

## **A BRIEF HISTORY OF COOLITUDE: PERUSING RAJKUMARI SINGH'S I AM A COOLIE**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Rajkumari Singh (13 October 1923-1979) was an Indo-Caribbean, Guyanese writer, with Indianness infused at the core. She has endowed the world with her beautiful and thought provoking poems like – 'Per Ajie.' This poem is a standout defining indentured laborers' perplexities and emotional journeys. She accorded the Indian Indenture Literary period and was one of the first published Indian women to strain through, to bring the best of Guyanese culture and Indian spirit into written words. A wonderful poetess, she has depicted the journey of all those Indians who had to leave their motherland for a better prospect of life. She is acclaimed as a Guyanese Cultural Hero. She emphasised the ignorance that people had for their collective histories. She advised celebrating the individual ethnicities, but she also stressed the notion of solidarity and mixed racial or fusion history. This paper aims to read one of her very straightforward and brilliant works titled- 'I am a Coolie'. This work delves into the meaning, the cultural, political, and emotional significance of the word 'Coolie' and its usage for Indian workers in the Caribbean. She has a massive role in putting the Indenture Literature on a pedestal for the world to know the grievances and experiences of the indentured labourers at every place they know of. This paper, in a way, is an understanding of her views on the word- 'Coolie' and her interpretations as of that time. The paper also briefly looks at the three more authors- Gaiutra Bahadur, Historian Brij V Lal and Peggy Mohan Jahajin and their significant works in the field of *Coolitude*.

The arrival of 551,000 Indians to the Caribbean in 1838 created a vast space for the experiences of these Indians who dreamt of a better life. These innocents were pulled away from their motherland and pushed into a pit of slavery. Indenture Literature collects it all and presents it as a bright shiny canvas under which lies some of the greatest works by indentured labourers and generations of those who came after. The cultural disorientation, the emptiness of the heart, the enslavement in a foreign land to unknown people, the longing of beloved and family, had to be put up somewhere, not just as a medium to let out or vent, but also to preserve for the future. The primary difference between slavery and indentureship is that slavery is for a lifetime, and indentureship was initially for a five years bond with the owner or supplier. The Indo-Caribbean writers like Seepersad Naipaul, Shiva, V.S.Naipaul, and Sam Selvon significantly focussed on Indian heritage, while writers like Rajkumari Singh focussed on the 'how' of that heritage. Awarded with Wordsworth Mcdrew Award Laureate (posthumously) in 2002, she received 'Guyana's Arrow of Achievement' in 1970. Rajkumari Singh got her indomitable spirit from her parents. Her father, Dr. Jung Bahadur Singh, received his education in England and started as a medical administrator on ships that transported Indians between India and the Caribbean. Her mother, Alice Bhagwandai Singh, worked for the Red Cross and YWCA and laid the foundation of two important organisations: the Balak Saharta Mandalee (a charity organisation that served poor Indian women and children) the British Guiana Dramatic Society. Rajkumari's feminine consciousness came from her mother, and growing up, witnessing all the hassles of indentured labourers, this consciousness grew stronger. Rajkumari Singh and Mahadai Das were among the first published Indo-Caribbean women writers, and they significantly contributed to the healthy development

of Indo- Caribbean Literature. They have beautifully depicted the Guyanese culture and nativity in their works.

The essay 'I am a Coolie', written in 1973, is a simple but alluring work by Rajkumari Singh. The essay explores the literal and the contextual meanings of the word- *coolie* and the process through which it gained existence and grounds further. She starts the essay by giving the accepted and printed definitions of the word -*coolie*.

The word has undergone various transformations. Singh firstly briefs about the arrival of indentured labourers in concrete details. She mentions that Peter Ruhoman, a retired civil servant published a book- 'Centenary History of the East Indians in British Guiana 1838-1938'. Now this book gives a note which says that the word *coolie* frequently appears in most of the works, texts, documents that the author has gone through and that it has "grossly misused." According to the author, the term was *kuli* and spelled *coolie or cooly*. A word originated in India but used for Indians in a different context. It carries the same meaning as that of porter/ jobber in the British colony and carrier in England. The following paragraph of the essay has Webster's definition of a coolie, which clearly states the term is extended to "emigrant labourers from India, China, and other Eastern Countries." The establishment of the fact is concreted by the next part of the essay, which says Chambers defines it as – "an Indian or Chinese labourer who has emigrated under a contract to a foreign land." Singh boldly asks if this term is still used in the same context as it was used back then. She says- "We moved from a Colony to Internal Self-Government to Independence to Republicanism." Most of the postcolonial historians have associated indentureship to slavery. Representation of indentureship using slave theory somehow missed out the agency that the migrants had when they chose to migrate. Internal Migration, i.e., leaving one's village in search of employment was one of the key features of the period. Indo Fijian historian Brij V Lal, grandson of an indentured labourer, tries to discard the slave theory and attempts to situate labour migration as a human urge to go in search of green pastures. Historian Brij V Lal through his autobiographical works as well as his academic works analyses the process of migration in terms of a larger historical process of the period.

*The whip and chain story is still a dominant part of the public discourse and understanding of it even though the new indenture historiography cast serious doubt about explanatory value. There is of course undeniable truth in the indenture as slavery thesis. ... Suffering and pain were an integral part of indenture. All this is abundantly clear from the historical record. But that is not the whole story. It cannot be. It is possible to acknowledge hardships while branding girmitiyas agency as people who had a hand in shaping their destiny. (Lal 5)*

Author Gautria Bahadur, an Guyanese American writer has authored the book- *Coolie Woman: The Odyssey of Indenture*. The book contains the exploration and the journey of Bahadur to investigate and learn about her great grandfather's historical and cultural roots. The books traces the journeys of thousands of women into the foreign land and their experiences of indentured labour. Bahadur says that they have faced double the resistance as men because they have been marginalised twice, firstly on the basis of nationality and ethnicity and then on the basis of gender. Bahadur traced her great grandmother's history and journey on the ship to the colonial lands. She has briefly covered multiple stories of emigration, displacement, indentureship, and abandonment. She has very bravely and sensitively written numerous stories of innumerable experiences of the indentured women and their familial status. Her concept of homeland and host land have marked as one of the most important contemporary writers of Indenture literature.

Peggy Mohan's *Jahajin* (2007), investigates the indentured migration of women to the Caribbean. It weaves together the stories of many generations of women. The narrator in *Jahajin* is a researcher in Trinidadian Bhojpuri. She is in a quest for figuring out the hues of the language which is now in a dying state. Interviews

are her key source for study. Oral narratives of the coolie immigrant woman not only set the stage for the learning of the language but also allowed the narrator to dig deep into her coolie ancestry. According to the narrator of Jahajin "The migration came across to me as a story of women making their way alone, with men in the backgrounds, strangers, extras. In the history books it had always been the other way around: it was the men who were the main actors" (204). Women folk had much to say. Their experiences on the deck and on the plantations were different from that of their male counterparts. But their stories were rarely heard.. According to Maggio (2007), in order to hear the subaltern's voice, we must not only accept their language of communication as a genuine medium but also make a concerted effort to listen to them using all of their modes of communication (437). We hear a coolie woman spilling her heart out through Jahajin. By blending lines of distinction, Peggy Mohan criticizes historical nostalgia, which obscures the pain of oppressed populations and fosters violent cycles.

Moreover, Indo-Guyanese use this term to derogate each other. Previously, the word *coolie* was related to an unskilled occupation or service. In India, at the given times, coolie is used for workers on the railway station who carry luggage for a fee. Wearing red shirts or kurtas paired with white trousers or pants and dhotis contrasts with the regular crowd on the stations. However, has the modern-day relevance done any justice to our brothers and sisters working on another land for a better future prospect? The question that Rajkumari Singh asked is valid even today. The coolies of India and the coolies of Caribbean land are different, but the generalisation of the people with this context is mundane and hurtful. The transoceanic journey of these people is harrowing, and the name that they get stuck with, no matter what race, class, ethnicity they belong to. They are depreciated in the same way.

Rajkumari wrote this essay and exalted this entire 'coolitude'.

Rajkumari then boldly asks if anyone remembers that it is not just them, but even their fathers and forefathers were called coolies. They toiled and worked day and night only to earn a disrespectful term like this. Singh graciously describes the sightings of the workers in the farm, in the wet paddy field, sowing and draining their energies in the tropical heat. They bent over their backs and planted the rice saplings in the water, which was up to the knee level but soaked up to their chests and breasts. The bodies of these workers were eventually bending down due to the postures and the exhaustion of the physical labour. She mentions the Sun Belle Dairy vans that delivered milk and how Ahir baba was the one to wake up early, take the cattle for grazing, and then milk them to supply milk without any delay. The innocent memories and the vivid description make the essay such a nostalgic piece of work that one will be reminded of one's days of childhood and parents turmoil to raise us with all dignity. Rajkumari Singh questions whether the sugarcane planters were not working enough to gain some respect or rather have some respect. The sweetness that these hands sowed in the fields swayed in the field of sugarcanes, and when one has sugar in their sweets, one must recognize the hard work these coolies pulled through. The same workers who gave sweetness to the sugar canes died revolting and fighting for their rights; Singh mentions some names like – 'Lallabagee' and 'Alice' and says these people sacrificed themselves for the rights of the so-called *coolies*. Singh distinctly remembers the sightings and the sounds; furthermore, she describes the gastronomical journey where she tells about the *Per- Ajie* or coolie grandmother who blew through *phookni* to cook some *hot sadha roti* on her *chulha* and put some *aloo chokha* with it to feed the children and the grandchildren. She then mentions all the delicacies that she remembers from her day- *dal with the chunk of garlic, onion, pepper, and geera in hot oil, rice, baigan chokha, coconut chokha*.

Taking up the linguistic aspect of the essay, the essay is coloured with the usage of Hindustani words, like *geera* or *baigan*. The word *-Per Ajie* is an address to the grandmother, which is very common in India. Rajkumari Singh was firmly attached to her roots, this fact is evident in the essay, as she could have used the

English counterparts or words like Brinjal/Eggplant like she has used the words-onion and pepper, but she chose to put certain words just as she remembers in her native language or the way her grandmother might have her told her to remember by. She has used these words to bring out the essential sense of Indianness and the cultural importance which the coolies have carried within themselves to the Caribbean places. The memories of food and the work in the fields are somehow the crux of her memories; she puts them unblemished without any fancy writing. The content is whole and absolute.

Rajkumari Singh builds her essay with mentions of these minor incidents, which make the essay so powerful. She has written works that have stronger appeal in terms of diction and purpose, but this essay stands apart from every other work because the essay's simplicity, lucidity, and directness are gripping. It is written to have a conversation with a reader in the most ingenious manner. She puts across a simple point that though the coolies were brought her as wage/indentured workers, they stayed behind as citizens and served the land on which they lived with faithfulness and dedication. They may remember and yearn for their motherland, but they never disrespected and denied the land they are working on. Instead, they made it more decadent by the cultural heritage that they brought with them. They planted, plowed, and nourished this land with their physical labour and grew together with utmost honesty and love. The term Coolie should no longer be used to belittle or depreciate them; instead, it should now be reversed in its meaning and should be carried with all pride and honour. It should sanguinely be put up as a label of hard work and hardships that the workers carried to flourish in a foreign land for a better tomorrow. Racial discrimination has wounded the emigrants, and the emotional bonds have been tested. The cultural dislocation has already strained the mental and social balance of the people. They gradually settled in the Guyanese culture to make it plentiful and prosperous. Reconstructing their identity of Indian to Indo-Guyanese, they accommodated and made profound changes to live everyday life. Rajkumari Singh, through this essay, wanted her people to proudly wear the name coolie, be self-reliant and give themselves the recognition they long waited for but were never bestowed on them. They need not wait for authorities or masters or owners to behold them. They are for themselves. In a way, she promoted the theme of Coolitude, a term introduced by Khal Torabully, a writer from the Maldives; he used this term to give an identity to the experiences and events of all Indentured labourers who were reduced to a mere coolie.

Various academicians have equated this term- *coolitude* with *negritude*. Negritude is simply the ideological conception and belief in the African or Black Culture. The transoceanic journey of these people is harrowing, and the name that they get stuck with, no matter what race, class, ethnicity they belong to. They are depreciated in the same way. Rajkumari wrote this essay and exalted this entire 'coolitude'. Another crucial aspect of this essay is the portrayal of diligent female characters and the evocative experiences Rajkumari mentions. She shows how the females have, without any fail, carried the history of their ancestral land and sustained the male dominance that came from both cultures. Females have contested for their space and yet never denied any of their responsibilities towards their home. The mention of the 'coolie grandmother' in the essay speaks volumes about the sacrificial regime and fostering spirit of the women back then. Working in the fields, feeding the family, and going through racial discrimination, not to forget sexual violence and domestic violence, all were part and parcel of their lives. As the target of ethnic otherness, these women struggled to pass on their traditions and customs. Amidst all this, to get ruled by the Britishers and then migrate to a country to get confused and derailed by the Afro- Caribbean politics, women suffered through extensive angles in intensive ways. Our women's delicate nature and affectionate personality carved a niche for the Indo-Guyanese women in the multi-ethnic Caribbean milieu. An important essence of the essay is the balance of feminine and masculine energies in the essay. Singh does not differentiate between the help and hard work of both the genders. Even though the females had a different

struggle story, males were equally distressed by the racism against them. The ideals of feminism are not boldly presented in the essay, rather they are put along in gentle fashion for a sensitive and more considerate reader. The Indian men and women had roots of patience and they infused the same in the coming generations setting an example of strength to survive. The men used to go out work in the paddy fields or plantations while the women had a choice to either work with their husbands or stay back home to help with the children and household chores. Women as depicted in the traditional roles, were expected to run the house with their physical labour and then keep strengthening their mental faculties. Though this essay puts the work of women, the art of cooking in exquisite terms. It also shows a real and permanent side of the society's mental image of a woman. Be it the homeland or the foreign land, women had less advantages, more labour and toil, and also were sexually available for men in addition to these traditional duties. The advancement of women like Rajkumari Singh also shows us another picture of an improved and progressive indentured society, where women have been educated and taken out of the loop of rigorous struggle at homes. Rajkumari being a granddaughter of an indentured lady from Bihar, has taken the task on her shoulders to remove the derogatory connotation attached with the term *Coolie*. An intriguing thought is to realise that even though Indian women were suppressed on both the lands. The African community supported them and the women shared the spirit of camaraderie. However, there were Chookidars who were appointed to look after the 'coolies'.

*The trade of kidnapping coolies had been extensively carried on, and that prison depots had been established in the villages near Calcutta for the security of the wretched creatures, where they were most infamously treated, and guarded with the utmost jealousy and care, to prevent their escape, until the Mauritian and Demerara slaves were ready for their reception!*

Rajkumari, in her essay, has explained profoundly why these Indian Immigrants are not just some labourers but people who have reinstated the Caribbean land into abundance with their sheer hard work and determination. This land belongs to them as much as it does to the locals of the land. They have breathed a new life and embraced the land as their own to make it flourish. This term coolie was given back then to indentured labourers, but their ancestors worked hard to turn the term into a heroic caption for them. To redefine the term and attach glory, strip the defame that came with it.

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