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Social Semiosis in Moses Nagamootoo's *Hendree's Cure*

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ABSTRACT

Indo-Guianese writing is characterized by a central tension, that between the desire for cultural separation and the opposing urge toward creolization, both of which are different psychosocial responses to the same historical event; the loss of India and, consequently, the absence of home. Moses Nagamootoo's Hendree's Cure is an attempt to recreate the past of the early Madrasi Indians by a Guiana born writer whose parents were the first generation offspring of Indian emigrants. This paper tries to explore the cultural syncretism of the early Madrasi plantation workers in the then British Guiana through the process of social semiosis.

The outbound voyage of the indentured Indian or coolie became a rite of passage into a new identity. The voyage itself tested the resilience of the men and women in a strange kind of Darwinian survival test. The arduous journeys on the indenture ships created a sense of alienation and extreme disorientation as the coolies were removed from all that was familiar and comforting, and initiated into a new regime of discipline, both in terms of regimented diets and work routines, as well as the strict obedience required on board and in the plantations thereafter.

Yet, even in the strangeness of the new plantation environment, the coolies and their families held on to their old beliefs, desperate for a shred of familiarity and spiritual solace. The different ethnic and cultural traditions of the places of origin thus travelled with the coolies into the New World. We shall now examine a narrative that attempts to fictionally reconstruct the middle phase of the formation of the diaspora, where the immigrants attempted to begin new lives and recreate their old memories in an alien space, constantly looking back to the lost homeland.

The displaced Indians - insecure, confused, disoriented and hysterical from the time of their arrival in the host country - considered as fragmented personality oscillating between home sickness and a 'homing desire' [1]. Even though migration entailed a temporary release from traditional sanctions and disciplines that were exercised back 'home' in India through certain customary structures such as the village 'panchayat', or the meetings of community elders, in the overseas setting indentured Indians found themselves subject to new pressures. The colonial sugar barons sought to thrust servility upon the cane-cutters even off the cane fields. That immigrants resented the status of 'coolie' is indicated by the anti-colonialist Madrasis--- like Peters, Victrin, Naga and his brother David in Moses Nagamootoo's *Hendree's Cure*--- detesting the British ownership of the sugar estates and their rule over the colony. They particularly hated those British overseers who contemptuously referred to them all as "Sammy", an alternative version of the derisive appellation, "coolie", which was used to describe all Indian indentured persons. For some Madrasis, though, the hurt and anger gave way to self-contempt. Naga's two younger brothers, Ramasammy and Chinasammy, for example, gave their children new, more English-sounding surnames: Whitlingum and Arnasalam, respectively. Dumping their Madrasi names and embracing Christianity they tried to escape their origins, declaring their independence from the family compound.

The imagination embodies history, helping to remember a disremembered past. Constituting a minority within an Indo-Caribbean Hindu majority in pre-independence Guyana, 'Madrasi' Indians were relegated to the very fringes of cultural and religious marginality by Hindu high-mindedness and colonial racism. Confined to the limited paradigms of representation in terms of demography and cultural alterity, Madrasis were thereby subjected to the dual hegemony of racialized and ethnic difference that reinforced their minority status whereby, "of the 239,000 Indian immigrants to British-Guyana, less than five percent were considered Madrasis" [2]. Inscribed within the colonial paradigm of difference, due to the North-South divide in India itself, Madrasis were reduced to an ethnic sub caste even before the *kala pani* voyage on the treacherous waters of the Atlantic. Discriminatory practices based on skin coloring and the inherent Aryan belief in the primitiveness and cultural inferiority of non-Aryan social systems depicted Madrasis as cultural anomalies who were less Indian, and therefore, less Hindu than the fair-skinned northerners from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, thereby justifying their marginalization within their larger Indo-Caribbean community in British-Guyana.

Relations between the Africans and Indians, as the novel indicates, "were frequently stressful and sometimes

overtly antagonistic in the century after slavery was abolished and indentureship was introduced into the colony" [3]. The Indian indentured laborers were viewed as the usurper of the indigenous workers' rightful, negotiated place in the socio-economic hierarchy. The real object for which most of the Indians has been indentured to the colonies had been to lower the price of wages, compelling the emancipated Blacks to accept such terms as their masters chose to give them. This planted the roots of African distrust for Indians. But in villages where both the races cohabited, they learnt to coexist and cooperate. Naga and his African friend Gunn found a shared political identity as both of them supported the same party, the Peoples Progressive Party (PPP), in protest against the Backra rule, and were full of anti-colonialist rage when the British removed their elected government in 1953.

While recreating certain aspects of early Madrasi village life based on semi-autobiographical segments of memory, the author's intentionality focuses on the ways in which the Madrasi community finds its spiritual and cultural connection with the local Afro-Guyanese population of Whim rather than with their other Indian immigrants due to certain commonality of experiences shared by blacks and Madrasis based on social ostracism and cultural denigration. The early Madrasis had three things in common with the Africans: "they ate pork, loved loud elaborate ceremonies with loud drumming and held no great antipathy towards Christianity. The first and last of these predispositions were certainly not shared by the majority of Indian immigrants from the central provinces and the north" [4]. Normative patterns of acceptability/unacceptability situated Madrasis as undesirable outcasts (they were "the least desirable immigrants of all" [5]) in the same way that social prejudice against blacks stereotyped Afro-Guyanese as barbarians and cultural heathens. Blacks and Madrasis found common cause in the universal language of exclusion by transforming the swampy, mosquito-infested area of Whim into an experimental model of peaceful coexistence through the process of cultural syncretism.

Regarding the recreation of the homeland through approximation of ritual and space usage, Vijay Mishra, in his seminal essay 'New Lamps for the Old: Diasporas Migrancy Border' states that even though "the establishment of homeland is not essential to 'the cultural logic' of these diaspora…it must be conceded that homeland figures prominently in the psychic imaginary of diaspora" [6].In the case of diaspora the fantasy of the diaspora is linked to the recollected trauma that stands for the sign of having been wrenched from one's mother/ [father] land. The sign of trauma may be the '[middle] passage' of slave trade or Indian indenture. In subsequent years many immigrants would look back at the passage itself as the most traumatic moment of their lives; it was during the passage that they thought about their home lands most intensely, and many of the fantasies of the homeland were probably created there and then since "no place ever vanishes utterly" [7], the ship was a space that outlived its original design. But return was never out of their minds, and the idea of return was to become one of the frames of their narrative of endurance on the plantation and, subsequently, in the land of their adoption.

In *Hendree's Cure*, Naga's parents arrived in Guyana at the turn of the century. Naga's father told him how, with other members of his family, he had endured that uncertain sixty days Atlantic crossing. The author provides a description of "how with Koolain there had been no romance, just hard work" [8]. The drudgery in the cane fields drained all the energy of the indentured laborers. But linked with their memory of their motherland was a promise made by agents and recruiters, a promise about riches and indenture, and through the promise of riches the promise of a glorious homecoming. While largely the promise remained unfulfilled, the depression in the sugar trade towards the end of the nineteenth century forced the colonial sugar barons to accommodate the Madrasis on freehold land away from the estates in lieu of repatriation. In the novel "towards the end of their second five years turn on the estate, Naga learnt that his parents had been faced with the choice of repatriating to India or owning their own homestead and plot of rice land in the colony" [9]. Afraid again of the unknown, 'afraid to leave the familiar temporariness' [10] they refused to return. By creating an imagined India in the experimental ethnic village of Whim, a fertile oasis, at the rim of the plantation desert Naga's parents learnt to live in displacement. Whim seemed to be the 'Promised Land'. As the place was already settled by bound coolies, some of whom were Madrasis, what they underwent was "a process of social semiosis whereby the tribes from a particular 'homeland' interact with other cultures over a long period of time and produce diaspora" [11]. Against the fictions of a heroic past and distant land, the real history of diaspora is always contaminated by the social process that governs their lives.

The Madrasis who were stereotyped as "lazy, aggressive and rebellious…least keen of all the migrants, for estate work" [12], preferred to make their living away from the estates in rice farming and fishing. For example, Naga learnt "pillikin, the name for self-employment at sea which was done by kicking a catmaran on sling mud, and catching leftover fish in the seine" [13]. Naga's aspiration for financial independence led him to try his hand in various business ventures: "At one time, Naga was a fisherman, trader, burnt-earth contractor, cook-shop owner, butcher, ceremonial barber/priest and turfite" [14]. Even though Naga was behaving, in his wife Chunoo's words, "like pot-salt; that he wanted to be in everything" [15] his wider ambitions served his wide range of interests. But the fact that this hitherto unknown Madrasi fisherman, from a small, obscure village on the Corentyne, had humbled the mighty racing lords like Lionel Luckhoo is ample proof that "you did not have to abandon yourself or your culture to be successful" [16].

Gradually, as people began to rebuild their lives, life became valuable, not to be wasted by men, either as mere machines of an oppressive empire, nor wasted by old-style Madrasi recklessness. The preoccupation with making money and saving it is a common and persistent feature of the [Indian] diaspora. This is not unique to it, for every community that migrates for economic reasons seeks in wealth both a vindication of its decision to migrate and a compensation for the humiliations and privations suffered in the process. In the years between 1953 and 1959 Whim saw immense transformation. A large Hindu petty-bourgeois class flourished on rice growing and cattle rearing, while the Madrasis expanded their fishing enterprises. Several local capitalists had emerged in wholesaling, trucking and building contracting. Another avenue of mobility was seen to be through the acquisition of knowledge. The importance of education as an avenue of socio-economic mobility for the indentured laborers is seen in the novel in Naga's aspiration for his third son, Abel. Abel, who had a good head for education, as Naga thought, was going to be a horse-race radio announcer, "like Lloyd Luckhoo" [17]. The village was producing its first new intelligentsia from high school graduates, some of whom gravitated to the civil service.

Faced with early experiences of cultural and economic glass ceilings, immigrants sought to climb off the bottom of the heap through acquisition of colonial language. Indentured workers quickly learnt that acquisition of the colonial language was a prerequisite for socio-economic mobility. The importance of comprehending the language of the colonialist is addressed in the novel by Naga coaxing his third boy, Abel to entertain his friends by announcing the Krack-O-Jack race:

> "Abel, who was sixteen, without further prompting, launched into his imitation of Lloyd Luckhoo, the popular racing commentator:
> "The horses are now at the far corner…And they're off! I see Bright Steel taking the lead…but wait: I see a horse running in the opposite direction. My gord, it's Krack-O-Jack, the favourite. Krack-O-Jack has bolted; he's running the wrong way…but back to the main event…"
> By this time Abel had cocked his arse in the air like a jockey on horseback, with left hand in front holding imaginary reins, and his right hand lashing out behind with a whip .
> "Now they swing into the Money Turn, and it is still Bright steel in the lead … And with a fur-long to go it is Bright Still all way…And bright Steel wins!"
> He threw his hands up in the air with finality, and proclaimed, as Luckhoo would do after every great race, "Oh, what a race, what a horse!" " [18].

Bilingualism became a key advantage for those Indians who settled overseas during the indenture period. In alien societies the continuing use of Indian languages, both orally and scripturally, came to represent a cultural bulwark, as means of retrenchment, of self-justification and an important marker of identity. Communicating in a language that could not be understood by employers of Creole or European origin had distinct advantages. In the eleventh chapter of the novel the eponymous hero Hendree used certain "words [which] were not anything the man sitting before him had heard before; they were certainly not English or creolese, and [it] was not sure if they were Hindi either. All [that was] heard distinctly at the end of every line was "am-ma" " [19]. The use of readily understandable 'desi' words like "*dhaaru*", "*pani*" and "*murgi*" by Hendree during the spiritual session amazed Joe-Joe and made him believe the different tricks that Hendree used to achieve his purpose with professional ease. The bizarre story of "Do[ing]" [20], that is, the practice of invoking a spirit and sending it to haunt and even destroy its intended victim is a deliberate debunking of the accepted theory of Western medicine. The use of 'obeah' for healing purpose subverted the established, rational, Western medicine practice by undercutting the very foundation on which it is based and represented the alternative practices that were often borrowed by Indians and Africans from each other. There was a wide spread belief in the existence and power of spirits, good and bad. To prescribe a'cure', the doctor had to have something more powerful than the inflicting spirit. That something was generally a good spirit fighting the bad spirit. There were plenty enough spirits around to keep all religions busy. Addee's case may be mentioned in this context. In Addee's case an entire team was attacking simultaneously. But just as there were many such maladies afflicting folks in the village, there were also many doctors prescribing different cures. The existence of nonwestern languages enabled the persistence of these alternative epistemes and knowledges among the coloured immigrant population.

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14. Nagamootoo, p 24.
15. Same as the above.
16. Nagamootoo, p 25.
17. Nagamootoo, p 57.
18. Nagamootoo, p 59.
19. Nagamootoo, p 134.
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