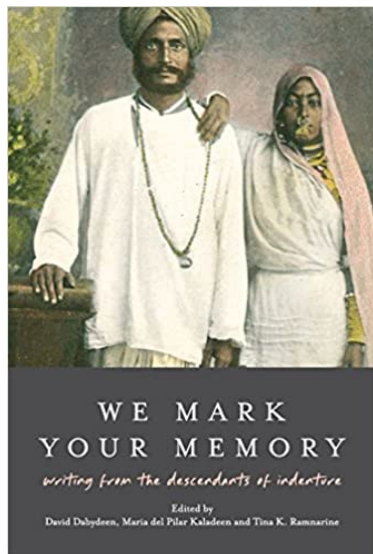


## Review Article

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### ***We Mark Your Memory: Writings from the Descendants of Indenture (2018)***

Edited by David Dabydeen, Maria del Pilar Kaladeen and Tina K. Ramnarine



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Writing the history of indentured diaspora primarily depends on the available archives that contain the official and personal documents related to this history. While the State archives contain scanty materials for research in this area, considerable efforts have been made by the descendants of the indentured labourers to retrieve personal narratives of their ancestors. Retrieving these personal narratives, have indeed, played a major role in creating small family archives, which have inspired the present generation of authors/researchers to document the history of indentured diaspora. Indeed, this history is the outcome of intensive research on the genealogies of the descendants of indentured labourers. Stories narrated by the indentured labourers, old photographs, diary writings, travel documents and such other records are significant archival materials based on which the present generation of authors/researchers trace their family's past as well as that of the community. These family archives provide considerable resource for research on history of indentured diaspora. It is in the context of this background that the anthology, *We Mark Your Memory: Writings from the Descendants of Indenture* (2018) edited by David Dabydeen, Maria del Pilar Kaladeen and Tina K. Ramnarine may be considered as

a worthy contribution to the history of indenture diaspora. This anthology, which the editors of the book claim to be a “commemorative volume” (Dabydeen, Kaladeen, & Ramnarine, 2018, p. xii), is an attempt to collate the creative/critical pieces written by the descendants of indentured labourers (coolies). Production of such an anthology to mark the centenary year of the abolition of indentureship (1917) is a praiseworthy initiative. The publication of this book is the outcome of a collaborative venture between the School of Advanced Studies, University of London and the association of Commonwealth Writers, which inevitably foregrounds the active global network of almost thirty writers from various regions of the world working seriously on this project of retrieving the lost indentured narratives. The editors of the book acknowledge the genuine contribution of the association of Commonwealth Writers, which is “the cultural initiative of the Commonwealth Foundation” and this association, the editors claim, “inspires and connects writers and storytellers across the world, bringing personal stories to a global audience” (Dabydeen et al., 2018, p. vii). The pronoun ‘we’ of the title of this book represents the storytellers of the present generation, while the determiner ‘your’, mentioned in the title, refers to the coolies, the ancestors of these storytellers. The book therefore is indicative of academic activism that seeks to highlight the significance of reading, researching and discussing these personal narratives in the context of indenture diaspora.

The cover page of the book presents a photograph of an indentured couple who are probably married and this is accompanied by a scanned copy of the emigration pass of an indentured worker named, Juman Khan. This man, as the details on the emigration pass indicate, is from Allahabad and he boarded the ship ‘Hereford’ in the Calcutta port in March 1894 to migrate to Fiji. This emigration pass, the editors mention, belongs to the maternal great-grandfather of Akhtar Mohammed, one of the contributors to the volume (Dabydeen et al., 2018, p. ii). These documents are the markers of the actual journeys which are being recorded and foregrounded now through efforts such as the present one.

In the introductory chapter, the editors provide a historical account of the beginning of the indenture system of labour, mainly focusing on the Indian indenture system, mentioning all the data related to the transportation of coolies from India to various colonies across the world. The Indian indenture system began in 1834 when coolies emigrated from India to Mauritius (Dabydeen et al., 2018, p. x) and this was followed by migrations of a massive number of labourers to Guyana, Trinidad, Fiji and South Africa. This history of Indian indenture system does not only bring to the minds stories about oppression of Indian workers, but also instances of rebellious intents like, the “coordinated plantation uprisings in Guyana” and the “‘non-resistance’ movement in Fiji, where workers without recourse to other forms of protest, took their own lives in alarming numbers” (Dabydeen et al., 2018, p. xi). The introduction in the book is followed by the editors’ note on the word “coolie”, and in this section, various meanings of the word “coolie” are succinctly explained, tracing the journey of this word from a derogatory sense to “a signifier of a distinct cultural identity” (Dabydeen et al., 2018, p. xiii).

The stories or the narratives in this book can be distinguished on the basis of the thematic content or they can also be classified from the perspective of the geographical location of the indenture system mentioned in the story. Such classifications could have rendered a good structural organization to the volume. In fact, in an edited anthology like this, a proper structuring of contents could have provided a better awareness of the geocultural specificity of authors. Indenture system produced variant social and cultural formations in specific sites, and therefore, the stories in this anthology must be analysed from the perspective of the location of the indenture system. Nine stories are set in Trinidad, five in South Africa, three in Fiji, three in

Mauritius, two in Guyana, one in Malaysia, one in Sri Lanka, one in Virginia, one in Jamaica, one in Samoa, and there is one story that does not refer to any specific geographical location.

Among the nine stories that focus on the indentureship in Trinidad, there are strong emphases on colonial oppression, gender discrimination, unhygienic working condition, and in some cases, the revolutionary spirit of indentured labourers is also the topic of a narrative. “The Rebel” by Kevin Jared Hosein is a typical instance of a story that seeks to foreground the indentured workers’ rebellious intent. In this story, Hosein refers to his father’s friend, Salaman who kills a white man to protest against the colonial overseers responsible for exploiting the indentured labourers and committing various acts of crime. Later, Salaman is arrested and also imprisoned. This story shows how the colonial administration uses its power to suppress such acts of rebellion in order to create fear in the minds of labourers. Gabrielle Jamela Hosein’s piece, “Chutney Love” interestingly captures the carnival spirit of Indo-Trinidadian women celebrating the “chutney” culture (Dabydeen et al., 2018, p. 71). Using a distinctive creole mode of expression, this poem reflects the pride of Indo-Trinidadian women participating in chutney dance and singing, which is a marker of their indigenous root and identity: “I never yet did leave Trinidad / Since India was left on de boats / So I know dis chutney is real Trini make / National culture like calypso / We did sing it / We did dance it” (Dabydeen et al., 2018, p. 71-72). In another narrative, “I go sen’ for you” the author presents the story of her great-great-grandmother who had to take care of her three children as a single parent after her husband left Trinidad at the end of indentureship contract. This poem by Fawzia Muradali Kane attempts to capture the sad plight of indentured women workers struggling to survive in an alien location without the support of their male partners. Like Kane’s narrative, Jennifer Rahim’s poem, “Great-grandmother, Ma” also seeks to highlight the sorrowful condition of Indo-Trinidadian women who had to bring up many children without support from other family members. Rahim wants to call her great-grandmother as “Ma” claiming to define her identity through matrilineal descent (Dabydeen et al., 2018, p. 129). “Homecoming” by Suzanne Bhagan is quite a unique story because the central character in this narrative, Gita travels to Calcutta to explore the city where her great-great grandmother lived. It was from this city that her great-great grandmother migrated to Trinidad. Gita’s exploration of the city of Calcutta is unique because of her desire to connect with the roots, enabling her to feel the pulse and the rhythm of this city. The city of Calcutta is split between two time frames in the story, one refers to the present time frame and the other one recalls the past, indicating the temporal difference. Stella Chong Sing’s poem, “Buckets” foregrounds the tension between the present generation of Indo-Trinidadian community and the author. While the author believes that many people of her community probably have forgotten the difficult journeys undertaken by their ancestors, she cannot forget these because the stories that she heard from her grandmother have left a strong impression on her mind. Her grandmother’s stories contain the traumatic experiences of a woman who witnessed the death of her three sons and also suffered immensely while working on the plantation fields. This poem attempts to elucidate the traumatic experiences associated with indentureship. The landscape of Trinidad figures prominently in the stories entitled, “Sita and Jatayu” and “Tales of the Sea”. In the former story, the author, Lelawattee Manoo-Rahming uses the mythical narrative of Sita and Jatayu to conceive a tale of sea journey undertaken by Indian indentured women. These women travellers represent the mythical Sita and they are protected by the nature that contains the mythical spirit of Jatayu. The latter story by Gaiutra Bahadur seeks to record the trauma inflicted upon the minds of the descendants of indentured labourers. Though the colonial empire has disintegrated, the histories of colonial oppression have united the people whose ancestors were once slaves to the colonial masters, “We were living in the afterlife of empire. The past wasn’t really past. It had left us with an inheritance

of harm, but it had also given us an opportunity to belong to something bigger and broader than our immediate origins” (Dabydeen et al., 2018, p. 163-164). The only narrative in the group of these nine stories related to Trinidad which cannot be termed as a story is, “The Protest March that Ended Indian Indentureship in St Vincent”. This is a critical narrative that refers to the revolutionary impulse of the indentured workers living in St Vincent during the nineteenth century. These workers, as the author Annold N. Thomas states, protested against the injustice of the colonial masters leading to the end of indentureship in St Vincent.

The five stories that refer to the indenture system in South Africa are interesting from the point of view of certain specific historical events. The issue of apartheid and the response of Mahatma Gandhi to indenture system are important topics in some stories. Prithiraj R. Dullay’s “My Father the Teacher” presents the story of the author’s father who participated in the anti-apartheid movement and also joined the movement, initiated by Mahatma Gandhi, against the “three pound tax” imposed on the Indians by the colonial government (Dabydeen et al., 2018, p. 26). The narrative entitled, “Gandhi and the Girmitya” by Satendra Nandan contains a poetic representation of Mahatma Gandhi’s real encounter with an Indian coolie in South Africa. Before beginning the poem, Nandan refers to Gandhi’s book, *An Autobiography: The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, which contains Gandhi’s description of his encounter with an Indian coolie. Using this as an inspiration for his poem, he tries to represent Gandhi’s empathy for an Indian coolie in poetic form. Apart from these two stories, the three other stories in this group of narratives exhibit the efforts made by the descendants of the coolies to retrieve the lost histories of their respective ancestors.

In the Fijian group of narratives, Brij V. Lal’s “The Tamarind Tree” is an exceptional piece as it starts with a reference to Ghalib’s poetic lines in which the symbol of ash evokes a sense of loss, igniting a desire to know the thing that is destroyed by fire. The tamarind tree in the story, which is destroyed by lightning, has been a witness to the several cultural and religious activities of the generations of indentured labourers in Labasa, Fiji. Ashes of this tree now remind the author about the past connecting him with those ancestors who once assembled under the shade of this tree. Two other stories in this group narrativize the pain of losing contact with coolie forefathers and also emphasize the need to associate with the members of Indo-Fijian community.

Among the stories that refer to the indenture system in Mauritius, Priya N. Hein’s “Paradise Island” is a painful story of separation of siblings under the indenture system. Gitan Djeli’s “Mother Wounds” is another story in this group that seriously captures the trauma of indentureship for women. Post-indentureship scenario is the topic of the third story in this group and the author, Kama La Mackerel uses the idea of “building walls” (Dabydeen et al., 2018, p. 114) to distinguish the opulent people of post-indentured generation from the poor coolies of the past.

The Guyanese group of stories contain two narratives and the one that deserves attention is “Escape from El Dorado: a bittersweet journey through my Guyanese history” by Anita Sethi. In this narrative, Sethi refers to the vast sugar plantation fields of Guyana which in a sense is associated with her grandmother’s shop “filled with sweets and chocolate” at Stretford in England (Dabydeen et al., 2018, p. 46). Impossibility of erasing the history of Guyanese sugar plantation from Sethi’s life is evident in the statement, “The story of sugar is interwoven with that of my life” (Dabydeen et al., 2018, p. 46). This story also explains the myth of El Dorado, “the fabled city of gold” in Guyana that “lured the British, French and Dutch in search of gold” (Dabydeen et al., 2018, p. 45).

Reference to the Malaysian indenture system is evident in the short extract selected from Aneta Sundararaj’s novel, *The Age of Smiling Secrets*. This short narrative, “The Legend of

Nagakanna” defines the myth of “nagakanna” (meaning “cobra eyes”) (Dabydeen et al., 2018, p. 124) to elaborate the religious beliefs of the coolies living in an estate in Sungai Petani, Malaysia. Lived experience of the Tamil coolies in Sri Lanka is represented through an incident of robbery in Deirdre Jonklaas Cadiramen’s narrative, “The Heist”. Deplorable condition of the Indian coolies working in the English colony of Virginia is suitably represented in Angelica A. Oluoch’s brief prose narrative, “Mama Liberia”. Though there is no direct reference to Jamaican indenture system in Eddie Bruce-Jones’s poem, “India has left us”, the author’s biography suggests that he is describing the sorrowful plight of Indian indentured labourers living in Jamaica. Indentureship in the country of Samoa is described by Noelle Nive Moa in her story, “Talanoa with my grandmother”. In this painful story about Moa’s grandmother’s journey across the Pacific Ocean and her separation from her beloved coolie man, the emphasis seems to be on the wounds of the coolie women.

An overview of the narratives included in this book justifies the publication of such a volume that seeks to foreground the mini-narratives of indenture diaspora. An anthology like this, opening up a new vista of the unknown, is a welcome gift for those researching in this area, especially because it introduces a number of authors who are seriously exploring the methods to connect with the lost ancestral history having its roots in indentureship. By collating the works of these authors in the form of an edited anthology, the editors emphasize the need to archive these stories, encouraging the readers to learn the history of indentureship from various perspectives. A careful study of the various narratives in this volume draws the readers’ attention to the aesthetics of writing history, explicating the very process of creating history by getting access to few factual data. While engaging with the past, a historian attempts to create a knowledge based on his negotiation with the past. This is effectively explained by Ranjan Ghosh in his book, *A Lover’s Quarrel with the Past: Romance, Representation, Reading* (2012). He believes that, “history cannot be either absolutism or relativism” (Ghosh, 2012, Kindle Location 668), and further refers to Richard Evans’s opinion on history, “History is not simply an abstract cerebral enterprise; it has a creative, imaginative side to it as well” (as cited in Ghosh, 2012, Kindle Location 723). Evans also observes that, “historians have to make an attempt to recreate a sense of what it was like living in the past and what people were like in the past” (as cited in Ghosh, 2012, Kindle Location 722). Ghosh’s and Evans’s perspectives offer a new dimension on historiography, emphasizing the importance of creativity involved in the process of writing history. It is in this sense that the stories in this volume offer an interesting notion of representing the past, urging the readers to get acquainted with fascinating modes of writing history. On the whole, the book is a significant contribution to the recreation of the history of the Indian Indenture.

## References

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