *jahajis* (shipmates)" (*Jahajin* 83). Although signing the agreement to indenture had given power to their colonizers to turn the Indians into *coolies,* calling themselves *jahajis* can be seen as a subtle wresting of control by the migrants.[14] It was also their first simple act of resistance. In *Coolie Woman*, speaking about her great-grandmother, Gaiutra Bahadur writes, "She was one individual swept up in a particular mass movement of people, and the perceptions of those who controlled that process determined her identity at least as much as she did. The power of her colonizers to name and misname her formed a key part of her story" (xxii). Bahadur may have written this for her great-grandmother, but it holds equally true for all Indians who undertook the transoceanic crossings under the system of indenture. Literary critic, Stuart Hall refers to cultural identity as "[P]oints of identification, the unstable points of identification or suture,

14 The term 'Coolie' carries multi-layered meanings. There is an ongoing debate over its use for addressing *girmitiyas*; some authors of the indenture diaspora shun it, while others advocate to reclaim it, and give it a new lease of life. For more information, see: Mahase 2020.

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which are made, within the discourses of history and culture" (226). He further opines:

> […] as well as the many points of similarity, there are also critical points of deep and significant *difference* which constitute 'what we really are'; or rather—since history has intervened—'what we have become'. We cannot speak for very long, with any exactness, about 'one experience, one identity', without acknowledging its other side—the ruptures and discontinuities which constitute, precisely, the Caribbean's 'uniqueness' (225).

Mariam Pirbhai views the ship as: "[A] unifying symbol for indentured peoples just as it did for those who endured the middle passage." Their new *jahaji* identity, apart from being a reconstitution, became a counter discourse of cultural reconfiguration, which would serve, "[T]o counteract the assimilative forces of life overseas, far from the protective bail of their ancient homeland" (55). Pirbhai also suggests that "[W]hile the individual's sense of identity is destabilised, both in the process of transplantation and the moment of contact, there is a counter impulse toward a transcendent spiritual fraternity" (57).

Another paradox that was witnessed during the voyage pertains to the transformation of the indentured people owing to their new *jahaji* identity. Their homogenous identity provided a much-needed anchor during the long and arduous transoceanic journey. Not only did it fill the vacuum caused due to loss of familial ties in India, it also grew roots, strengthened, and endured, allowing for Indians of different castes, cultures, and religions to find common ground, and be seen by their colonizers as a united and cohesive group.[15] Poet Sudesh Mishra informs, "[…] [M]any things were lost during that nautical passage, family, caste and religion, and yet many things were also found, chamars found Brahmins, Muslims found Hindus, biharis found marathis, so that by the end of the voyage we were a nation of *jahaji bhais*[…] all for one and one for all[…]" (12). Just as the ship became their new origin, the new hybrid identity of *jahajis* became their cultural identity, one they identified with during their entire period of indenture in the plantation colony. Bahadur states, "The moorings of caste had loosened, and people who had left behind uncles, sisters, husbands and mothers substituted shipmates, their jahajis, for kin. Unraveled, they began, ever so slowly, to spin the threads of a novel identity" (62).

15 These ties were lasting and endured through the long years of their indenture. For more information, see: Samaroo and Dabydeen, eds. 1987.

Women in indenture constituted a complex paradigm in their transcolonial migration and remained marred in complexities during the entire period of their indenture. Already marginalized as the weaker sex in the homeland, their vulnerability was heightened on board the ships.[16] Just like the men, they too had become outcastes in Indian society owing to their crossing the *Kala pani*. While the patriarchal society of India would still find ways to welcome their sons back home, the "motherland" would never accept its outcaste women. Instead, it would treat them as *pariahs* (outcaste) and deny them a return. Whether they had come willingly, or by force through abduction, the women were aware of this fact when they came aboard the ships. It was the single women that suffered more than women who had indentured along with their families. Yet, it was the single women that made up the majority of women in indenture. Despite their triple vulnerable status and victimization that was meted by the hands of the colonial officers, the middlemen and their own Indian brethren, indenture offered the women an opportunity to renegotiate their peripheral position and move to the center. Almost all accounts written on indenture describe the women's subaltern status, with their ratio of 40 to 100 men making them constant victims of rape and violence.[17] Yet, paradoxically, it is their low numbers that ensured them a level of privilege, and granted them agency. Their scarcity gave them some control over the terms of their indenture, and offered them social mobility. The Indian Emigration Act of 1864 had, after revision, made it compulsory to ensure forty women for every hundred men sailing on the ships to the colonies. Gaiutra Bahadur informs that despite great care being taken to house the single men and women separately, "Power was being renegotiated between men and women in the 'tween decks. What had seemed unthinkable in India was becoming conceivable as the seas were crossed. In some cases, women discovered a whole new ability to set terms and conditions" (72). Whether it was a calculated move by the colonists to buy their favor, or simply because they were women, they received lesser quantity of food than the males on board the ships, making them resort to desperate measures to assuage their hunger. At times, sleeping with the colonists, as well as the Indian seamen on the ships was the only option they were offered in return for more food. There was no rule that restricted sex with female immigrants, and in the absence of any checks or penalties, sexual

16 For more information on the vulnerability of indentured women, see: Poynting 1986; Reddock 1985.

17 See the episodes about Narayani and Kunti narrated by Sanadhya 1991.

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abuse of women continued unabated onboard the vessels. In *Coolie Woman*, one of the female voices informs, "One night the surgeon came down between the decks, took me by the arm, and dragged me into his cabin, and had connexion with me…I was not a prostitute in India" (58). The toilets on the ships "[S]erved as a bizarre portal to the women aboard, where 'puddings' were occasionally left as sad enticements for sexual favours" (Bahadur 51). When the women took up the courage to complain to the Protector of Immigrants, they found themselves doubly victimized and called "sluts." It is unfortunate that male writers have long been unwittingly complicit in reinforcing the stereotype of indentured women as immoral. They have not questioned the colonial archive that has cast the coolie woman as the seductress who enticed men in return for "pudding"!

Statistical data of the immigrants compiled by historians reveals that a majority of the indentured women were not accompanied by male relatives. This has led to their being stereotyped on the binary of either innocent victims of indenture who were kidnapped and abducted, or as widows, abandoned, fallen women and prostitutes, escaping the oppressive conditions leading to their marginalization in India. Whether they were sexually molested and raped, or whether they gave in "willingly" to meet the scarcity of food, their choices in creating an alternative life for themselves were certainly limited. In the narratives written by men, whether colonists or Indians, their one-sided readings on the indentured women in colonial 'his'tory have not allowed the women to either represent, or speak for themselves, relegating them to a double displacement in the literary space.[18] Bahadur reiterates, "Women … were not known persons at that time (19). It is the women writers of the later generation, who through their research-driven narratives, have retrieved the 'her'stories of their female forbears and "sailed" with them through their journeys towards their subsequent reinvention.[19]

Women writers have given voice to the suffering that indentured women underwent on the voyage, highlighting the fact that they faced greater troubles than men owing to their gender. Bahadur extrapolates that among other hardships, the women on the ships were "[G]iving birth, losing children, going mad, being driven to suicide, engaged in infanticide, rejecting or being rejected by shipboard husbands …" (63).

18 For more information on the (mis)representation of women in indenture by male writers, see: Klein 2019.

19 There is no first-person record written by women who underwent indenture. While some women have spoken about their journey and experience on the plantations, it has been left to their descendants to write about the experiences of their foremothers. For more information, see: Pande 2020.

Despite these setbacks, the women, more than the men, kept looking forward towards the end of the journey. While the men were looking back towards the homeland with a sense of nostalgia, the women were looking ahead with longing towards the new land they were sailing to. This is because, despite their lamentable condition, indenture was seen as an opportunity—an escape hatch—through which they would be able to break away from the shackles of patriarchy and create a new beginning, as well as a new life for themselves. In *Jahajin,* one of the female voices says, "We stopped talking about all that happened before. It was as if we had left the people we used to be behind us" (83). Marking a clear departure from the rudiments of the Indian patriarchal society that favored boys, pregnant women on board the ships hoped their wombs would yield girls. "We already have too many boys... What we need now is some girls" (*Jahajin* 65). "We stopped looking back. I think we had finally crossed the *kala pani* in our minds, changed from being the people we were before. The sad notes of the *beeraha* we had sung as we crossed that ocean had brightened into a new song, a song with no dark corners and no storms" (82).

The voyage led to a revaluation of the ascribed gender roles for women. Brinda Mehta notes how "[S]patial dissolutions motivated the blurring of caste, class and regional distinctions that provided Indian women with the scope for a certain sexual mobility" (193). She further adds that "[B]y openly flouting the very idea of Brahmanic monogamy, with its thesis of allegiance to one man and one family, these women were able to challenge traditional cultural norms and Hindu familial structures that had been deeply embedded in the Indian psyche for centuries" (193). Thus, crossing the *Kala pani*, paradoxically, gave the indentured women a rebirth and saved them from being shunned into oblivion in the homeland. In India, their fate would have accorded them an oppressive life lived in the margins. Indenture allowed the women to negate their earlier identity, and renegotiate a new one for themselves.[20] In *Coolie Woman*, one of the polyphonic voices speaks, "On that mad ocean, we came to life … We crossed seven seas: seven shades of water, shades of darkness and light, light that died and darkness that was born, darkness somehow extinguished and light rekindled[…] to spin the thread of a novel identity" (62).

A close reading of the narratives on indenture reveals that the transoceanic crossing, which is a key component in the indenture paradigm, has for long remained riddled with myths and stereotypes. The nar-

20 For more information on how women renegotiated their identity during indenture, see: Mukherjee 2015.

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ratives play a starring role in uncovering the many paradoxes linked to the sea voyage from India to the Caribbean. After stepping aboard the ship, the *girmitiyas* faced the reality of their dashed dreams about the Promised Land, one which had induced them to indenture. However, instead of mourning the loss of caste on crossing the *Kala pani*, a majority of the indentured Indians, who belonged to the lower castes in India, and were living deplorable lives as subalterns, celebrated the rupture with the homeland and hailed the ship as their new point of origin. Paradoxically, the loss of their individual identity led to the forging of a new collective cultural identity, that of *Jahaji bhais* and *Jahaji behens*, which endured long after their indenture was completed. The narratives on indenture written by women writers have called to question the one-sided view promulgated by male writers about the woeful and lamentable lives of the indentured women. Women writers lend voice to the hitherto voiceless and silenced *jahajins* who have slipped through the gaps in 'his'story. Their narratives divulge what can now be seen as one the greatest of paradoxes about indenture. It was during the voyage that the women discovered how their scarcity, while being the cause of their hardship and victimization, was simultaneously the ground for affecting their agency. Their indenture made them a stakeholder, and granted them more autonomy than they could have ever imagined receiving in India. On the ship, their gendered differentiation pushed them from the footnotes of the migration saga and brought them to the center. The voyage thus, serves as a metaphor for the poetics of indenture, with the narratives playing a starring role in reconstructing the transoceanic crossing, and allowing for a true reflection of the experience of the journey.

Abstract: The almost century-long system of Indian indenture (1830–1920) initiated by the British after the abolishment of slavery in 1833 displaced 1.3 million Indians who were taken as cheap contract labor to work on the plantation colonies of the Empire. This paper will draw focus on the voyage undertaken by the indentured Indians across the Indian and Atlantic Oceans to the British plantation colonies in the Caribbean. It will deconstruct certain stereotypes and myths about the journey on the ships across the *Kala pani* (black waters of the Indian and Atlantic Oceans) that have for long been reproduced in the earlier literature written on indenture. The journey of the indentured Indians to the Promised Land, towards the American continent, was paradoxically not for adventure, or for a religious cause, or even to pursue a dream, but was, quite simply, a means to an end. The ship, and by extension, the voyage, would become the site of their coming together, and it is from the ships that would emerge the narratives of their origin. Through a growing body of work across diverse genres of poetry, fiction and prose, the succeeding generations of the indentured people have been engaged in interrogating and reclaiming the indenture experience of their forbears in order to mine the legacies

of indenture. This paper will take a closer look at select narratives documenting the invisible and unvoiced 'her'stories to reveal the several paradoxes surrounding the experience of the transoceanic voyage in indenture.

Keywords: Indenture, Caribbean, Voyage, *Kala pani*, *Jahajis*

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