Published in : L'Inde de leurs textes : littératures d'Asie du Sud en diaspora. (Numéro spécial de la revue DESI - Diasporas : Études des Singularités Indiennes) (2019), n°4, pp. 113–126

Status : Postprint (Author's version)

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Indo-centricity and Diaspora: Writing back to the 'new' India in M.G, Vassanji's *A Place Within: Rediscovering India* (2008) and Gaiutra *Bahadur's Coolie Woman: The Odyssey of Indenture* (2014)

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KEYWORDS: DIASPORA, RETURN NARRATIVE, CENTRE, INDIA, M.G. VASSANJI, GAIUTRA BAHADUR

ABSTRACT

India's refashioning of itself as an economic superpower at the start of the twenty- first century has entailed redefining the labels and parameters of belonging through the creation of flexible forms of citizenship, so that, in today's India, diaspora becomes the new engine for 'igniting sluggish economies and for professing exclusive emotional and political affiliations' (Raghuram and Sahoo). This article concerns itself with the ways in which 'return narratives' by writers of the Indian diaspora, old and new, embrace or resist, not only the myth of 'the global Indian family' that has been deployed by the 'new India' of economic liberalization since 1990s, but also the new forms of Indo-centricity and 'pure Indianness' that go with it. More specifically, M.G. Vassanji's *A Place Within* (2008) and Gaiutra Bahadur's *Coolie Woman* (2014) are taken as fine instances of texts engaging with different 'centres' at the same time - among which the new forms of Indocentricity created by the diaspora-oriented of post-liberalization India. In these texts, there is certainly a writing back to the West, as the postcolonial mantra has it, but perhaps more importantly, there is also a writing back to the homeland - in particular a writing back to the 'new India'.

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India's refashioning of itself as an economic superpower at the start of the twenty-first century has gone hand in hand with a new resolve to utilise the potential of its diaspora for development purposes. Consequently, many critics)esai 2004; Mishra 2007; Amit Kumar Mishra 2016; Raghuram and Sahoo 2008) have aptly commented on the mutually-gratifying game played by the lew' India of global markets and the 'new' Indian diaspora, that is, the segment of the Indian diaspora which has entered metropolitan centres of Empire or other white settler countries such as Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the USA part of a post-1960s pattern of global migration' (Mishra 2007: xxv). The reclaiming of its diaspora by the 'new' India has expressed itself through the Creation of flexible forms of citizenship, such as NRIs (Non-Resident Indians), BOs (People of Indian Origin), and more recently, OCI (Overseas Citizen of India), all of which have 'redefin[ed] the parameters and labels of belonging' (Amit Kumar Mishra 2016: 711). Such reclaiming has also expressed itself, fom 2003 onwards, by the holding of the *Pravasi Bharatiya Divas,* a forum 'Which celebrates in a very official way the achievements of overseas Indians hkI which 'createfs] a framework for sustained interaction between the Indian government and the diaspora (Lal 2006: 88). For Parvati Raghuram and Ajaya Kumar Sahoo, it is not only that there has been a 're-imagining of the relationship between citizenship and belonging in India' (4). It is also that, in today's India, 'diaspora becomes the new engine for igniting sluggish economies and for professing exclusive emotional and political affiliations (5) - read: for professing exclusive allegiances to 'pure' Indianness seen as high-caste, upper-middle class Hinduness. Possibly because it is both a symptom and a cause of the rise of Hindutva in today's India, the coming to power in 2014 of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party under the leadership of Narendra Modi has only exacerbated the ways in which the diaspora-oriented politics of the new India has created new forms of Indo-centricity in the Indian diaspora at large. Still, writers of the Indian diaspora - 'old' and 'new' - have started casting a critical eye on the ways in which the India of global markets now wields a utilitarian language of cultural continuity and affect to reclaim its diaspora, an 'affect' that has 'economic potential for the mother country' (Raghuram and Sahoo 2008: 4). What is more, writers of the plantation diaspora (that is, of the 'old' Indian diaspora) have endeavoured to disrupt normative high-caste upper-middle class constructions of diasporic Indianness through which the 'new' Indian diaspora of global capital 'presents itself as the dominant (and indeed the more exciting) site for purposes of diasporic comment' (Mishra 2007: 3).

This article looks at two contemporary 'back to the Indian roots' narratives, namely M.G. Vassanji's A *Place Within* (2008) and Gaiutra Bahadur's *Coolie Woman* (2014), with a view to examining how these two 'return narratives' by authors belonging to the 'old' Indian diaspora embrace or resist, not only the myth of 'the global Indian family' that has been deployed by the 'new India' of economic liberalization since 1990s (see Aditya Nigam 2004, 72), but also the new forms of Indo-centricity and 'pure' Indianness that go with it. In *A Place Within* (2008), the East African-Asian Canadian writer of Gujarati descent narrates his return to India after three generations. In *Coolie Woman* (2014), the Guyanese-American author Gaiutra Bahadur relies on, as well as imagines around, colonial archives in order to retrace her great-grandmother's experience as an indentured labourer. Although my cursory reading of A *Place Within* is only meant to better contextualize *Coolie Woman,* it will become clear that both texts are geared towards unsettling different centres

at the same time, among which dominant and homogenizing notions of Indianness (and of diasporic Indianness). So one of my aims in this essay is to show that, in these two books, there might be a writing back to the West, as the postcolonial mantra has it, but perhaps more importantly, there is also a writing back to the homeland - in particular a writing back to the 'new' India.

Published in 2008, *A Place Within* is often presented as a travelogue and deals with Vassanji's 'returns' to the land of his ancestor over two decades, starting in 1993. Clearly, the context of Vassanji's first journey to India introduces what he sees as a 'fatal flaw' (4) to the romantic scenario promising the long-delayed reunion between the returnee and the lost homeland. While setting foot for the first time in the dingy immigration hall of Delhi airport, Vassanji self-consciously confesses that he awaits some epiphany of sorts to consecrate his arrival in the ancestral land. But the news of raw communal violence in Bombay and Surat reaches him instead upon his arrival, which hits a nerve in Vassanji, all the more so because Gujarat is the state from which his Khoja ancestors originated. Worse, the returnee comes to understand that what looked like random intercommunal butchery was in fact premeditated ethnic cleansing, so Vassanji's quest for origins gets informed from scratch by simultaneous processes of distancing and homecoming. While staying in Baroda, Vassanji expresses his disillusionment over the fact that Gujarat, 'the land of Gandhi, of peaceful though clever shopkeepers' (31) should also be the state where communal violence had raged for the longest time. Yet, as Vera Alexander aptly notes, Vassanji's quest for origins 'leads to a complex battle between intellectual and emotional responses to his surroundings' (2018: 54), so that his self- righteous outbursts can also, at times, turn self-reflexive. Musing on the ways in which his residency in Canada spares him the ordeal of having to experience violence, not in the abstract, but 'at the individual level while making eye contact' (Vassanji 2008: 33) — 'mobs burning homes, mobs setting people aflame; rape and hacking limbs; smashing children to death' (33) — Vassanji eventually refuses to turn away from the embrace of the motherland:

After all I did come here, saw it as a kind of return, could identify with so many things: so do I simply shun, reject as not mine, what I cannot cope with, while accepting gratefully what I can? [...] If my family had stayed here, what would I have become, a victim or a thug? A defender with acid bulbs and swords? (33)

Paradoxically, the dark irony that Vassanji's own region of origins should be the stage of some of the darkest episodes of Indian contemporary history only reinforces his determination to find evidence of his own idea of India — a 'plural' India (and a 'plural' Gujarat) that might still bear witness to the religious syncretisms of the past. After all, in the Introduction to his travelogue, he remarks that, back in Dar es Salaam, where he grew up, the 'happy combination of mystical and devotional Hinduism and Islam' informed not only the systems of belief of his Gujarati Khoja community, but also, more generally, his relationship with India. Vassanji notes that, for him, 'the existence of such inclusive systems of belief was proof of an essential historical quality of India, that of tolerance and flexibility, a certain laissez faire in matters of the spirit' (ix). Arguably, this commitment to an idea of a 'plural' India transforms Vassanji's 'back to the roots narrative' into

something else - a quest for a place from which he might be able to demystify the 'India Shining' facade of the Hindu nationalist politics of the BJP, one that has worked hard to extend its glow beyond the borders of the Indian nation-state, towards the diaspora. Asma Sayed aptly remarks in that sense that *A Place Within* 'becomes a symbolic act of political transgression as Vassanji questions the singular and linear history perpetuated by rightwing Hindu forces in India, particularly since the 1990s' (2015: 136).

In fact, Vassanji's 'quest for a place' almost materializes in Gujarat, as he searches for the 'physical link to [his] origin' (249), indeed for the dwelling places of those *pirs* (holy men) who were followed by his Khoja ancestors. Vassanji explains that the Khojas have identified themselves as Ismaili Muslims from the late nineteenth century onwards, even as they relied on an 'odd, syncretistic faith' combining elements of Hinduism and Islam. 'Were we Hindu or Muslim?' Vassanji wonders as he stands at the shrine of Imamshah. 'I believe both; some would say neither' (250). Likening the *dargah* (tomb) of this holy man to 'a physical memento, a memorial over the buried remains of a personality who influenced and preserved the lives of my ancestors for generations in this part of the world' (253), Vassanji then experiences a sense of belonging giving shape, and meaning, to his 'roots quest' in India: 'In some strange manner I feel that I have a claim to [this] place that I have not felt elsewhere,' he declares. But the BJP-led 'new India' appears to be engaged in a rewriting, perhaps even an erasure, of those past cultural syncretisms whose ambiguity might subvert the forces of Hindutva. Upon meeting with the head of the shrine, Vassanji is taken aback as he realizes how different Imamshah's genealogy has become now that the BJP is in power in Delhi. Far from identifying the Muslim origins of Imamshah - that is, the genealogy as Vassanji learned it - one of the head's companions recasts Imamshah as the orphaned son to Brahmin parents who was later adopted by a Muslim family. Thinking back to his trip of nine years ago, Vassanji can only come to the conclusion that a complete usurpation of the site has taken place, 'new origin and new stories, new rites, new look, a lot of money, all to convert it into a Hindu site' (256).

Clearly, Vassanji's appraisal of the BJP- led 'new' India' rewrites the quintessential 'return to the roots' narrative into a plea for another return; that of the Nehruvian egalitarian principles upon which the postcolonialIndian state was founded. Priyamvada Gopal notes that "Vassanji's critique of religious purity and communal chauvinism is faintly elegiac, invoking the moment of Nehru and Gandhi" (180). However, in a contemporary context within which the BJP has come back in power since 2014 and imposed as India's new Prime Minister no one but Narendra Modi, the Chief Minister of Gujarat from 2001 to 2014, and the person who was held responsible by his strongest opponents for the 2002 'holocaust in Gujarat' (Vassanji 220), it becomes relevant to wonder whether Vassanji's vision is in fact 'faintly elegiac', or truly oppositional.

I will now turn to Bahadur's book, *Coolie Woman,* as another return narrative committed to 'writing history from below' (Mukherjee 2015: 171), while opening a space for claiming a syncretic brand of Indianness which unsettles dominant constructions of India 'as a site of origin or longing or legitimation' (Puri 2016: 324) for the Indian diaspora at large. Described on its dust jack as a 'historical rescue mission' by Dominican-American writer Junot Diaz, *Coolie Woman* was published in 2014 and is divided in three sections: 'Embarking', Exploring', 'Returning.' Combining forays into

colonial archives and family records with autobiographical passages, each section appears to mark a phase in a journey — I will return to that. In the middle of the book, an appendix bridges the familial and the communal, in that it features Bahadur's family snapshots, together with colonial photographs and paintings of Calcutta and Georgetown as well as pictures of anonymous and individualized coolie women'. There is also an impressive 'Works cited' section, which testifies to the wealth of documents that Bahadur relied on, among which colonial archives from different countries, literary narratives, scholarly studies and transcripts of interviews with formerly-indentured people. It is worth mentioning that this imposing scholarly apparatus is somewhat thrown into crisis by the book's epigraph: 'Silence can be a plan/ rigorously executed/ (...) It is a presence/ it has a history a form/ Do not confuse it/ with any kind of absence' (ix). By quoting from Adrienne Rich's poem, 'Cartographies of Silence', Bahadur draws attention from the outset to the limitations of her endeavour and emphasizes the persisting alterity of her great-grandmother Sujaria, her object of study. Through this epigraph, Bahadur already suggests that beyond any scholarly reconstruction, it is never possible to speak for the other; one can just 'imagine around gaps' in an attempt to connect to the silences of pre-generational others.

Bahadur is well aware that the title of her book might 'be offensive to some' (xix), and the epigraph is quickly followed by a preface in which she justifies her choice of 'the C-Word', as she calls it. Notice the implicit connection she draws here between the 'C-Word' and the 'N-Word', which already suggests points of commonality between the experience of Slavery and that of Indenture as well as between their legacies. Drawing on the Guyanese poet Rajkumari Singh, Bahadur makes it clear that, although it has been used as an ethnic slur, or as 'a reminder of lowliness in the hierarchy of the sugar estate' (xx), the word coolie can - and perhaps should - be invested with pride by the descendants of the indentured. For Bahadur, this word 'carries the baggage of colonialism on its back' (xxi). In so doing, it reminds us that the tense race relations between the black and Indian populations in the Caribbean in the postcolonial period are still framed by the racial hierarchies that were created by the British when they implemented Indenture as a quick-fix solution to the abolition of Slavery. Anticipating the 'historical rescue mission,' to rehearse Diaz's formulation, that will take place through her foray into colonial archives, Bahadur briefly introduces her subject, so to speak, by mentioning her great-grandmother Sujaria in the last paragraph of the preface. A high-caste Hindu who 'left India as a coolie', Sujaria is presented by Bahadur as 'one individual swept up in a particular movement of people'; one that was named and misnamed by the British in an attempt to 'shap[e] who she was by limiting who she could ever be' (xxi). In many ways, Bahadur thus asserts that the word 'coolie' feels 'true to her subject' (xxi).

In an interview with the *New York Times,* Bahadur insists that her book tells a 'lost history within a lost history' (2013: § 9): this is 'the story of Indian women within the story of Indian indenture'. In fact; even after decolonization, both Indo-Caribbean women and the gender-specific aspects of their indenture were not part of official histories or even literary texts. If, as Abigail Ward notes, the past of the Indian indentured labourer is a curiously neglected one' (2013: 270), then the generalized neglect of the gendered aspects of Indenture take abysmal proportions. Since the late 1980s, scholars have established that two-thirds of female migrants heading to the sugar colonies did so as single, unaccompanied women (Rodha Reddock 1985), in a similar way to what Bahadur's

great-grandmother experienced. However, taking David Dabydeen's *The Counting House* (1996) and Amitav Ghosh's 'Ibis trilogy' (2008; 2011; 2015) as cases in point, Alison Klein remarks that, contrarily to historical evidence, 'most indenture narratives depict women traveling with a partner or men traveling alone' (2015: 70). With regards to Trinidad specifically, Frank Birbalsingh (2013) notes that male Indian-Trinidadian writers might also have contributed to what Ramabai

Espinet called the phenomenon of the invisible woman in West Indian fiction' (1989). Indeed, books by male writers such as Samuel Selvon, Ismith Khan and V. S. Naipaul may well 'contain portraits of many female Indian- Trinidadian characters.' It remains that these female characters tend to be 'sketched in bare physical and emotional outline' (Birbalsingh 2013: 14).

Since the 1990s, however, there has been an increased visibility of novels by Indo-Caribbean women writers, as exemplified by the emergence and critical impact of writings by authors such as Lakshmi Persaud, Ramabai Espinet, and Shani Mootoo, to mention just the most popular ones. Mariam Pirbhai observes that 'several of these works playfully or critically turn the tables on a male-dominated tradition which has flattened female characters or privileged a male perspective' (2013: 44-45). Importantly, however, the emergence of 'fully-fleshed representations' of Indo-Caribbean female characters who are 'leading participants in the action of their stories' (Birbalsingh 2013: 14) is not a literary phenomenon alone; it can also be seen as a trans-disciplinary endeavour. Pirbhai thus reminds us that Indo-Caribbean women writers have worked 'in tandem with historians in the memorialization and excavation of women's narratives' (2013: 47). A fine case in point is *Maharani's Misery* (2002) by the historian Verene Shepherd, in which she uses colonial archives to make sense of the alleged rape and subsequent death of the Maharani of the title on board the *Allanshaw,* a ship bound for colonial Guyana in 1885. In her book, the historian depicts Indian women's experience of emigration and indentureship as one of extreme hardship and draws explicit parallels between 'the rape of enslaved women on Middle Passages slavers' (xix) and Indian women's sexploitation 'via the post-slavery indentureship system' (xxi). Shepherd's emphasis on the relative similarity of experience between coolie' and black enslaved women can be seen as strategic in many ways. Indeed it identifies points of commonality between Indo-Caribbean and Afro-Caribbean women in Afro-centred Caribbean contexts within which the antagonism between the two communities dates back to colonial times. In fact, even if by reopening an enquiry into the voyage of the *Allanshaw,* Shepherd ultimately fails to retrace Maharani's experience, she nonetheless succeeds in exposing the crew's 'ideology of racial, caste, and gendered superiority,' among which the self-serving belief that 'non-elite women migrants were 'naturally promiscuous'' (xxvii).

Published a decade after *Maharani's Misery, Coolie Woman* shares the scholarly apparatus of its predecessor and makes no bones, too, about the systemic colonial violence to which Indian female labourers and migrants were subjected. Still, *Coolie Woman* is less framed by the debate that was still raging at the time when Shepherd was writing her book. This is the debate opposing critics who were presenting indenture as a 'new form of slavery (cf. Hugh Tinker 1974) against those who were arguing that indenture had been of significant material benefits for the migrants. Bahadur quickly returns to that debate in Chapter 3, using the interrogative form to go beyond a form

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of'either/or' fallacy: 'Did the system liberate women, or con them into a new kind of bondage? (...) Were these two possibilities mutually exclusive or could they both be true?' (39). In fact, as many critics have noted after Brinda Mehta (2004), a paradigm-shift appears to have taken place towards the end of the twentieth-century. This shift combines a move towards the rehabilitation of the single female Indian migrant with a transgenerational perspective on the complex legacy of indenture. Foregrounding the pioneering character of the first generation of women having crossed the *kala pani,* recent novels such as Ramabai Espinet's *The Swinging Bridge* (2003) and Peggy Mohan's *Jahajin* (2007) have indeed participated in recasting the *aji* (or grandmother) figure as a positive role model, and more specifically, as a 'highly dynamic symbol of reconstitutive identities in flux' (Pirbhai 2013:47). This paradigm-shift clearly represents a means of writing back to a tradition of misrepresentation within which, as Tejaswini Niranjana (2006) remarks, Indian women migrants were objectified as prostitutes - this is the colonial take - or were constructed as fallen women/victims of colonialism, as in the early 20th-century discourse of Indian nationalism. Looking at the Hindi print-public sphere in the early twentieth-century, Charu Gupta emphasizes that even returnees from the sugar colonies simultaneously portrayed indentured women as 'innocent victims' and 'guilty migrants' in order to 'appropriate and articulate a narrow language of nationalism' (2015: 1358).

Bahadur's book does its share of moving beyond this prostitute/victim stereotype by humanizing and individualizing some women migrants - at times by piecing together the story of female migrants who, like Sujaria, gave birth during the passage from India. My point is that, beyond its generic anatomy, *Coolie Woman* has certainly much more in common with novels such as *The Swinging Bridge* (2003) and *Jahajin* (2007) than with non-fiction books such as *Maharani's Misery.* In fact, Alison Klein's remark that Mohan's *Jahajin* unsettles the boundary between fact and fiction (see 2015) could be applied just as well to Bahadur's book — except that *Coolie Woman* from the outside falls within the category of non-fiction. Commenting on the photograph of a plantation estate in 1896, Bahadur thus remarks that an overseer holds out 'something indistinct and furry,' which causes her to muse that 'even photographs leave questions' (82). Ironically, the photograph might, or might not be, the same one which is reproduced in the middle section of the book; the fact that Bahadur leaves it open to question suggests that she nudges readers into 'imagining', too, around historical documents. Likewise, in Chapter 1, Bahadur refers to a family picture which is not linked back either to the middle section of the book, but which can easily be identified as being the first one in the section. Again, the suggestion that documents only display partial truths is emphasized through the discrepancy between the actual black and white picture, and Bahadur's vivid memory of having worn on that occasion 'a kiskadee-coloured dress and matching ponytail holders, blinding balls of yellow' (3). Doubt is all-pervading in Bahadur's forays into historical documents, colonial archives, and transcripts of interviews. As she relays the story that Sujaria is said to have told about her deceitful recruitment in India, Bahadur hastens to wonder whether the eavesdropping child who originally heard the story 'knew Hindi well enough to get the story right' (47). Bahadur is fully aware of the prejudices that are embedded within colonial archives. Looking at transcripts of interviews with coolie women by colonial officials in the wake of allegations of rape, she remarks that 'the questions put to the women have been cut out of the records.' What's

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more, the words are not entirely their own: 'Government interpreters paraphrased [the women], perhaps even misinterpreting details' (58). At other times, she is racked by self-doubt and comes to question her own interpretative power:

How do I even begin to situate my great-grandmother in this odyssey? If I draw an imaginary line from moment to moment on the ships, from glimpse to glimpse of women abroad, will her shape emerge, constellation-like? Could the wrong shape emerge, if I connect the wrong moments to one another? How do I know which are right? Will her constellation give off light? (63)

The narrative theorist Gerald Prince defines the 'disnarrated' as 'expressions ol impossibility or unrealized possibility, (...) epistemic expressions of ignorance, ontologic expressions of nonexistence, failed attempts, crushed hopes, suppositions and false calculations and so forth' (1988: 3). It is worth remarking that in *Coolie Woman,* Prince's 'disnarrated' takes on momentous proportions. Bahadur indeed fills whole paragraphs with unending strings of questions, formulating and re-formulating hypotheses about Sujaria that appear to express her own limitations as well as those of the existing records. I've just used the verb 'appear' here because, by formulating and re-formulating hypotheses, Bahadur also grants them an imaginary and paradoxical form of existence, implicitly begging her readers, in turn, to imagine around her own imagination. Consider this passage:

I try to imagine my great-grandmother in [Calcutta], preparing to board The Clyde in 1903. Had she found a protector (...)? Was he of her caste? In her week in the depot, did she see any men cede their sacred threads to the river, and, if so, did that disturb her? (...) Did the presence of cobras, venomous but venerated among Hindus, strike her as auspicious - or ominous? Who had certified her as fit to sail, and disease-free, and "Pregnant 4 mos," [sic] if the depot doctors didn't really examine women? (46)

I have already mentioned that each of the three sections of *Coolie Woman* - namely, 'Embarking', 'Exploring', and 'Returning' - appears to mark a phase in a journey. The repetitive use of gerunds is remarkable here. Gerunds are typically used to characterize actions that have started but are yet to be completed, and here the gerunds — 'Embarking', 'Exploring', and 'Returning' - add to the sense that the phases of a journey are still ongoing - and that these phases of this journey far exceed the physical journeys that were undertaken by the indentured ancestors. Towards the end of the book, Bahadur reflects on how widely the dream of return was shared among indentured labourers. Bahadur remarks that in spite of intense bouts of nostalgia, her great-grandmother never returned to India, and she suggests that unfulfilled dreams are passed down through the generations. She writes; 'Her desire to see India would be ours to inherit. It would fall on us to realize the return that she never did' (173). Chapter 1 likewise positions the crossing of the *kala pani* as the departure point of a journey that continues to reverberate through time and through the generations. Interestingly, this chapter is more autobiographical than historical in that it starts not with Sujaria's journey, but with Bahadur's own migration from Guyana to the US in 1981 at the age of seven, a departure in the wake of which 'everything seemed to split apart' (4). Calling into question what Aditya Nigam (2004) has called the myth of 'the global Indian family,' Bahadur's childhood memories of her first contact with 'Indians from India' in the US reveal that recently-arrived

immigrants in New Jersey offer, at best, a "patronizing" (8) nod of recognition towards the members of her Indo-Guyanese community, even in the midst of the 1980s, when heinous groups called 'Dot Busters' would indiscriminately attack all Indian-looking people. Now that she is about to return to her birthland, Bahadur makes it clear that her return to Guyana sixteen years afterwards does not undo the trick of migration; rather it causes her to feel a sense of belonging which now exists side by side with an unnerving feeling of dislocation' (13). Significantly, it is upon this first return to Guyana - a return which was clearly invested with the hope of restoring her to a form of pre-departure wholeness - that Bahadur gets to know about Sujaria. At the departure gate in Newark, Bahadur's father tells her daughter the story behind their family name, one that significantly does not start with India, but with a ship. Bahadur then gets to learn how Sujaria indentured as an unaccompanied and pregnant woman, gave birth to her own grandfather during the passage from India, and what's more, picked a name for her new-born which bypassed any pre-existing lineage. 'Like most Indians who migrated,' as Bahadur reminds us, 'she did not have a last name' (10). Of course, this is a fascinating symbolic exchange taking place across four generations. Bahadur's own 'dream of return' to Guyana is soon to be shattered; yet it is at that precise moment that her father tells her another, pre-generational story of departure and impossible return, one that simultaneously recasts her great-grandmother as a symbol for origins and new beginnings.

Bahadur will realize Sujaria's dream of return to the ancestral village in Bihar, but of course the transgenerational cycle of departures and returns has now shifted to the symbolic sphere. Given the diaspora-oriented politics of post-liberalization Indian, it is unsurprising that the motif of return to the Indian motherland has gained new momentum in writings by Indo-Caribbean women writers. What is compelling, however, is that such passages back to India are depicted in less than favourable light. In Ariti Jankie's *Hush!Don't Cry* (2010) in particular, the Trinidadian female protagonist's dream of returning to 'her motherland' (Chapter 1, § 10) via her arranged marriage to a glamourous doctor from Uttar Pradesh turns into a nightmare of domestic abuse, so much so that Birbalsingh reads the novel as a caution against 'Indo-centricity' in a Caribbean context, that is, a caution against 'unrealistic adulation of India and Indian culture by Indian-Trinidadians' (2013: 17). In *Coolie Woman,* in a similar way to what happens in Mohan's *Jahajin,* in which the female narrator's return to India after several generations is narrated from an ironic distance, India here gets downgraded from a symbol of origins to a simple stage of a quest for 'narrative gold' (176). Bahadur's visit to Bihar is no homecoming, and she is quick to spot self-appointed 'roots men who escort Indo-Caribbeans 'through the hinterlands of their foreign motherland, in search of their origins' (173) and make sure that cash will be traded for fabricated memories. In the same chapter, the writer parallels her great-grandmother's never to be fulfilled dream of returning to India with real stories of return, including that of *The Resurgent,* the last ship having taken more than two hundred coolies back to India in 1955. As Bahadur makes it clear, the return to India was a colossal mistake for the ex-coolies, who were called 'social lepers' by Gandhi (169), and were massively rejected by their clans, 'even if they paid priests the extravagant sums they demanded to restore them to caste' (Bahadur: 169). Finally, whether it takes place in the contemporary moment, or whether it places in the past, the return to the Indian motherland appears to be an exercise in failure in *Coolie Woman,* one that ends up contesting the very notion that India could ever be the

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ultimate symbol for grounding and origins. In that sense, similarly to *A Place Within, Coolie Woman* participates in a reverse flow through which the 'old' diaspora writes back to the 'new' India of economic liberalization and 'flexible citizenship'.

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