

Book Reviews

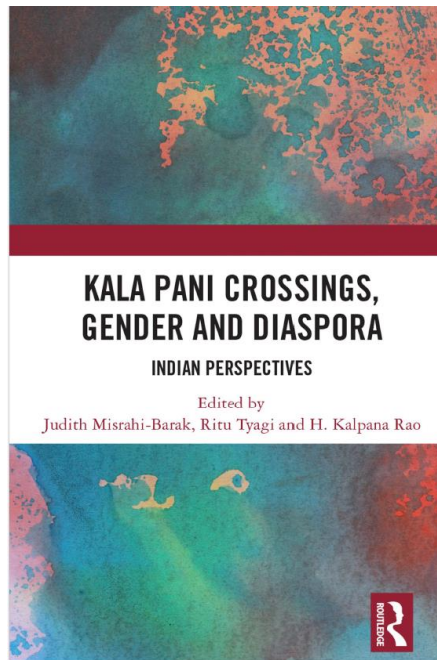


CAESURAE: POETICS OF CULTURAL TRANSLATION

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***Kala Pani Crossings, Gender and Diaspora: Indian Perspectives* edited by Judith Misrahi-Barak, Ritu Tyagi and H. Kalpana Rao. Routledge (Taylor and Francis Group), London and New York. 2024. i-xv+1-385. £39.99. Rs. 995/- (South Asian Edition). Reviewed by Oly Roy.**

Edited by Judith Misrahi-Barak, Ritu Tyagi and H. Kalpana Rao, *Kala Pani Crossings, Gender and Diaspora: Indian Perspectives* focuses on ‘post-indentureship feminisms’ while charting the engagement of race, class, caste, gender and sexuality with diasporic concepts such as home, belonging, displacement and the reaffirmation of nationhood and selfhood within the

scope of the Indian experience. A companion to the 2021-22 Routledge publication, *Kala Pani Crossings: Revisiting 19th Century Migrations from India's Perspective*, edited by Ashutosh Bhardwaj and Judith Misrahi-Barak, this work endeavours to understand Indian Indenture and its legacy in the diaspora and in India.

Combining essays and writer interviews based on fictional and non-fictional writings, the book has scoped out a curious and innovate methodology, blending both subjective and creative perspectives. It features a range of compelling research articles from scholars and researchers across the globe to explore relational historiographies of indentureship that defined the lives of the *Girmityas* or indentured labourers who migrated across the *Kala Pani* to form what the book defines as 'old diaspora.' The book reimagines this forgotten chapter of Indian history in terms of the displacement and sense of estrangement that followed the abolition of slavery in 1834 and consequent indentured labour trade from India to regions like the Caribbean, Reunion Island, Mauritius and Fiji.

Routledge's *Kala Pani Crossings: Revisiting 19th Century Migrations from India's Perspective* (2021-22) has attempted to initiate an investigative discussion in India about the system of indentureship and its effects on Indian labourers who had come to replace slaves in tropical sugarcane plantations, focusing primarily on loss of cultural, familial and religious identity that they suffered from having crossed the forbidden sea. While the previous volume bore witness to these stories of loss, erasure and creation of hybrid identities, this volume highlights the gendered dimension of the migrant experience. The book questions the invisibilization and homogenization of women's experiences within the migrant community, and sees their experiences of negotiating their freedom and their lives with husbands, partners and family as uniquely arduous. Far from the strata of respectable elite in India, most of these women were widows, runaway *satis* or prostitutes who had been forsaken by their families, and had voluntarily or involuntarily signed *girmits* with the colonizers.

Through its exploratory essays and chapters, the book posits the varied contradictory opinions on the notion of emancipation for women within the indentured system, discussing the different roles and positions that they took up in these communities. Both physiological and psychological aspects of violence, subjugation and victimhood have been discussed in the chapters through essays, newspaper articles, case studies and personal interviews. Through analysis of nationalist discourse, colonial accounts as well as other pertinent narratives, the book delves deep into the moral, sexual as well as caste related politics of identity that exploited and marginalized indentured women, stripping them of legitimate agency.

By unlocking the intersections of diaspora and gender, the work focuses on ‘post-indentureship feminisms,’ thus opening itself up to discussions on indentured female voices that narrate their own stories of resistance and subversion through a meaningful creative agency. These stories of transgression, exclusion and alienation create interstitial spaces wherein new conceptions of femininity are allowed to emerge. The volume explores how women’s stories of resistance and negotiation create possibilities of redefining their position and identity with respect to their ‘home,’ whether they can only be viewed as marginalized by their diasporic spaces or there is an opportunity to consider their transnational experience as empowering them towards reinvention of self and identity. It focuses exclusively on migrations between India and territories in the Southwestern Indian Ocean such as Reunion and Mauritius in the Mascarene islands or between the Indian Ocean and the Caribbean Sea, or between the Indian Ocean and the Southwestern Pacific Ocean as for Fiji, making it of academic interest to scholars and researchers of Literature, History, Indian Ocean Studies, Migration, Postcolonial and South Asian Studies. This trans-national approach allows the volume to include accounts of relational historiographies of indentureship across the Caribbean and the Francophone world, discussing Indian, Mauritian, Guadeloupean authors and artists alike.

The volume endeavours to illustrate a new understanding of the continuities and connections in the diasporic experiences of indentured Indians across continents. It explores the traditional standards of Indianness and gender relations as shaped through the dynamics of race and culture. By looking at the distinctions between Indian women at home and their diasporic counterparts, it seeks to foreground alternatives to Indian norms of gender, patriarchy, caste and class. The feminist framework is used as a perceptual lens to revisit how notions of mythology, religiosity and nationality are constructed in response to the new India that often fails to assimilate within itself ideas of multiplicity and hybridity arising out of diasporic experiences.

Ideas of home and nationhood are also critiqued in various ways to see how gender and space negotiate with them. The book attempts to bridge the gap between anglophone and francophone diasporic experiences by retrieving feminine voices within diasporic discourses that challenge established perceptions. It interprets the evolutions, transitions and ruptures within the anglophone and francophone indentured colonies as connected histories that relate these communities to their homeland while also seeing them as connected sociologies that are conscious of their positionality with respect to various forms of colonialism on a global scale.

The volume not only includes *girmitya* stories by writers and scholars of diverse diasporic legacies relating their tales of displacements, estrangements and alienation in their own voices, but also critical discussions that take both English and French texts as their primary sources. Socio-cultural as well as literary perspectives make for a rich multi-disciplinary reading experience. Divided in five sections, the book begins with an “Introduction” penned by the three co-editors. The first section entitled, ‘Rethinking the Kala Pani from an Indian Perspective: Theoretical and Pedagogical Approaches,’ discusses critical issues related to the conceptualization of old and new diaspora and has three chapters. The contributors in this section include Mala Pandurang, Himadri Lahiri and Amba Pande.

The next section entitled, 'Past and Present: Revisiting the "Sexual Contract",' establishes a central theme in the volume by investigating the interactions that women had with men and the different manifestations of marital norms, customs and sexual relations in heterosexual, homosexual and queer contexts. The contributors in this section are Suparna Sengupta, Auritra Munshi and Arnab Kumar Singha. The third section of the volume explores the muffling and repudiation of indentured women's voices across francophone islands of the Indian Ocean (Reunion) or the Caribbean and is named 'Voice and Vision Redeemed.' With four chapters, this section offers new insights into narratives of individuation, collective memory and history emerging from marginalized migrant communities. Vijay Rao, Jenny Balasubramanian, Praveen Mirdha and Gargi Dutta are the contributors to this section. The fourth section, 'In Conversation with India: Memorial Narratives Inside Out,' urges the readers to reconsider the politics of representation by evaluating the present through the perspectives of the past. The section features two chapters contributed by Ridhima Tyagi and Stephanos Stephanides.

The final section of the volume entitled, 'In the Writers' Own Voices,' features responses to a template of questions proposed by the co-editors to authors who have grappled with the history of indentureship in through their families. Prof Kusum Aggarwal, Emerita Professor from Delhi University (Department of Germanic and Romance Languages) has contributed towards conceptualizing the template and editing the interviews in discussion with the writers. The section features the voices of Brij V. Lal, Ananda Devi, Shani Mootoo, Peggy Mohan, Cyril Dabydeen, Davina Ittoo, Ramabai Espinet and Khal Torabully. The interviews allow for an interplay between scholarly essays and the first-person narratives as the writers reflect on their own subjective notions of belonging.

The volume is an essential companion for critical and creative readings in the history of indentureship, particularizing the Indian perspective. Its enriched collection of scholarly essays

draws the reader's attention to the urgent need to reconstruct and re-evaluate women's history within the crucial chapter of 'old diaspora' of indentured Indian labourers.

***About the reviewer**

Oly Roy is an Assistant Professor of English at St. Xavier's College, Burdwan, and a Research Scholar in the Department of English at Cooch Behar Panchanan Barma University, West Bengal. Her research area is Trauma Studies and American Literature where she is involved in exploring contemporary theories, philosophies and semiotics of historical and cultural trauma.