Advance Information

Coolie Woman

The Odyssey of Indenture

Gaiutra Bahadur

Shortlisted for the Orwell Prize 2014

In 1903 a Brahmin woman sailed from India to Guyana as a ‘coolie’, the name the British gave to the million indentured labourers they recruited for sugar plantations worldwide after slavery ended. The woman, who claimed no husband, was pregnant and travelling alone. A century later, her great-granddaughter embarks on a journey into the past, hoping to solve a mystery: what made her leave her country? And had she also left behind a man?

Gaiutra Bahadur, an American journalist, pursues traces of her great-grandmother over three continents. She also excavates the repressed history of some quarter of a million female coolies. Disparaged as fallen, many were runaways, widows or outcasts, and many migrated alone. Coolie Woman chronicles their epic passage from Calcutta to the Caribbean, from departures akin either to kidnap or escape, through sea voyages rife with sexual exploitation, to new worlds where women were in short supply. When they exercised the power this gave them, some fell victim to the machete in brutal attacks, often fatal, by men whom they spurned. Sex with overseers both empowered and imperilled other women in equal measure. It also precipitated uprisings, as a struggle between Indian men and their women intersected with one between coolies and their overlords.

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About the Author

Gaiutra Bahadur is an award-winning American journalist. Her work has appeared in the New York Times Book Review, The Nation, Ms. Magazine and the Washington Post, among other publications. A former daily newspaper reporter, she was a Nieman Fellow at Harvard in 2007–2008. She was born in Guyana and emigrated to the United States as a child.

(see overleaf)
An astonishing document … both an historical rescue mission and a profound meditation on family and
growth, Bahadur’s Coolie Woman spans continents and centuries, the private and national, to bring to
light the extraordinary lives of the author’s great-grandmother and the other quarter of a million “coolie”
women that came to the New World as indentured labourers. Bahadur’s meticulous research and tireless
perseverance have restored an important chapter in our histories – outstanding work.’ – Junot Diaz, Pulitzer
Prize-winning author of The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao and This Is How You Lose Her

‘Gaiutra Bahadur’s pathbreaking book carefully excavates an imperial history of violence and uprooting. But
this is no simple account of victimhood. It shows, with understated literary power, the bitterly paradoxical
nature of colonial modernity: the unbearable dialectic between enslavement and liberation that many
unsung millions underwent in their private lives.’ – Pankaj Mishra, author of From the Ruins of Empire: The
Revolt against the West and the Remaking of Asia

‘I thought I knew something about slavery and forced labour, having written two books on the subject.
And I thought I knew something about immigration to the New World. But Gaiutra Bahadur’s book made me
realise how the experience of a whole generation of women like her great-grandmother profoundly challenges
the various stereotypes we have. This is a highly original combination of careful scholarship and well-told
personal journey.’ – Adam Hochschild, author of Bury the Chains: The British Struggle to Abolish Slavery

‘With the exhilarating meticulousness of a period film, Coolie Woman recreates a vanished world and casts
a personal searchlight on the saga of indenture. Gaiutra Bahadur rescues her great-grandmother Sujaria
and other “coolie” women from the archives by means of a narrative that is both scholarly and soulful.
In detailing the bitter journeys of her forebears, in making their astonishing experiences real and sympathetic,
and in registering the complexities of their lives, Bahadur honours their memories and shows herself their
worthy descendant.’ – Teju Cole, author of Open City

‘Every so often a history comes along that grips you into a cascade of compelling narrative. The writer
excavates new ore from old seams. Coolie Woman is such a book, destined for a unique place in the
multi-mirror of Caribbean culture.’ – John Agard, playwright and poet

‘Gaiutra Bahadur braids a dazzling rope from the history of Indian migration to the Caribbean, the
experience of Indians in Guyana and of Indo-Guyanese immigrants in the United States, and the joy and
pain of “return” to India. Deeply researched, elegantly written, Coolie Woman is a major contribution to the
literature of diaspora.’ – Richard Drayton, Rhodes Professor of Imperial History, King’s College London

‘An impassioned, meticulously researched, and gripping book that shines a fierce light on a dark, unexplored
corner of the history of colonialism and slavery, Coolie Woman intertwines the personal and the historical to
sensational effect. It is a uniquely affecting piece of work.’ – Neel Mukherjee, author of A Life Apart