

COOLIE CARTOGRAPHY: CROSSING FRONTIERS THROUGH COOLITUDE

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ABSTRACT

Following the abolishment of transatlantic slavery, the British introduced a new scheme of labour to replace the former. This system of indentureship affected nearly two million Indian coolies who defied the traditional ban against crossing the *kala pani* (dark waters) in order to work on plantations in countries such as British Guiana, Trinidad, Malaya, South Africa and Fiji. The Indian labour diaspora emerged and established itself across the globe. Despite over one hundred years of labouring and contributing to the development of their new homes, the coolies and their descendents still face political, social and cultural marginalisation.

The aim of this thesis is to explore the consequences of indentureship in various societies through a parallelisation of international coolie conditions, as represented by writers of the Indian diaspora. The three areas selected for this study are Guyana, Malaysia and Fiji. David Dabydeen (Guyana), K.S.Maniam (Malaysia) and Satendra Nandan (Fiji) all share the impetus to disclose the past as a portal into the present, thereby disrupting normative time, and by implication, a fixed sense of history. However, the most striking similarity between these writers, despite their geographical and social distance, is their literary method which centres on the theory of coolitude. Coolitude was coined by Khal Torabully as a means of recuperating the voiceless coolie: firstly, by

remembering the sea voyage across the *kala pani* and secondly, by highlighting the coolie's place in the mosaic of multicultural societies.

Chapter One details the historical, theoretical and methodical foundations of the thesis. Chapter Two explores Dabydeen's novels *The Counting House* and *Our Lady of Demerara* while Chapter Three is a detailed study of Maniam's novels *The Return* and *In a Far Country*. The final chapter considers Nandan's novel *The Wounded Sea* and collection of poetry *Lines Across Black Waters*. Each literary analysis seeks to understand how coolitude, as a means of historically and politically placing the coolie in the current world, links spaces between countries, both through a shared colonial history and a common postcolonial condition.