



Commodification of Identity: Dissecting the Coolie Body in the Indo-Caribbean Diaspora

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Abstract

Following the Slavery Abolition Act 1833, the mass labour emigration between 1837 and 1917 became a potent mechanism in the formation of the Indo-Caribbean diaspora. Over time, this "new system of slavery" emanated a new canon of studies related to migration and (re)settlement, the formation of new identities, experiences, and affiliation through assemblages of material. My study will analyse a selected texts from the Indo-Caribbean oeuvre. In the exploration of the intersectionality between migration and materiality, I will posit the significance of human identity and the process of commodification stimulated under the draconian indenture trade. The dehumanized exploitation of these coolies and their descendants is isomorphic of the deeply entrenched binary disposition of privileging the mind over the body, the enlightened over the "primitive", and the West over the East. My paper will engage in the binary prejudice and consequent, the commodification of the Indian coolies during and after the indenture system.

These indentured labourers chose to undertake the hazardous transoceanic journey and forged new yet enduring relationships with their *jahaji bhai/bhains* (fellow companions on-board). This new-found kinship materialized aboard the inhumane conditions, prompted by the perilous dark waters that surrounded them over the journey of three to four months, continued on the plantation estates. Additionally, my paper shall discuss the way this impactful "coolie odyssey", that took place towards the end of the 19th century from the ports of Bengal via the *kala pani* to the West Indies, made the Caribbean a microcosm of multicultural societies which underscores the cultural exchanges, the recreation of lifestyle (food, clothing, rites, and rituals) and the adaptive nature of humankind.

Keywords: Commodification, Identity, Indo- Caribbean, *Coolitude*, indenture.