Before the Girmit: Recruitment, Consent, and the Gendered Infrastructure of Indian Indenture in Amitav Ghosh's Sea of Poppies and Gaiutra Bahadur's Coolie Woman

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ABSTRACT

Scholarship on Indian indentured labour has examined colonial political economy, plantation exploitation, diaspora formation and women's migration. Literary studies have read gender and maritime mobility in Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* (2008), and Gaiutra Bahadur's *Coolie Woman* (2013) has aimed to recover women's lives through family history and colonial records. Less attention has gone to recruitment, constrained consent and the gendered processes before departure as a comparative problem. This article argues that Indian women's entry into indenture was mediated by a gendered infrastructure of consent. This infrastructure joined agrarian dispossession, caste and household hierarchies, recruiting intermediaries, colonial classification, contractual documentation and maritime transport. It made women's agreement possible, recordable and, later, hard to interpret. Using comparative close reading, feminist labour historiography and critical archival reading, the article studies Ghosh's fictional migration to Mauritius in 1838 and Bahadur's reconstruction of her great-grandmother's migration to British Guiana in 1903. It keeps fiction, family-historical reconstruction and historical claims drawn from published scholarship distinct. It does not treat one migrant as representative of all women. By tracing recruitment from inland India through Calcutta and Indian Ocean routes to Atlantic plantations, it offers an interdisciplinary account of contractual freedom and women's agency for Indian Ocean World studies.

Keywords: Indian Indenture; Women's Migration; Gendered Recruitment; Contractual Consent; Indian Ocean World; Indian Ocean–Atlantic Connections

INTRODUCTION

Two women leave northern India for the sugar colonies. The first is Deeti, the widow at the centre of Amitav Ghosh's novel *Sea of Poppies*. She escapes her husband's funeral pyre and boards the *Ibis* at Calcutta in 1838, bound for Mauritius.[1] The second is Sujaria, a Brahman woman of twenty-seven. She sailed from Calcutta on 29 July 1903 aboard the *Clyde*, four months pregnant, and reached British Guiana on 4 November. Her great-granddaughter, Gaiutra Bahadur, found a trace of her in an emigration pass and built from it *Coolie Woman: The Odyssey of Indenture*.[2] In law, both women were emigrants who had agreed to go. Yet neither story can be told as a free choice, and neither can be told as plain coercion.

This article asks what it meant for an Indian woman to consent to indenture. Its answer is that consent was not a moment of signing. It was the outcome of a process, and that process was gendered at every stage. Conditions in the village, the advice of kin and strangers, the questions of officials, the entries in a register and the rules of a ship all shaped what a woman could know and what she could refuse. I call this process the gendered infrastructure of consent. The central distinction is between signing a contract and holding real knowledge, choice and bargaining power in the circumstances that produced the signature. Recruitment is therefore treated as a sequence and not as an event: conditions at home, intermediaries, official procedure, depots, documents and the voyage.

The two texts approach this sequence from different positions. *Sea of Poppies* is a historical novel set in 1838. Its *Ibis* carries indentured migrants and convicts from Calcutta towards Mauritius, and its plot draws on the linked histories of opium, agrarian distress, commerce and empire. *Coolie Woman* combines family history, archival reconstruction, autobiographical reflection and historical argument. Bahadur follows one great-grandmother and, through her, the quarter of a million women who left India as indentured labourers. Ghosh imagines an earlier period through fiction. Bahadur investigates a later migration through documents, family memory and acknowledged conjecture. The gap between Mauritius in 1838 and British Guiana in 1903 matters. In 1838 the system was four years old, it was governed by new rules of 1837, and it was about to be suspended. By 1903 it had

[1] Amitav Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies* (New Delhi: Viking, 2008).
[2] Gaiutra Bahadur, *Coolie Woman: The odyssey of indenture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

been resumed, consolidated in the Emigration Act of 1883 and run through protectors, depots and registered recruiters.[3] Practices and populations were not the same in the two moments, and I do not treat them as the same.

The title uses the word *girmit* with care. It is a vernacular form of the English 'agreement', and it is associated most closely with Fiji, where *girmitiya* became the name of the indentured and their descendants.[4] Ghosh's novel uses the term for its migrants, and it has a wide life in diasporic memory. But it was not the universal administrative word for indenture. Official records in Mauritius and British Guiana spoke of emigrants, immigrants and indentured labourers, and of contracts whose terms differed by colony and decade. I use *girmit* as a critical frame for the contractual regime and not as a historical label for every colony. 'Before the girmit' names the time and space in which an agreement was prepared before it was made.

The problem addressed here is a separation in existing work. Literary studies of indenture often begin on the ship or the plantation, or they read the past through diaspora and memory. Histories of regulation describe recruiters, depots and statutes, but seldom ask how fiction and family history represent the same procedures. Studies of women's migration have often had to choose between two assumptions: that women were deceived or forced, or that their journeys were free acts of mobility. Both assumptions hide the institutional work done before departure. A comparison that joins recruitment, consent, literary representation and historical reconstruction can show how that work shaped what women could choose and what later readers can know of their choices.

The argument is as follows. Women's entry into indenture was mediated by a gendered infrastructure that joined colonial economic change, caste and class inequality, household relations, recruiting intermediaries, administrative classification, labour contracts and maritime transport. This infrastructure shaped the conditions under which consent could be given, limited, recorded or later reconstructed. Reading *Sea of Poppies* beside *Coolie Woman* shows that historical fiction and archival family history offer distinct and complementary ways to

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[3] Hugh Tinker, *A New System of Slavery: The export of Indian labour overseas, 1830-1920* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974); Marina Carter, *Servants, Sirdars and Settlers: Indians in Mauritius, 1834-1874* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995); Ashutosh Kumar, *Coolies of the Empire: Indentured Indians in the sugar colonies, 1830-1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

[4] Brij V. Lal, *Girmitiyas: The origins of the Fiji Indians* (Canberra: Journal of Pacific History, 1983); Brij V. Lal, *Chalo Jahaji: On a journey through indenture in Fiji* (Canberra: Division of Pacific and Asian History, Australian National University; Suva: Fiji Museum, 2000).

examine the unstable relation between contractual freedom and gendered unfreedom. Four questions guide the study. How do the two works represent the conditions that precede women's recruitment? How do caste, class, gender, marital status and household vulnerability intersect with recruitment to set the limits of consent? How do fiction and family history reconstruct women's decisions and silences differently? And how does a gender-focused account of recruitment illuminate the links between inland India, maritime routes and overseas plantations?

Indenture shows that connection at work. A peasant plot on the Ganges plain, a recruiter's route, the port of Calcutta, a ship's deck and an overseas plantation formed one chain of labour mobility.[5] British Guiana is not part of the Indian Ocean World. It enters the argument because migration that began in the Indian subcontinent, and was organised through Calcutta and Indian Ocean shipping, joined South Asian labourers to Atlantic plantation societies.[6] Literature is treated here as a source of questions and evidence about this connection, and not as a stock of examples for postcolonial theory. The article first reviews the scholarship, then builds a framework and a method, then reads the two works in four steps, and ends by stating its contributions.

Literature Review: Indian Indenture, Gender, and the Historical Problem of Consent

Freedom, Recruitment and the Colonial Imagination

Hugh Tinker's *A New System of Slavery* set the terms of the debate. He argued that Indian indenture resembled slavery in its coercion, its mortality and its deceit, whatever the law said about consent.[7] Later historians have both used and revised his account. Madhavi Kale placed indenture within post-emancipation capital and the planters' search for labour.[8] Ashutosh Kumar reconstructed the

[5] Sugata Bose, *A Hundred Horizons: The Indian Ocean in the age of global empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006); Michael N. Pearson, "Littoral society: The concept and the problems," *Journal of World History*, 17, 4 (2006), 353-73.
[6] Yoshina Hurgobin and Subho Basu, "'Oceans without borders': Dialectics of transcolonial labor migration from the Indian Ocean world to the Atlantic Ocean world," *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 87 (2015), 7-26.
[7] Tinker, *New System of Slavery*.
[8] Madhavi Kale, *Fragments of Empire: Capital, slavery, and Indian indentured labor migration in the British Caribbean* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998).

networks, correspondence and decisions of migrants, and presented them as actors within a harsh system and not only as its victims.[9] Jonathan Connolly has shown that the meaning of free labour was itself remade as indenture was built in Mauritius, British Guiana and Trinidad, so that a contested practice came to be seen as a legitimate form of freedom.[10] Neha Hui and Uma Kambhampati add a political-economic argument: indenture was justified in the language of economic freedom, and it stood between slavery and free migration.[11] Their study of ship registers also shows that caste affected who returned from British Guiana, since very low castes were less likely to go back.[12]

These works establish that the freedom of indenture was constructed, and that migrants were not a uniform group. Andrea Major shows how the figure of the 'hill coolie' in British debate of the late 1830s produced an enduring stereotype of the typical Indian migrant.[13] Marina Carter's studies describe the recruiting networks, regulations and social lives of migrants in Mauritius, and Richard Allen places them within the island's transition from slavery.[14] Clare Anderson shows that indentured labour shared ships, ports and practices of identification with convict transportation.[15] Radhika Mongia argues that the regulation of Indian indentured emigration was a formative site for the modern state's authority over mobility.[16] What remains less clear is how this constructed freedom was lived at the moment of recruitment, especially by women.

Women, gender and indenture

Work on women began with the problems of numbers and violence. Brij Lal described a Fiji labour force with too few women, and a plantation order

[9] Kumar, *Coolies of the Empire*.
[10] Jonathan Connolly, *Worthy of Freedom: Indenture and free labor in the era of emancipation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2024).
[11] Neha Hui and Uma Kambhampati, "The political economy of Indian indentured labor in the nineteenth century," *Journal of the History of Economic Thought*, 47, 2 (2025), 141-63.
[12] Neha Hui and Uma S. Kambhampati, "Between unfreedoms: The role of caste in decisions to repatriate among indentured workers," *Economic History Review*, 75, 2 (2022), 421-46.
[13] Andrea Major, "'Hill Coolies': Indian indentured labour and the colonial imagination, 1836-38," *South Asian Studies*, 33, 1 (2017), 23-36.
[14] Carter, *Servants, Sirdars and Settlers*; Richard B. Allen, *Slaves, Freedmen, and Indentured Laborers in Colonial Mauritius* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).
[15] Clare Anderson, "Convicts and coolies: Rethinking indentured labour in the nineteenth century," *Slavery & Abolition*, 30, 1 (2009), 93-109.
[16] Radhika Mongia, *Indian Migration and Empire: A colonial genealogy of the modern state* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018).

marked by sexual competition, violence and the control of women's bodies.[17] Rhoda Reddock studied women under indenture in Trinidad, and Prabhu Mohapatra showed how wife murders in the Caribbean led to a 'sexual contract' that sought to restore men's claims over women.[18] Carter collected testimonies of Indian women in nineteenth-century Mauritius, and Verene Shepherd wrote narratives of the passage from India to the Caribbean.[19] Recent collections extend this work to agency, resistance and gender across the diaspora.[20]

These studies show that women's lives cannot be read from male-centred labour histories or from aggregate figures. Samita Sen adds a warning. In colonial India the assumption that women who migrated had been deceived or abducted was produced by interests opposed to women's own migration, and it helped bring about a prohibition, in 1901, of women's 'voluntary' migration to Assam plantations.[21] The language of the deceived woman was therefore part of the machinery of control. This bears directly on consent, because both the story of the victim and the story of the free agent were made by someone for a purpose. What the historiography has not fully done is to ask how conditions before departure, including household authority, caste respectability and the needs of recruiters, shaped the forms of labour and intimacy that came after.

Criticism of the two texts

Criticism of *Sea of Poppies* has taken up gender, caste, opium and the sea. Tara Leverton reads gender and sexuality in the maritime space of the novel, especially through the figure of Baboo Nob Kissin.[22] Rudrani Gangopadhyay

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[17] Brij V. Lal, "Kunti's cry: Indentured women on Fiji plantations," *The Indian Economic & Social History Review*, 22, 1 (1985), 55-71.
[18] Rhoda Reddock, "Freedom denied: Indian women and indentureship in Trinidad and Tobago, 1845-1917," *Economic and Political Weekly*, 20, 43 (1985), WS79-WS87; Prabhu P. Mohapatra, "Restoring the family: Wife murders and the making of a sexual contract for Indian immigrant labour in the British Caribbean colonies, 1860-1920," *Studies in History*, 11, 2 (1995), 227-60.
[19] Marina Carter, *Lakshmi's Legacy: The testimonies of Indian women in 19th century Mauritius* (Stanley, Rose-Hill: Éditions de l'Océan Indien, 1994); Verene A. Shepherd, *Maharani's Misery: Narratives of a passage from India to the Caribbean* (Kingston: University of the West Indies Press, 2002).
[20] Crispin Bates, ed., *Beyond Indenture: Agency and resistance in the colonial South Asian diaspora* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024); Judith Misrahi-Barak, Ritu Tyagi and H. Kalpana Rao, eds., *Kala Pani Crossings, Gender and Diaspora: Indian perspectives* (London: Routledge, 2024).
[21] Samita Sen, "'Without his consent?': Marriage and women's migration in colonial India," *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 65 (2004), 77-104.
[22] Tara Leverton, "Gender dysphoria and gendered diaspora: Love, sex and empire in Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*," *English Studies in Africa*, 57, 2 (2014), 33-44.

considers how selves are remade on board the *Ibis*.[23] Anupama Arora links opium, colonialism and migration through the novel's structure of land, river and sea.[24] Nandini Dhar comes closest to the present concern. She argues that the novel treats the decision to accept indenture as a response to shrinking options for the rural poor, and that it unsettles the opposition of choice and coercion.[25] Her reading is a precedent for this article. I add attention to the gendered processes through which such a decision was prepared, brokered and certified.

Work on *Coolie Woman* has stressed diaspora, trauma and the archive. Murari Prasad and Binod Jha read the book as an account of Indian diasporic formation in Guyana and of women's part in family making and cultural change.[26] Sathya Pramode and Namrata Mohan study testimony and trauma in Bahadur's account of abuse and violence.[27] Alissa Trotz reads the book's method as a challenge to the epistemic violence of the official archive, and cautions against reading Indian women only through violence.[28] I ask a narrower question: how do archival absences and narrative reconstruction affect what we can say about recruitment, contractual consent and women's constrained choices?

The research gap

Building on Dhar's reading of constrained choice in Sea of Poppies, this article shifts attention to the processes through which women's options are narrowed, recruitment information is mediated, and consent is administratively certified. Its contribution is a historically differentiated comparison of these

[23] Rudrani Gangopadhyay, "Finding oneself on board the *Ibis* in Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*," *WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly*, 45, 1-2 (2017), 55-64.
[24] Anupama Arora, "'The sea is history': Opium, colonialism, and migration in Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*," *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature*, 42, 3-4 (2011), 21-42.
[25] Nandini Dhar, "Shadows of slavery, discourses of choice, and Indian indentureship in Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*," *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature*, 48, 1 (2017), 1-35.
[26] Murari Prasad and Binod K. Jha, "Indian diasporic formations in Guyana: Reading *Coolie Woman: The odyssey of indenture*," *Asiatic: IIUM Journal of English Language and Literature*, 10, 2 (2016), 230-46.
[27] Sathya Pramode and Namrata Mohan, "The 'C' word: Testimony and trauma in Gaiutra Bahadur's *Coolie Woman: The odyssey of indenture*," *Dia-noesis: A Journal of Philosophy*, 18, 2 (2025), 343-62.
[28] D. Alissa Trotz, "Gaiutra Bahadur's *Coolie Woman*: Intimacies, proximities, relationalities," *Small Axe*, 22, 2 (2018), 219-31.

processes in Ghosh's fiction of 1838 and Bahadur's archive-mediated reconstruction of migration in 1903.

Theoretical Framework: Gendered Infrastructure, Constrained Consent, and Oceanic Labour Mobility

The framework joins four bodies of thought. Feminist labour historiography asks who migrated and on what terms. Postcolonial political economy explains the demand for labour and the language of freedom that justified it. Critical archival studies asks how records are made and what they allow us to say. Indian Ocean relational history places the whole process in space. I treat them not as rival authorities but as explanations of four dimensions of one process.

Gendered infrastructure and the production of consent

Infrastructure is a useful term because it directs attention to arrangements that work in the background and are noticed when they fail. Brian Larkin has shown that infrastructures are political and symbolic as well as material.[29] Biao Xiang and Johan Lindquist apply the idea to migration. Their 'migration infrastructure' names the commercial, regulatory, technological, humanitarian and social mechanisms that make movement possible.[30] Unlike a general account of migration infrastructure, this concept asks how gender shapes women's access to information, their ability to refuse, and the administrative evidence later treated as proof of consent. I extend this idea in two ways. I add gender, because the same mechanisms open and close different doors for women and men. And I add consent, because the mechanisms do not only move people. They also produce the appearance and the record of agreement.

By the gendered infrastructure of consent I mean the connected social, economic, commercial, administrative and maritime arrangements that shape which women can migrate, what they can know, whom they must trust, how their agreement is recorded, and what that record later allows others to say about their

[29] Brian Larkin, "The politics and poetics of infrastructure," *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 42 (2013), 327-43.
[30] Biao Xiang and Johan Lindquist, "Migration infrastructure," *International Migration Review*, 48, S1 (2014), S122-48.

choice. It is not only material. It includes recruiters and kin, caste rules and household authority, laws and forms, and the institutions that controlled transport. I distinguish four operations. Conditions of dispossession and household power *compel*. Intermediaries *broker* access and information. Officials and documents *certify* that agreement has been given. Ships *carry* the migrant beyond the point of return. Running through all four is a fifth feature: the archive keeps some traces of the process and loses others. I apply each operation by asking what narrows a migrant's options, who mediates information, what record certifies agreement, and how departure alters the possibility of refusal. These operations identify connected mechanisms rather than a universal sequence experienced by every migrant.

The principal analytic category is constrained consent. It names decisions made in unequal circumstances that neither remove a woman's agency nor make her choice fully informed and freely exercisable. Naila Kabeer's work on agency helps here. Choice presupposes the possibility of alternatives, and agency can be exercised in ways that leave existing inequalities in place.[31] This avoids a binary of absolute coercion and unrestricted voluntariness. A woman might act with purpose, even with courage, and still have had no option she would have preferred.

Caste, class, gender and the labouring body

Intersection is central. Kimberlé Crenshaw's account of intersectionality and Joan Scott's view of gender as a relation of power both warn against treating women as one group.[32] Uma Chakravarti has argued that caste hierarchy in North India depends on control of women's sexuality, so that purity, marriage and widowhood bear on women differently by caste.[33] A high-caste widow and a low-caste labourer's wife faced different dangers and different costs of leaving. Hui and Kambhampati's register data show that caste also shaped outcomes after migration.[34] I therefore treat caste and gender as intersecting but historically

[31] Naila Kabeer, "Resources, agency, achievements: Reflections on the measurement of women's empowerment," *Development and Change*, 30, 3 (1999), 435-64.
[32] Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color," *Stanford Law Review*, 43, 6 (1991), 1241-99; Joan W. Scott, "Gender: A useful category of historical analysis," *American Historical Review*, 91, 5 (1986), 1053-75.
[33] Uma Chakravarti, "Conceptualising Brahmanical patriarchy in early India: Gender, caste, class and state," *Economic and Political Weekly*, 28, 14 (1993), 579-85.
[34] Hui and Kambhampati, "Between unfreedoms."

variable relations, and I separate the social pressures that drove migration from the institutional mechanisms that processed migrants.

Colonial governmentality and contractual freedom

The law presented indenture as a contract. Robert Steinfeld has shown that nineteenth-century free labour law kept penal sanctions for breach of contract, so that contract and coercion were not opposites.[35] Connolly and Hui and Kambhampati show how officials and economists reconciled indenture with the doctrine of freedom, and Tayyab Mahmud reads indenture as a legal form through which capital obtained cheap labour after slavery.[36] Uma Kothari adds a spatial point: unfreedom lay in the control of movement, both the compulsion to migrate and the confinement after arrival.[37] I do not reduce indenture to slavery. Anderson and Kumar show that it had its own contracts, administrations and room for migrants' initiative.[38] The task is to see coercion and exploitation continuing alongside these differences. A key question is how documents made recruitment look administratively clear and consensual while hiding the pressures around each decision. Anderson's study of colonial identification suggests that forms and registers made persons legible by recording their bodies, castes and origins.[39]

Archive, narrative and women's historical agency

Ann Laura Stoler asks us to read colonial archives as sites where knowledge was produced and not only stored.[40] Michel-Rolph Trouillot shows that silences enter history at the making of sources, archives, narratives and interpretations.[41] Saidiya Hartman asks how a historian can tell of lives that records reduce to a few

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[35] Robert J. Steinfeld, *The Invention of Free Labor: The employment relation in English and American law and culture, 1350-1870* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991); Robert J. Steinfeld, *Coercion, Contract, and Free Labor in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).
[36] Connolly, *Worthy of Freedom*; Hui and Kambhampati, "Political economy"; Tayyab Mahmud, "Cheaper than a slave: Indentured labor, colonialism and capitalism," *Whittier Law Review*, 34 (2013), 215-44.
[37] Uma Kothari, "Geographies and histories of unfreedom: Indentured labourers and contract workers in Mauritius," *Journal of Development Studies*, 49, 8 (2013), 1042-57.
[38] Anderson, "Convicts and coolies"; Kumar, *Coolies of the Empire*.
[39] Clare Anderson, *Legible Bodies: Race, criminality and colonialism in South Asia* (Oxford: Berg, 2004).
[40] Ann Laura Stoler, "Colonial archives and the arts of governance," *Archival Science*, 2, 1-2 (2002), 87-109; Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic anxieties and colonial common sense* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009); Jacques Derrida, Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 17.
[41] Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the production of history* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995).

lines.[42] Diana Taylor's distinction between the archive and the repertoire, between recorded and embodied memory, helps with family memory in Bahadur's book.[43] I use these ideas to separate four conditions that are often merged: archival silence, where nothing was recorded; narrative uncertainty, where a text signals what it does not know; missing evidence, where records once existed and are lost; and interpretive reconstruction, where a writer infers agency from partial traces.

Indian Ocean relational space

The Indian Ocean is treated here as a historical system of movement and exchange. Sugata Bose's account of the ocean as a space of linked economies and ideas, Michael Pearson's idea of littoral society and Isabel Hofmeyr's call to use the ocean as method all direct attention to connection across land and sea.[44] Sanjay Subrahmanyam's 'connected histories' remind us that connection must be shown through particular routes and institutions.[45] Hofmeyr has also urged that the Indian Ocean and the Atlantic be read together.[46] In this article the link is traced through concrete paths: recruiters, depots, shipping firms, imperial law and the ships themselves. Labour movement did more than transfer workers. It reorganised obligations, intimacy and the possibility of belonging, a point developed by Lisa Lowe in her study of the 'coolie' as a figure in the colonial management of freedom.[47]

Methodology: A Comparative Literary-Historical Study of Recruitment and Consent

The corpus is a pair chosen for difference. Ghosh offers a fictional historical world. Bahadur investigates documentary traces and family memory to

[42] Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in two acts," *Small Axe*, 12, 2 (2008), 1-14.
[43] Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing cultural memory in the Americas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).
[44] Bose, *Hundred Horizons*; Pearson, "Littoral society"; Isabel Hofmeyr, "The complicating sea: The Indian Ocean as method," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 32, 3 (2012), 584-90.
[45] Sanjay Subrahmanyam, "Connected histories: Notes towards a reconfiguration of early modern Eurasia," *Modern Asian Studies*, 31, 3 (1997), 735-62.
[46] Isabel Hofmeyr, "The Black Atlantic meets the Indian Ocean: Forging new paradigms of transnationalism for the Global South – literary and cultural perspectives," *Social Dynamics*, 33, 2 (2007), 3-32.
[47] Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015).

reconstruct one woman's life. I read them as distinct but complementary representations of women's indentured migration. Ghosh sets his story in 1838, in the early and contested phase of emigration from Calcutta. Bahadur's Sujaria travels in 1903, within a mature regime of protectors, depots and registered recruiters. Mauritius lies in the Indian Ocean and was the first British colony to receive Indian indentured labour. British Guiana lies in the Atlantic and had received Indian labourers since 1838.[48] The difference between the destinations is part of the analysis and not an accident of selection.

Four methods are combined. *Comparative close reading* attends to plot, narrative perspective, characterisation, dialogue and description in passages on conditions before departure, encounters with recruiters and officials, contractual decisions and the move to the ship. In Ghosh I read focalisation and contrast. In Bahadur I read how conjecture, qualification and alternatives are marked in the prose. *Historical contextualisation* places each work within the development of indenture, the laws of the period and the plantation systems of each colony. *Critical archival reading* treats records as products of institutions concerned with managing labour. *Conceptual analysis* applies gendered infrastructure and constrained consent to specific passages and evidence, and I do not assume that the framework settles a question before the evidence has been read. Comparison then sets continuities and differences side by side without assuming that Ghosh's characters stand for the migrants Bahadur documents.

I distinguish three kinds of evidence. The first is Ghosh's fictional representation. The second is Bahadur's reconstruction, which rests on an emigration pass, ship-surgeon reports, colonial records, visits to the village named on the pass and family memory, and which she presents with acknowledged uncertainty.[49] The third is independently verified colonial evidence, by which I mean statutes and records as reported by historians who have worked with them. The third layer consists of colonial laws and administrative practices discussed in published historical scholarship; I have not independently consulted the underlying records for this article. These sources provide historical context rather than new archival findings. I have not carried out new archival research for this article. Where I speak of the administrative record, I rely on Bahadur's published account and on the work of Tinker, Carter, Kumar, Hui and Kambhampati and

[48] Carter, *Servants, Sirdars and Settlers*; Walton Look Lai, *Indentured Labor, Caribbean Sugar: Chinese and Indian migrants to the British West Indies, 1838-1918* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).
[49] Bahadur, *Coolie Woman*.

others. Three rules follow. Fictional episodes are never used as proof of actual recruitment practice. The circumstances of one woman are never taken as representative of all indentured women. And where evidence is incomplete, I separate what is documented, what is plausible and what is unknown. Terms are treated as context-dependent. 'Coolie' was a colonial label, and I use it only as a historical category or in Bahadur's title and usage. *Girmit* is used as explained above.

Agrarian Dispossession, Gendered Vulnerability, and the Conditions Preceding Indenture in Sea of Poppies

Sea of Poppies opens with a vision. Deeti sees a great ship with sails like wings before any decision to leave has been made.[50] The opening offers the reader a sign of departure and, from the start, complicates ideas of choice. Part One, 'Land', then places that vision in a world of poppies. Deeti grows poppies on her household plot and sells them to the opium factory at Ghazipur, where her husband, Hukam Singh, works. The Company monopoly worked through advances of cash to cultivators, who delivered the crop at prices the state set, and the obligations were hard to leave.[51] Ghosh dramatises what such a system did to a village: food crops give way to poppy, household income depends on the factory, and an addicted husband stands at the centre of a home the opium economy has already damaged.[52] The narration stays close to Deeti's perceptions, so that the reader meets the factory and the household through her eyes.

Deeti's circumstances show how this economy meets household power. On her wedding night she was drugged, and her brother-in-law, Chandan Singh, raped her so that the marriage could be completed in place of an impotent husband. When Hukam dies, she is expected to die with him. Chandan wants her land, and he and the overseer Bhyro Singh, who took part in the wedding-night assault, threaten her with further violence. Here the colonial economy is not a distant background. It makes the household a unit of property, labour and reproduction, and the widow's body the point where those interests meet.

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[50] Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies*, Part One.
[51] John F. Richards, "The opium industry in British India," *The Indian Economic & Social History Review*, 39, 2-3 (2002), 149-80.
[52] Arora, "'The sea is history'"; Dhar, "Shadows of slavery."

Deeti's decision is narrated through both constraint and purpose. In the novel's account the pyre becomes the least bad of her options, a death sanctioned by custom and by her family's demand. Only when Kalua, the low-caste ox-cart driver, rescues her does a second option appear. The words 'I will burn on my husband's pyre rather than give myself to you.' presents Deeti's action as purposeful while revealing the household violence that has narrowed her alternatives.[53] The pyre scene has its own history. The colonial state banned sati in Bengal in 1829, after earlier regulations that tried to separate 'voluntary' from compelled immolation by asking whether the widow consented.[54] I do not claim that emigration law descended from sati law. The parallel is interpretive. In both, officials looked for a sign of a woman's willingness, and in both a woman's apparent consent could coexist with heavy pressure from kin and custom. Ghosh's pyre scene shows the grammar of voluntariness before the novel reaches the contract.

Kalua's caste matters. He is a Chamar, and a union with a high-caste widow breaks the rules through which caste is reproduced. Chakravarti's account of Brahmanical patriarchy helps to explain why, since control of women's sexuality is the mechanism that keeps caste boundaries.[55] The couple's bond challenges inherited hierarchy, but only by leaving the village, and it remains exposed to those with the power to hunt them. This is where indenture becomes thinkable. The novel does not present it as an opportunity. It presents it as a place the pursued can go. Hui and Kambhampati's finding that very low-caste workers in British Guiana were less likely to return suggests that some low-caste migrants found relief from caste in the colonies.[56] That finding concerns a later period and another colony, and I use it to contextualise Kalua's case and not to authenticate it.

Historical scholarship supports the broad picture of agrarian pressure, debt and weakened rural livelihoods as conditions that encouraged emigration, although it also warns against treating such push factors as a full explanation.[57] I use this evidence to place Deeti in context, not to prove that a real woman made her choices. I also separate the general conditions that encouraged mobility from the specific mechanisms of recruitment, which are the subject of the next section.

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[53] Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies*, 157.
[54] Lata Mani, *Contentious Traditions: The debate on sati in colonial India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Andrea Major, *Pious Flames: European encounters with sati, 1500-1830* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006).
[55] Chakravarti, "Conceptualising Brahmanical patriarchy."
[56] Hui and Kambhampati, "Between unfreedoms."
[57] Kumar, *Coolies of the Empire*; Carter, *Servants, Sirdars and Settlers*.

In terms of the framework, this section has examined the operation of compelling. Kabeer's point that choice needs alternatives is useful. Deeti has alternatives, and each carries a heavy price. The novel's achievement is to show her decision as an act and as a result at once.

Recruitment, Classification, and the Making of Contractual Consent in Sea of Poppies

In Part Two, 'River', the novel follows Deeti and Kalua downstream towards Calcutta, and the question changes from why they leave to how they enter the labour system. They do not set out to be indentured. They learn that they are being hunted, and they choose emigration as a way to escape pursuit.[58] The entry into contract thus comes at the end of a flight and not at the end of a plan. Brokering here works less through a recruiter's promise than through the shape of the available routes. Indenture is open to people whom other institutions have made vulnerable.

The destination reaches the migrants as a name. In the novel Mauritius appears in several linguistic forms, among them the vernacular *Mareech-dip*, and it carries different meanings for migrants and officers. Information moves unevenly. The migrants know the destination as rumour, as dread of the black water, and as the anchorage at Ganga Sagar where the ship pauses on its way out of Indian waters. The contract makes the same destination an item in a system of numbers and obligations. Historians describe recruiting agents known as *arkatis*, who brought people from northern villages to depots, were paid by the head and had reasons to simplify what they told recruits.[59] That evidence belongs to historical analysis, and the novel is not its confirmation. What Ghosh adds is a picture of the experience of partial information.

Calcutta was the hub where inland migration became maritime migration. It was a port city made from the delta's environment and trade, and it housed the depots, agents and offices through which emigrants were processed.[60] In the novel the move from river to city changes the migrants' relation to community and

[58] Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies*, Part Two.
[59] Tinker, *New System of Slavery*; Kumar, *Coolies of the Empire*.
[60] Debjani Bhattacharyya, *Empire and Ecology in the Bengal Delta: The making of Calcutta* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Tinker, *New System of Slavery*.

identity. They leave the village's social checks and enter a place where the checks are those of agents and clerks.

The registration before boarding is the clearest scene of certification. In the record Deeti becomes 'Aditty' and Kalua becomes 'Maddow Colwer'. A clerk transcribes, and the transcription remakes. The names that go into the register are English renderings that cannot easily be traced back to the persons who carried them. The scene shows what Anderson calls legibility: persons are made administratively readable by being redescribed.[61] In a gendered form, legibility attaches to marital status. The couple travel as husband and wife, a status that both the novel's world and the colonial ship's order understand. A widow who has fled her husband's pyre enters the system as a wife. The register records a wife and does not record a flight. The altered names make registration a literary enactment of administrative classification: the register preserves migrants in a form that official institutions can process, but it does not preserve their histories without distortion. This fictional episode illuminates Ghosh's representation of legibility, not the frequency of misregistration in historical practice:

> "What then was to be her name? Her proper, given name was the first to come to mind, and since it had never been used by anyone, it was as good as any. Aditi, she said softly, I am Aditi. No sooner had she said it than it became real: this was who she was—Aditi, a woman who had been granted, by a whim of the gods, the boon of living her life again. Yes, she said, raising her voice a little, so that Kalua could hear her. I am Aditi, wife of Madhu. The significance of a married woman using her own name was not lost on the others."[62]

Official procedure aimed to certify willingness. The rules of 1837 required emigrants to appear before a magistrate, and later regimes added protectors, medical examination and statements of terms.[63] These measures were meant to protect, and some did. They also made willingness visible in a form that could be filed. The form recorded a statement and left its circumstances out. Here the gap between formal agreement and constrained consent opens. Deeti's statement of willingness would be true in the register and incomplete as an account of her

[61] Anderson, *Legible Bodies*.
[62] Ghosh, *Sea of Poppies*, 233.
[63] Tinker, *New System of Slavery*; Kumar, *Coolies of the Empire*.

decision. I do not project the more developed protections of 1864 and 1883 back onto a novel set in 1838. The system Ghosh depicts was young and contested. An inquiry began in 1838, emigration was prohibited in 1839, and it resumed in 1842.[64] The suspension shows that contemporaries already doubted that recruitment was free.

The *Ibis* is the threshold where pre-departure choice turns into contractual obligation. Ghosh's ship is a refitted slave ship that carries convicts as well as migrants, so that the carrying infrastructure does not clearly separate the two kinds of cargo. This repeats a pattern Anderson traces in the shared use of ships and ports for convicts and coolies.[65] On board, Bhyro Singh reappears as subedar. The man who held Deeti on her wedding night is now part of the ship's order. The point is not that real recruitment always reproduced village violence. It is that Ghosh shows a labour system staffed from the same hierarchies that its migrants hoped to leave. After boarding, the option of return is gone. Kalua's flogging, his killing of Bhyro and his sentence of death show how quickly choice on land becomes discipline at sea.

This section has traced brokering, certifying and carrying in a fictional case. It shows how the appearance of voluntary recruitment is produced by a sequence of encounters, and how at each step a woman's situation is made legible in terms that leave her circumstances partly invisible.

Sujaria, Archival Absence, and the Reconstruction of Women's Recruitment in Coolie Woman

Coolie Woman begins with a document. The emigration pass issued to Sujaria records a woman of twenty-seven, a Brahman, with a burn scar on her left foot and a village in Bihar, Bhurahupur. A note in pencil at the edge records that she was four months pregnant. On the line for her husband's name there is only a dash. The ship's arrival in Georgetown on 4 November 1903 and Sujaria's number in the register complete the paper trail.[66] From this thin document Bahadur builds a layered account. She draws on the pass, which she found in Guyana's national archives, on the reports of surgeons who supervised voyages

[64] Tinker, *New System of Slavery*; Connolly, *Worthy of Freedom*.
[65] Anderson, "Convicts and coolies."
[66] Bahadur, *Coolie Woman*.

from Calcutta to the West Indies, on colonial records of recruitment and plantation life, on visits to the village named on the pass, and on the memories of Sujaria's descendants.[67] Clare Anderson's *Subaltern Lives* offers a model of such biography, built from scattered records.[68] Because this study relies on Bahadur's published account of the emigration pass, it treats the document as a mediated archival trace rather than as an original record independently examined here. .Its entries establish what administrators recorded, but they cannot by themselves establish why Sujaria travelled or how freely she consented.

It helps to sort the evidence into three layers. What the sources establish is limited: the date and port of departure, the ship, Sujaria's age, caste and village as recorded, her pregnancy, the absence of a husband's name, her arrival and the birth of her son during the voyage. What Bahadur's narrative reconstructs as plausible is larger: the depot, the examination, the crossing and the experience of women like Sujaria, drawn from records of other people and other voyages. What remains unknown is what the book most wants to know. Bahadur does not claim to know why her great-grandmother left India pregnant and without a husband.[69]

The pre-departure past is where uncertainty is greatest. Bahadur reports a family story in which Sujaria was on a pilgrimage when men offered to take her to the next stop, and she found herself in the Calcutta depot.[70] Other explanations are possible, and the circumstances of an unattached, pregnant, high-caste woman suggest some of them: flight from a household, a broken marriage or widowhood, or the pressures of reputation. These are inferences from the situation and not findings. The family story deserves attention as part of the infrastructure. A tale of deception places responsibility with others, and in a family of high-caste origin it may have protected the honour of a woman who left without a husband. This too is an interpretation. It cannot be proved from the sources. But it shows how the gendered infrastructure continues after departure, in the ways families remember women's journeys. Taylor's embodied repertoire and Chakravarti's account of caste and the control of women's sexuality can be brought together on this point.[71]

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[67] Ibid.
[68] Clare Anderson, *Subaltern Lives: Biographies of colonialism in the Indian Ocean world, 1790-1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).
[69] Bahadur, *Coolie Woman*.
[70] Ibid.
[71] Taylor, *Archive and the Repertoire*; Chakravarti, "Conceptualising Brahmanical patriarchy."

The pass is also a product of classification. It records the body, caste and origin of a person in a form designed to identify and manage her. Anderson's study of colonial identification shows how records made bodies legible, and the burn mark and the pencilled note fit that practice.[72] The record notices pregnancy, perhaps because the voyage and the plantation would soon be affected by it. It does not notice, because it has no field for it, why a pregnant Brahman woman was boarding a ship without a husband. Such records also encode assumptions. They sort women by husband, caste and respectability, and a woman with a dash on the husband's line stands outside the expected order.

Scholars have read Bahadur's handling of this absence in several ways. Trotz sees a method that exposes the epistemic violence of the official archive while refusing to define women only by violence.[73] Pramode and Mohan read the same material as testimony and trauma, and Prasad and Jha stress how it illuminates women as makers of family and culture in Guyana.[74] My concern is different. It is not simply that archives silence women, a point well made already. It is that the incompleteness of the record changes what can be claimed about consent. The pass is strong evidence for the operation of certifying. It shows that an emigrant was registered, identified and counted. It is weak evidence for compelling and brokering, the operations that explain why she appeared at the depot. The archive records the infrastructure's output and hides much of its input.

I avoid turning this absence into a claim that women are wholly missing from the record. They are not. Carter's testimonies, the ship registers used by Hui and Kambhampati and Shepherd's narratives of the passage all show that women appear in the sources, though in forms produced by institutions that were managing labour.[75] The question is what such forms can say. They can establish that Sujaria went. They cannot establish that she chose, or what choosing meant. A reconstruction that recognises this, as Bahadur's does by marking conjecture and alternatives, protects the reader from two errors. One is to read a signature or a journey as proof of free choice. The other is to read the absence of a record as proof of coercion.

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[72] Anderson, *Legible Bodies*.
[73] Trotz, "Gaiutra Bahadur's *Coolie Woman*."
[74] Pramode and Mohan, "The 'C' word"; Prasad and Jha, "Indian diasporic formations."
[75] Carter, *Lakshmi's Legacy*; Hui and Kambhampati, "Between unfreedoms"; Shepherd, *Maharani's Misery*.

From Recruitment to Migration: A Comparative Synthesis of the Gendered Infrastructure of Consent

Read together, the two works reveal different parts of one process. Ghosh's novel is strongest on the first and last operations. It shows how agrarian dispossession, household power and caste respectability compel a woman to leave, and how the ship carries her beyond return. Bahadur's book is strongest on the third. It shows how a colonial form certifies a woman as an emigrant and how that certificate shapes what can later be known. Neither gives a full account of brokering. Ghosh imagines it, and Bahadur cannot recover it. The shared gap is informative, because brokering depended on informal trust and talk, and it left the fewest traces of what was said.

Both works show women acting within constraint. Deeti plans, hides, accepts a new name and chooses emigration over capture. Sujaria boards a ship pregnant, survives a hard labour at sea and gives her son a name that was neither her own nor her father's, an act Bahadur reads as self-authorship.[76] Neither woman appears only as a victim, and neither is shown with a free choice. Kabeer's distinction helps: each acts, and each acts within a range of options that others have narrowed.[77] To see this avoids two errors. It does not romanticise migration as free mobility, and it does not reduce all indentured migration to a single model of coercion.

The two settings differ in ways that matter. In 1838 Mauritius was the first British colony to receive Indian indentured labour, and recruitment from Calcutta was governed by new and contested rules. Carter and Allen describe a planter society adjusting to emancipation, in which former slaves and indentured Indians lived and worked side by side.[78] By 1903 British Guiana had received Indian labour for more than sixty years. The legal regime was the consolidated Act of 1883, and the plantation order was long established.[79] Women's recruitment had also changed. From the later nineteenth century the authorities required a minimum share of women among emigrants, which made their recruitment a

[76] Bahadur, *Coolie Woman*.
[77] Kabeer, "Resources, agency, achievements."
[78] Carter, *Servants, Sirdars and Settlers*; Allen, *Slaves, Freedmen, and Indentured Laborers*.
[79] Walter Rodney, *A History of the Guyanese Working People, 1881-1905* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981); Look Lai, *Indentured Labor, Caribbean Sugar*.

problem for recruiters and a matter of official concern.[80] Common features also appear. Recruiters, a Calcutta hub, a form that sorts people by caste and marital status, and a ship that closes the way back belong to both cases. I treat these as features of colonial recruitment in general and do not use evidence from one colony as proof of practice in the other. The novel cannot show what happened in 1903, and the memoir cannot show what happened in 1838.

The works also differ as forms of knowledge. Ghosh constructs plausible experience through characterisation, focalisation and dramatic encounter. His novel can show what it might be to have no good option, and how a household, a factory and a ship may be linked in one life. It cannot show how often such lives occurred. Bahadur works with traces, family memory and acknowledged uncertainty to follow one migrant. Her book can show what an administrative form made visible and what it left out. It cannot show what the average woman thought. Fiction is not a documentary source here, and archival family history is not a complete record. Their differences help to mark the limits of knowledge about recruitment, motive and consent.

The migration of these women can be traced across a connected space. Recruitment in northern India fed the depots at Calcutta. Ships left the Hooghly for Mauritius across the Indian Ocean, or for Guiana by way of the Cape of Good Hope. Sujaria's *Clyde* belonged to a firm that carried salt and iron to India and returned with labourers, a trade that tied Indian ports to the Caribbean.[81] Historians have also traced how Mauritius and the Caribbean were linked by returnees and remigration, so that Indian Ocean and Atlantic plantation systems exchanged people and information.[82] Connolly's study treats Mauritius, British Guiana and Trinidad as parts of one history of freedom.[83] In this setting women's experience complicates histories that privilege imperial policy, aggregate statistics or male-dominated accounts of labour mobility. Aggregate figures count women as a proportion.[84] A gendered study of recruitment asks who the women in that proportion were, what moved them and what the institutions needed from them. These questions bear on wider debates about migration regimes and

[80] Reddock, "Freedom denied"; Lal, "Kunti's cry."
[81] Bahadur, *Coolie Woman*.
[82] Hurgobin and Basu, "'Oceans without borders'"; Kumar, *Coolies of the Empire*.
[83] Connolly, *Worthy of Freedom*.
[84] David Northrup, *Indentured Labor in the Age of Imperialism, 1834-1922* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

connected histories in the Indian Ocean and beyond.[85] British Guiana is not treated as geographically part of the Indian Ocean World, but as an Atlantic destination connected to India through recruitment and maritime circuits. The comparison follows these documented connections without assuming that Indian Ocean and Atlantic plantation systems were identical.

The comparison supports a single claim. Consent cannot be understood by examining the contract alone. Its historical meaning appears in the circumstances that precede recruitment, in the procedures that organise departure, and in the forms of evidence through which women's choices are later reconstructed. Gendered infrastructure, constrained consent, colonial classification, archival uncertainty and transregional mobility are aspects of one argument. Women's agreement was produced within unequal arrangements, and the traces of that production are partial. The contract certifies a conclusion. The infrastructure explains how the conclusion was reached.

CONCLUSION:

This article has argued that women's entry into indenture was shaped by interconnected social, economic, administrative and maritime processes that set the possibilities and limits of consent. *Sea of Poppies* and *Coolie Woman* illuminate those processes through different narrative modes and historical settings. Together they show why individual migration decisions must be placed within wider structures of gendered inequality and colonial labour demand.

The research questions can now be answered. Agrarian vulnerability, caste and class relations, household authority and recruitment institutions shape the representation of women's entry into indenture by narrowing the alternatives and then supplying one route out. Contractual consent differs from the circumstances of decision because the form records a statement and not the pressures behind it. Fiction and archival family history supply different evidence: the first offers plausible experience and the second offers traces and their limits. And the comparison links inland India, Indian Ocean transport and overseas plantations without erasing their differences.

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[85] Thomas R. Metcalf, *Imperial Connections: India in the Indian Ocean arena, 1860-1920* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); Sunil S. Amrith, *Crossing the Bay of Bengal: The furies of nature and the fortunes of migrants* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013); Edward A. Alpers, *The Indian Ocean in World History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

The most important aspect of this article is its consideration of the process of consent in terms of household vulnerability, recruitment, classification and departure at sea. Through the comparison between fictional and archival representations of the family, it develops a historically specific approach to gendered labor migration without collapsing narrative possibility into documentary truth.

The limits of the evidence should be stated plainly. Two works cannot represent the full range of women's experiences of indenture. Administrative records cannot reveal individual motives, and retrospective reconstruction must be told apart from documented fact. The comparison is confined to two destinations and to recruitment through Calcutta, and it rests on published scholarship and not on new archival work. Further research could use protectors' reports, depot registers, vernacular songs and oral histories, and extend the framework to Fiji, Natal, Suriname and Réunion. Such work would test whether the four operations hold elsewhere, and whether recruiters, who left the faintest traces, can be heard more clearly.