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Remembering Indenture: Cultural Memory and Identity Formation in Girmitiya Diaspora Literature

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Abstract

Aim: The paper aims to examine the historical memory of the indenture system among the Girmitiya community and its role in shaping diasporic identity. Indenture was a contractual labour system under which Indian labourers were bound to work for a specified period. During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, thousands of Indian labourers were transported to colonial plantations in different parts of the world following the abolition of slavery.

Methodology and Approach: The paper adopts a qualitative textual approach and analyses selected works of Indo-Caribbean writers, including David Dabydeen, Peggy Mohan, and Ramabai Espinet. The study examines how experiences of migration, displacement, plantation life, and survival are represented and transformed into collective cultural memory. It also considers the preservation of language, traditions, and cultural values across generations.

Outcome: The study demonstrates that the memory of indenture contributes significantly to the preservation of Girmitiya cultural identity. The selected writers portray the exploitative conditions of plantation life while highlighting the resilience of Indian labourers who preserved their languages, traditions, and cultural values despite displacement and hardship.

Conclusion and Suggestions: The paper concludes that remembering indenture enables the Girmitiya diaspora to reconstruct its historical past, preserve its cultural memory, and negotiate its identity in the contemporary world. It suggests that greater attention should be given to Girmitiya literary and cultural narratives to preserve the memory and experiences of indentured communities for future generations.

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The system of indentured labour emerged in the nineteenth century following the abolition of the age-old system of slavery in the British Empire. In order to meet the growing demand for plantation labour, colonial authorities began recruiting labourers from India. The first ship carrying Indian indentured labourers arrived in the Caribbean in 1838, landing in British Guiana. In the following decades, labourers were transported to several other Caribbean colonies, including Trinidad and Tobago, Suriname, Jamaica, St. Lucia and Grenada. Although the indentured labour system was officially introduced as a contractual arrangement to replace slavery, in practice it reproduced many of the oppressive features of the earlier plantation regime. Most of the labourers recruited from India were poor, illiterate and belonged to marginalized social groups such as lower castes and landless peasants. Many of them were unaware of the harsh conditions that awaited them in the colonies and were persuaded by recruiters with promises of economic prosperity and a better life. However, upon arrival in the Caribbean, they soon realized the exploitative nature of the plantation system, which several historians have described as a “new system of slavery.”

The journey from India to the Caribbean itself was arduous, often lasting nearly three months across unpredictable seas. Once they arrived at the plantations, the labourers were bound by strict contractual obligations and were not permitted to leave the estates until the completion of their contracts. They were typically housed in the same rudimentary shacks that had previously been occupied by enslaved Africans and were forced to live in unhygienic and overcrowded conditions. Wages were extremely low, working conditions were harsh and mortality rates on many plantations remained alarmingly high. Between 1838 and 1917 more than 140,000 Indian labourers migrated to the Caribbean under the indenture system. A large proportion of these migrants came from regions such as Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Bengal. After completing their contracts, which were officially for five years but often extended to seven or eight years, the labourers were given the option either to return to India or to accept small plots of land in the colonies and settle permanently. While some labourers chose to return to India, a significant number decided to remain in the Caribbean and build new lives there. Over time, these communities played an important role in shaping the multicultural societies of the Caribbean. Despite the hardships they endured, the

descendants of these indentured labourers preserved many elements of their ancestral culture, including language, religious traditions and social practices.

In contemporary Indo-Caribbean literature, writers have sought to recover and reinterpret the experiences of their ancestors within the indenture system. Prominent authors such as David Dabydeen, Peggy Mohan and Ramabai Espinet draw upon historical memory to reconstruct the lives of the Girmitiya labourers and explore themes of indentureship, diaspora, cultural memory and identity formation. Their works not only document the historical trauma of indenture but also illuminate the ways in which diasporic communities negotiate identity and belonging across generations. The following sections of this paper analyse the works of these authors in order to examine how Indo-Caribbean literature preserves the cultural memory of indenture while simultaneously contributing to the formation of diasporic identity.

The historical experience of indenture did not end with the abolition of the system in the early twentieth century. The memories of migration, displacement and plantation labour continued to circulate among the descendants of the indentured labourers across generations. These memories were transmitted through oral traditions, family narratives and literary texts. These forms of expression sought to present the perspectives of the labourers that were largely absent from the dominant historical narratives produced by colonial plantation authorities. In this way, diasporic communities remember, reinterpret and transmit their collective past.

The concept of cultural memory helps us understand how such historical experiences remain meaningful long after the events themselves have passed. Scholars in cultural studies such as Maurice Halbwachs and Jan Assmann have emphasized that memories are not merely an individual recollection but a shared process shaped by social and cultural frameworks. Communities preserve memories of significant historical experiences and transmit them through rituals, customs, narratives and cultural practices. For diasporic communities, collective memory therefore becomes an important mechanism through which they maintain a meaningful connection with their past. Cultural memory acquires particular significance for Girmitiya communities whose ancestors migrated across continents under the indenture system. Their experience involved not only

geographical displacement but also profound social and cultural transformation. Over time, the identities of subsequent generations were shaped by both their inherited Indian cultural traditions and their lived experiences within Caribbean societies. Remembering the history of indenture therefore becomes a way of acknowledging historical suffering while simultaneously affirming the resilience that enabled these communities to survive and adapt in unfamiliar environments.

Literary representations play a significant role in preserving and reinterpreting these memories. Indo-Caribbean writers frequently revisit the history of indenture in order to reconstruct the lives of their forebears and to examine the lasting impact of migration and displacement. Through narrative representation, individual memories and inherited histories are transformed into a collective cultural archive that enables later generations to engage with their historical roots. Writers such as Ramabai Espinet, David Dabydeen and Peggy Mohan participate in this process of cultural remembrance through their literary works. By revisiting the experiences of indentured labourers, these writers explore how memory contributes to the formation of diasporic identity. The following sections examine how their writings reconstruct the past of the Girmitiya community and highlight the continuing influence of indenture on the cultural consciousness of later generations.

The works of David Dabydeen play a significant role in recovering the experiences of indentured labourers in the Caribbean islands. His own history is closely connected with the indenture system, as his ancestry is linked to the plantation history of Guyana. In his writings Dabydeen frequently revisits the past in order to reconstruct the lives of those who experienced displacement, isolation and cultural alienation under the indenture system. His works foreground the marginalized voices of labourers who were often misrepresented or entirely absent from colonial discourses. Dabydeen vividly portrays the harsh realities of plantation life. In works such as *The Counting House* he depicts the everyday struggles of indentured labourers who were brought from India to the Caribbean under extremely oppressive circumstances. The narrative highlights the exploitative nature of the plantation system where labourers were placed under strict supervision, denied freedom of movement beyond plantation boundaries and compelled to perform long hours of physical labour. Through such

representations, Dabydeen draws attention to the similarities between the earlier system of slavery and the later system of indentured labour.

At the same time, Dabydeen's writings explore how the descendants of indentured labourers remember and reinterpret the past. By transforming fragments of personal and communal memory into literary narratives, he reconstructs a history that had long remained suppressed or overlooked in official accounts. His works therefore function as a means of recovering the historical experiences of the Girmitiya community. Dabydeen also reflects on the cultural transformations that resulted from migration and displacement. Although the labourers were compelled to adapt to unfamiliar environments in the Caribbean, they continued to preserve elements of their inherited traditions and cultural practices. His works illustrate the complex process through which diasporic identities gradually emerged through the interaction of memory, cultural continuity and new social realities. In this way, Dabydeen's writings recover suppressed histories of the Girmitiya community and demonstrate how the memory of indenture continues to shape the cultural identity of Indo-Caribbean societies. His literary representations therefore serve as an important medium for preserving historical memory while also drawing attention to the social realities faced by diasporic communities.

Peggy Mohan introduces another important dimension to the history of indentured migration to the Caribbean. Her novel *Jahajin* foregrounds the experiences of women and presents the female perspective on indenture. Through this narrative, Mohan portrays the migration, displacement and struggles of indentured women and examines how their experiences were transmitted to later generations. In doing so, she highlights the gendered dimension of the indenture system and emphasizes the crucial role of women in preserving cultural memory within diasporic communities. The title of the novel, *Jahajin*, refers to a group of women who travelled together on the same ship to the destination colonies in the Caribbean. During the long sea voyage, these women developed bonds of solidarity as they found themselves separated from their families and familiar social environments. Mohan depicts how these shared experiences of migration and uncertainty enabled the women to form new social networks that later became significant sources of emotional support within plantation society. The memories

of the voyage, the anxieties of displacement and the struggle to adapt to unfamiliar environments gradually became central elements in the collective consciousness of the Girmitiya community.

Mohan also emphasizes the significant role played by women in preserving cultural traditions among the descendants of indentured labourers. Despite the disruption caused by migration, many labourers retained elements of their linguistic and cultural heritage, including Bhojpuri-based speech forms, religious rituals and social customs. These cultural practices functioned as important markers of identity that connected later generations with their ancestral past. Through such representations, Mohan suggests that indenture should not be understood merely as a historical event but as a lived experience that continued to shape the cultural identity of Indo-Caribbean communities. At the same time, Mohan explores the emotional and psychological dimensions of diasporic identity. The descendants of indentured labourers often inhabit a cultural space shaped simultaneously by inherited Indian traditions and the social realities of Caribbean societies. Through the recollection of ancestral experiences, later generations attempt to understand their historical origins and redefine their place in the contemporary world. In this way, Mohan transforms personal memories into a broader cultural archive that sustains the collective memory of indenture within the Girmitiya diaspora.

Ramabai Espinet is another significant writer whose works engage directly with the history of Indo-Caribbean indenture. Unlike many authors who primarily focus on the first generation of indentured labourers, Espinet pays greater attention to their descendants and explores how they engage with the past in order to shape their present identity. Through individual narratives she brings the forgotten histories of indenture to the foreground in a compelling and engaging manner. These themes are vividly portrayed in her novel *The Swinging Bridge*. The novel tells the story of a young woman named Mona Singh, who returns to Trinidad in search of her ancestral past. During this journey she discovers the story of her great-grandmother Gainer, who had migrated from India to Trinidad under the indenture system. Through Gainer's story Espinet reveals the hardships faced by indentured women whose experiences often remained undocumented in official colonial records.

Espinet therefore highlights the importance of family memories, personal archives and storytelling in reconstructing the past. Her work gives voice to the silences that surround the history of indenture, particularly the experiences of women labourers that were rarely recorded in British colonial archives. Through literary representation, Espinet attempts to fill these historical gaps by imagining the lives and struggles of those who were excluded from dominant historical narratives. In doing so, she provides an alternative perspective that preserves the experiences of marginalized communities. Espinet also places her characters who are descendants of indentured labourers, within the context of a changing and globalized world where they must negotiate complex questions of belonging. In *The Swinging Bridge* characters often move between different geographical locations and cultural spaces, reflecting the broader dispersal of the Indo-Caribbean diaspora. In this way remembering indenture becomes a quest for cultural roots and historical continuity. The recovery of forgotten stories enables later generations to reconnect with their past while simultaneously redefining their place in the present. Espinet's literary representations thus expand the discourse of indenture beyond the immediate experiences of plantation labour. Her works suggest that the legacy of indenture continues to influence later generations and plays an important role in shaping how they understand their history and their position within a rapidly changing world.

Literary works written on the history of indenture demonstrate how the past continues to shape the cultural consciousness of present-day Indo-Caribbean communities. Although the system formally ended in the early twentieth century, its legacy remains deeply embedded in the memories, personal narratives and cultural practices of the Girmitiya community. Through literary representations, writers revisit this complex history not only to highlight the hardships faced by their ancestors but also to examine the processes through which displaced communities formed their identities in unfamiliar environments. Remembering indenture therefore becomes essential for understanding the historical foundations of the diasporic community. The works discussed in this paper illustrate how cultural memory functions as a powerful mechanism through which the experiences of earlier generations are preserved. These authors transform fragmented individual experiences into meaningful cultural narratives. In this

way, their works act as repositories of collective memory that allow diasporic communities to acknowledge the struggles and resilience of their forefathers while shaping new identities in changing social contexts. Furthermore, the works of David Dabydeen, Peggy Mohan and Ramabai Espinet demonstrate that the history of indenture cannot be confined to a mere historical episode. Instead its influence extends into the present through intergenerational memory, storytelling and cultural practices that continue to shape Indo-Caribbean diasporic identity. Their writings highlight how questions of belonging, identity and heritage remain closely connected to the histories of migration and plantation life. By preserving the voices of the marginalized, these writers reinterpret the past and articulate a sense of identity rooted in ancestral memory.

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