

# Comparative Cultural Rights in Select Writings on Indo-Guyanese Plantation Diaspora

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## ABSTRACT

*One of the contributions of the recent literary scholarship has been to question the absence of authorial representation of minority diasporic voices from the widely acknowledged canon of British plantation diasporic literature. This canon has been established and upheld by the substantial and well-known critical studies which focus on the colonial andro-centric modes of representation. The implication is that the writers of the plantation diaspora barely resist the charms of Euro-centrism and essentialism. In this research paper I have tried to analyze selected novels written on the Indo-Guyanese plantation diaspora which are the imaginative representation of the lived experiences of the early Indian immigrants and their descendants in and of the plantation colony of British Guiana and the post-independence Co-operative Republic of Guyana to find out the palimpsests of identities and belonging. Attention has also been paid to literary representation of the historical phenomenon of twice migration of the Indo-Guyanese population to England and North America to understand its implication in my study of comparative cultural rights.*

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## Historical Background

Human migrations are a significant force in historical change. Large scale migration was central in fashioning the world of the nineteenth-century, its world-wide empires and the establishment of global economic and political dominance by people of Indian origin. Historically, the old Indian diaspora is linked to the creation of a system of indentured labour under British colonialism as a quick-fix solution for the abolition of slavery during the early 1830s. The indentured laborers and their descendents formed the 'girmit' or plantation diaspora in various former colonial sugar plantations.

In exchange for their continuous working in near slavery condition (Tinker) in the plantations for a certain period of time the indentured labourers were promised riches and a glorious return home. But in most of the cases these promises remained largely unfulfilled. Girmit ideology grows out of the denials of this millenarian quest in the very place and time of its anticipated fruition (Mishra). This necessitates an illusive investment into one's own unhappiness and this unhappiness is sometimes carried over to the subsequent generations through post-memory or 'retrospective witnessing by adoption'(Long). In the case of the indenture diaspora this illusion grew out of a communal memory of an ancient land that had been lost.

The violation of the promise made by the recruiting agents, the failed millenarian quest, required transcendence of the originary indenture experience. But it was an impossible transcendence because it required the 'experience' to be materially completed, it required a cure in the form of a postcolonial nation state where the pain of indenture may be transformed into a triumphalism of sorts and the experience itself recognized in the full sense. But the barely concealed anxieties, the 'automatic' attitude of racism towards the other, so deeply ingrained in the majoritarian culture during the post-emancipation period reveals that the nation and diaspora are engaged in an ongoing negotiation.

## Research Problem

One of the contributions of the recent literary scholarship has been to question the absence of authorial representation of minority diasporic voices from the widely acknowledged canon of British plantation diasporic literature. This canon has been established and upheld by the substantial and well known critical studies which focus on the colonial andro-centric modes of representation. The implication is that the writers of the plantation diaspora barely resist the charms of Euro-centrism and essentialism.

## Research Objectives

In this research paper I have tried to analyze selected novels written on the Indo-Guyanese plantation diaspora which are the imaginative representation of the lived experiences of the early Indian immigrants and their descendants in and of the plantation colony of British Guiana and the post-independence Co-operative Republic of Guyana to find out the palimpsests of identities and belonging. Attention has also been paid to literary representation of the historical phenomenon of twice migration of the Indo-Guyanese population to England and North America to understand its implication in my study of comparative cultural rights.

## Research Questions

The chief questions I have investigated are: Why have caste, class and racial minorities, the women and the children been less represented in the canon of plantation diasporic literature? What contributions has each minority group in this investigation made to the thriving culture of plantation diaspora? How did their silencing or exclusion enable them to become aware of their marginalized condition, and to claim agency and negotiate terms in their interactions with colonial hierarchy and patriarchal inviolability?

## Research Methods

The research methodology adopted for this study consists of interpreting and comparing/contrasting primary sources. I have also used biographical and historical materials in order to understand the social and political milieu in which the novelists wrote. I have supported my findings with a significant number of critical essays on Edward Jenkins, Moses Nagamootoo, and Gaiutra Bahadur, which deal specifically with the subject of racial discrimination, gendered oppression, class conflict, political struggle for self-determination, and cultural rights.

## Theoretical Framework

Culture refers to collective similarity of behaviour. It manifests itself in many forms and is embedded in the daily practices and knowledge systems of both the minorities and indigenous majority. It includes the duties and obligations that are necessary for social life to continue and is fundamental to the collective identity and the distinctiveness of the group. Because of this relationship between culture and collective and individual identity, social cohesion and daily life, cultural rights are particularly important guarantees for indigenous majority and minorities like migrants and diaspora. They cumulatively protect the survival and continued development of indigenous and minority collectivities. Since indigenous community is not always the ruling class, and since the ideology of the ruling class is the ruling ideology of an epoch, the dyadic master-slave relationship between the plantation masters and the native creoles in the plantation colonies is restructured in favour of a triadic relationship where the European (British, French and Dutch) imperialists were the masters of the far flung plantation colonies, the natives were the slaves, and the newly interjected Indian indentured labourers were pushed to the peripheries. The reduction of this third figure of Indian indentured labourers and their descendents into a speechless group who is not yet comprehended as an integral part of the post-emancipation discourse of many of these erstwhile plantation colonies makes it all the more imperative to study their culture vis-à-vis that of the plantation masters and the native creoles.

In my study of the comparative cultural rights in select novels on plantation diaspora I have found Ruben Gowricharn's concept of cultural norm images (Gowricharn) to be extremely useful. Cultural norm images are part of the culture lived and applied in daily life. The cultural norm image of uneducated, brutish Indian indentured labourers in general and morally loose indentured women in particular legitimized the civilizing mission of the mostly white plantation masters. I have also used Bhabha's commentaries on minorities and cultural rights in my research. Article 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is the most significant international instrument for the protection and implementation of 'cultural rights'. The insistence in Article 27 of UDHR that minorities should preserve their cultural identity rather than emerge as new formations of minoritization, emphasizes the fact that minorities, amongst others, are regulated and administered into a position of having an excess of identity, which can then be assimilated and regulated into the state's conception of 'the common good' which Seyla Benhabib refers to as 'nationalism' which has usually been at the cost of

minorities – sexual, cultural or ethnic (Bhabha). Since diaspora is always a minority construct, it is too frequently imaged as a potential threat to the supposed unity of an imagined nation as they are viewed as the abject 'subjects' of their cultures of origin huddled in the gazebo of group rights, preserving the orthodoxy of their distinctive cultures.

## Selection of Texts

I have selected three texts on Indo-Guyanese plantation diaspora to build up my argument. The first one is *Lutchmee and Dilloo*. Written during the indentured period by Edward Jenkins, it is a novel written on Indo-Guyanese plantation diaspora recounting the story of how a handful of colonial officials and plantation masters managed to regulate administer the daily lives of the indentured labourers both on and off the plantations by casting them into different cultural norm images having negative connotations. The second is again a novel, titled *Hendree's Cure* by Moses Nagamootoo. It is the story of cultural self-assertion of the minority Madras community, within the Indo-Guyanese population, through claiming cultural rights to negotiate alternatives by characters like Naga, Hendree, Chunoo, and others. The third one, *Coolie Woman: The Odyssey of Indenture* by Gaiutra Bahadur, is a (auto/) biographical account of the traumatic experience especially faced by the indentured women because of the prevalence of colonial and patriarchal hegemony both during and after the indenture period.

## Discussion and Analysis

In *Lutchmee and Dilloo* by Edward Jenkins, I have found how a handful of colonial officials and plantation masters managed to regulate and administer the daily lives of the indentured labourers both on and off the plantations by casting them into different cultural norm images having negative connotations. While the Indo-Guyanese are branded as uneducated brutes in general, the Indo-Guyanese women are portrayed as morally loose. In *Hendree's Cure* by Moses Nagamootoo, I have found how the ethno-linguistically minor Madras community, within the Indo-Guyanese diaspora resist assimilation by adhering to their own subaltern knowledge systems. Hendree, for example, negotiates alternative medicine practice, a mixture of mystery and science, to amass wealth. He has understood the monetary value of information. He makes money by making the clients believe in his power as a potential healer. This healing business is actually based on his previous knowledge of the moral misdeeds committed by his clients. In my discussion of *Coolie Woman: The Odyssey of Indenture* I have focused on the rights of the indentured women to resist their stereotyping through various negative concrete cultural norm images by both the plantation masters and their male counterparts. Though deficient in both human and social capital vis-à-vis their male counterparts, and thereby forming an underclass within the Indo-Guyanese plantation diaspora, these women show remarkable agency in their strategic encounter both with colonial hierarchy and patriarchal inviolability.

## Findings and Contribution

The seminal argument that I have made in my research paper is that within the assumed universality of the Indo-

Guyanese plantation diaspora there are multiple minority groups with their racial, ethnic and gender particularities. The aspirations of these minority groups and their struggle for cultural rights follow a different trajectory from that of the majorities. Besides this, I have tried to suggest that majority liberal cultures might learn valuable lessons from the minority cultural emphasis on the processual, on the sense of politics as a matter of ongoing negotiation.

### Limitations and Future Scope

The major limitation of this research paper is the imperative of restricting the number of texts selected for this

investigation. There are many additional texts written during the indenture and post-indenture era which should have been included. In order to examine an individual work more closely, I have selected to focus on those where the trauma of indenture is written large. A second limitation is the need to restrict my investigation to the novels written on Indo-Guyanese plantation diaspora only. Future researchers may conduct comparative analysis of cultural rights of the indentured labourers in two regions like the Indian Ocean and the Caribbean or in two plantation colonies within the same region, for instance, Trinidad and Tobago and Guyana.

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