

Revisiting *Kala Pani* and Reinventing Identities: Reading Peggy Mohan's *Jahajin* (2007) and Ramabai Espinet's *The Swinging Bridge* (2003)

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Abstract:

The term *Kala Pani* has been at the focal debate of the old Indian diaspora studies. It has been a central area of enquiry from the multiple identity communities' of Indian diaspora. Women from the multiple identity communities' of old Indian indentured diaspora find tales of relative empowerment amid exploitation. The forbidden crossing of the ocean opened a diaspora space for women. According to *Manusmriti* the oceanic crossings are discouraged for religious Hindu men, leaving women and untouchables outside. Hence the single mothers, widowed or dependent women already living under a restrictive patriarchal structure with outcastes' status found it to be a powerful tool to achieve relative autonomy. The paper aims to delve deeper in the discourse of relative autonomy and empowerment of women from the old Indian diaspora of the indentured community.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Crossings, Empowerment, Space, Relative Autonomy.

Kala Pani (black water), as the name signifies was a system of forbidden crossing of the black waters of ocean in which the crossers would be punished in many tormenting ways after the death. The treaties of *Manusmriti*, dictate against such crossing. The believers of Hinduism treated oceanic crossing to a path to sin. Treaties of the *Manusmriti*¹ direct that the oceanic crossing was a way to hell, as the crosser would not only face social ostracization in this life but also face fury of the Gods and Goddess after the death. In the dictums the text laid foundation for Brahmin men as they were the first hierarchy but with time such rules became a general religious taboo. The treaties of the *Manusmriti* dictate rules for functioning of an ideal Hindu society; it strictly prohibits Hindu Brahmin men from crossing the black water. If a righteous Brahmin man did cross the black water he would be punished in numerous ways by being fed by the sons of adulterous women, the man would not receive any rituals of Shradha² as well. To quote, “Manusmriti, (Written circa 200BCE, Chapter 3, Verse, 158) mentions the rules- if a Brahmin did cross the waters, he is to be denied a Shradha, (the annual appeasement of spirits Shradha serves to remind one at important times throughout one’s life that death does not sever the link between the present and the past, between the living and the dead). Such an offender is grouped with prisoners, sellers of soma, one who eats food given by the son of an adulteress, a bard, an oilman or a perjurer”. (<http://historicalalleys.blogspot.in/2009/01/hindus-and-oceantaboo.html>). The religious book of Hinduism Garuda Purana and Markendya Purana, says that, “If ancestors are happy with Shradha they shower and bestow health, wealth, prosperity and longevity to the family”. (<http://www.astrospeak.com/slides/24-dos-and-donts-for-pitri-paksha-puja>.) (Date of access, 06/06/17).

Such believes were all pervasive in the colonial India where religion took precedence over anything. The Indian society was well knit in the hierarchy of caste where the Hindu Brahmin men followed such religious dictums dearly. However the brutal system of overexploitation

rendered Indian society helpless which forcefully altered and restructured the social fabric of the country. Such changes were negatively impacting the social web of the country. The anti-Indian policies of the British colonial settlers brought unimaginable poverty to the country. As a result, the heavy taxation amid famine, the poor exploited aboriginals were often forced into multiple religious crossings. The destitution often forced people to compromise their religious beliefs; ultimately paving a way for softening of the faith. Towards the end of British Colonialism, the common people became utterly miserable. Excessive exploitation of natural and material resources brought the common masses to the brink of starvation and death. In the beginning of the 20th century, Indian society struggled with privation and hunger to its utmost inhuman form. Mike Davis, in his 2001 book *Late Victorian Holocausts* stated that “Millions died not outside the ‘modern world system’, but in the very process of being forcibly incorporated into its economic and political structures. ‘They died in the golden age of liberal capitalism; indeed, many were murdered...by the theological application of the sacred principles of Smith, Bentham and Mill.’”(9). the inhuman conditions were not only caused by natural disasters but also by the hostile and unfair colonial policies. Such policies prioritized profit above everything. Colonial India turned into an epidemic state engulfed by famine and drought; where the living conditions were intimidating and morose.

Life was arduous as there was a paucity of everyday sustenance; there were deaths due to starvation. Furthermore amid such inhuman conditions the colonial government did nothing to uplift the anguished soul of the common and imposed additional taxes on the already starving populace. The revenue collectors turned ruthless and forceful during the collection of his revenues. to quote W.W. Hunter “The husbandmen sold their cattle; they sold their implements of agriculture; they devoured their seed grain; they sold their sons and daughters till at length no buyer of children could be found; they ate the leaves of trees and the grass of the field; and in June, 1770, the Resident of the Durbar affirmed that the living were feeding

off the dead. Day and night a torrent of famished and disease-stricken wretches poured into the great cities...early that year pestilence had broken out” (W.W. Hunter in S.R. Chakraborty, 01). The inability to pay the taxes further depowered people; as a result their lands and other properties were often confiscated by the British government. The society went under the deep rubble of poverty that looked too difficult to overcome. However, colonial masters provided the peasants an alternative to such destitution, a life of wealth and luxury³ far away from the home. The society was already starving and tormented, and there seemed to be no other way out of it. Hence the peasants were forced to accept the offer. In the very beginning phase of migration, one sees an invisible reluctance in the Indian men to travel beyond the borders. Nevertheless, helplessness, starvation and fear of death often get the better of people, so the Indians were coerced.

Many Indians left the country and took up the arduous journey of *Kala Pani* in a hope to renew their lives. The desolate circumstances at home made it easier for them to risk losing caste and social status than losing their loved ones. Numerous men and women crossed the ocean to a dream world of opportunities, gold, and riches. The idea of crossing brought a hope to end their ubiquitous misery. The grand opportunities by the British claimed a life of wealth in a short period of time, where they would work as contractual workers. Under such dubious promises, many illiterate peasants from the poor farming areas were forced into indentured servitude. Poor class Indians chose to migrate due to socio- economic conditions at home further fuelled by deceptive narratives of the recruiters. The recruiters duped many uneducated peasants under false pretences of wealth and luxury. The descriptions were deceitful where plantation colonies were painted as a place where rivers of milk existed with immense gold and rubies, a promised land, with eternal wealth and prosperity. There are often recorded anecdotes of ex indentured labourers describing how dubious claims were made of, a land where milk flows innumerable gold, diamonds, and rubies are lying on

ground, where there is no dearth of food, no draught, no famine, no epidemic, a utopian world away from their unbearable dystopia.

When one discusses the term *Kala Pani*, the image that comes to one's mind is often about crossings and oceanic journeys that are prohibited. Any oceanic crossings by believers of Hinduism would lead them to lose their religious identity. Furthermore, they would no longer be part of a traditional society, and would be seen as outcasts. In the treatise of Manu, the Term HE⁴ has often been impressed upon. However, restrictions on HER and other lower castes, their crossings have not been given much attention. Hence crossing was less conflicting for women, as they were already living as outcasts. One of the significant aspects of indentured labour crossings was the crossings of women. The concept of oceanic crossings as mentioned in *Manusmriti*, often led the foundation for men, it directed principles and rule strictly for Brahmin men. Women were excluded from certain religious practices, as they were considered impure. The discourse of *Kala Pani*, did not provide any ground rule for women except the inherent patriarchal structures that restricted the mobility of women. Hence we see less conflicting narratives related to crossing in women centric experiences in the *Kala Pani* discourse.

Once in the plantation colonies, women were a minority in the majority labour force that made them more susceptible to sexist practices and gendered discrimination. While Men were left powerless and marginalized women felt even more insecure further subjected to ultra-exploitation, and multiple marginalisations. Multiple marginalizations were imposed through various patriarchal institutional practices of the plantation system, furthermore reinforced by the men of their own communities'. There were also and traditional patriarchal practices brought from the homeland that governed the lives of indentured women. Historian Verene A. Shepherd described the condition of women in plantation as was of "Ultra-exploitability"⁵. Ameena Gafoor discusses about the situation of women in Indo-Caribbean

indentured society, she argues that, "...women is on the fringe as a minority and therefore further marginalized and doubly considered Other" (Gafoor in , 86 Pirbhai et.al).

The circle of oppression and exploitation was difficult for women to overcome but women fought against such systemic violence. As a result we find lived experiences of indentured women who resisted the multiple abuses. These women further created their own spaces for negotiations and achieved a relative autonomy. To quote Joy Mahabir, "many indentured women were able to confront and resist the social structures that confined and abused them, creating concrete and imaginary spaces where they could achieve self-definition, safety and relative freedom". (Mahabir in Pirbhai et.al. 44).

In the discourse of *Kala Pani*, women from indentured diaspora advocates for restructuring and re-categorization of state determined categorizations. They are of the view that such categorization creates hierarchies that sustain various levels of discrimination hence these women seek for a common ground for various negotiations to take place. The discourse of *Kala Pani* is often celebrated among indentured women as it seems to be only de-powering men, snatching their caste, tradition and the religious identity. On the contrary, the same *Kala Pani* is an empowering agent for women to some degrees. According to *The Manusmriti* (9.2–9.3), women have no caste⁶ and they are considered impure to partake in certain religious rituals. Such practices excluded women from many religious practices and social events. And if women became widows, there situation often became extremely deplorable. As a result we find a significant number of single, widowed women who migrated to plantation colonies. Women who crossed *Kala Pani* were already living outside the social structures of stratified Indian society as they were either single women with children or widowed.

Women who chose to cross the ocean, a majority of them were single, either widows, or single mothers abandoned by their in-laws or the husbands. Many women were picked by recruiters while begging on the streets abandoned by their in-laws. There were also a few women who were accompanying wives. The single abandoned women were already living the life of an outcast, often considered inauspicious to be included in any religious or social gathering. They were barred from religious rituals, and a few were abandoned by their in-laws as widows. There were also women who were trying to escape multiple abuses inflicted upon them by their in-laws.

Thus, crossing did not feel much different from the kind of life they were used to. Further, we also have instances of women, duped by recruiters on false pretences. After the Crossing of the *Kala Pani* many women had little scope and freedom to reinvent their social and economic status. Women achieved a new identity in the indentured colonies after attaining a certain level of social and economic independence. Brinda Mehta in her book *Diasporic Dislocations* suggests that, “the spatial dislocations of the transatlantic crossing have given rise to interstitial subject positions that favours inbetweenness and indeterminacy and also favours communal feminist bond” (152, 2004). In their scholarship on plantation studies, Rhoda Reddock, Patricia Mohammed and Verene A. Shepherd, opined that most of the women in indentured labour system had spirit of resilience, utmost desire for the freedom, hence they maintained a sense of independence in every sphere of their lives be it economic, social or cultural, even though the plantation system was quite oppressive in its approach to indentured labourer women we see most female indentured labourers maintained their independence even as they lived under the oppressive system of plantation labour as well as traditional patriarchal structures. (Pirbhai et.al 2).

Rhoda Reddock writes, “For single indentured Indian women, emigration presented the possibility of a new life, and escape from a situation in which prostitution or starvation

were the only alternatives. Thus these were the women whom circumstances had forced to become independent ...and take some control over their own lives”, (Reddock in, Pirbhai et.al 30-31). In the structure of migration and movement and women as subjects of migration, Carol Boyce Davies, identifies women and migration in *Kala Pani* discourse “not subordination but a sense of resistance that is located in elusive subjectivity” (Boyce Davies in Mehta,145). Isabella Hoving argues that, “displacement itself creates a discourse of struggle, where struggle is imagined as part of journey” (Hoving in Pirbhai et.al, 145). When one dialogues about the struggle of indentured women and its imagined struggle as part of journey in which indentured women fought and struggled against, “psychic trauma of displacement at the discursive level by juxtaposing images of the ...homespace” (Pirbhai,145). It seems that in the *Kala Pani* imaginary, fixed or interstitial identities are less important than the actual establishment of intellectual identity. As a dialectical narrative, intellectual identity leads to a redefinition of intellectual work in order to establish the poetic recovery of the histories and experiences of women that were previously silenced. Peggy Mohan and Ramabai Espinet emphasize the process of historical recovery of memories and identities. Peggy Mohan’s *Jahajin* is a novel of memory and reinventing one’s historical identity by visiting one’s roots. Peggy Mohan takes up a rigorous process of going through journeys to search for her historical roots and identities. She looks for the history of her great grand-mother who travelled as indentured labourer from India to the British plantation colony of Trinidad. In the process of revisiting her roots, she meets Deeda. Deeda is an ex-indentured labourer, who anecdotes the life story of Mohan’s great-grandmother Sunnariya. Deeda unearths the lives and struggles of many indentured women in the process, women who took up arduous voyages, lived and died in the plantation colonies.

In the novel Deeda claims that she was utterly amazed to see so many women waiting at the depot for their voyage, she could not believe her eyes and questioned it herself that how

come so many single women are migrating alone on their own. She further describes about a pregnant widow who was travelling alone. There was another widow named Janki, with three sons and the youngest of all was still a baby, she was thrown out of her house by her in-laws after her husband had died. Furthermore Deeds says that the journey was extremely dreadful and many people did not make it to the plantation. Some died on the way due to various diseases caused by the sea, and some died due to home sickness. There were also some who lost their lives to social isolation and alienation. The historical journey of Mohan fills her with a sense of historical complexity. She comes to know about her own identity which is a result of complex historicity, deep struggle and resistance. Through the tale of Deeda, she unveils the life of many Indentured labourers women from who constantly fought to create a sense of identity.

The characters in Mohan's *Jahajin* are real life characters. They provide a glimpse into the lives of helpless masses, suffering due to natural and manmade disasters. Her characters exhibit harsh realities of the indentured labour system. The novel illustrates the life of a woman named Deeda, who, due to extreme poverty and famine was forced to travel as an indentured labourer. Deeda says to quote, "When Kalloo was going on four years, a draught came. Last year's rice crop was bad, and now no rain for this year's crop to grow and no money to buy food to eat...I was the one cooking every day, and I could see rice getting less and less. I kept thinking, what will happen to this child if I starve?"(17).

It was during her sea voyage, she felt that she had acquired a different sense of self, a stronger one and a relatively independent. Her story is the story of the triumphs that women achieved and celebrated after the *Kala Pani* crossing. Migration and displacement made life challenging for indentured labourer women, however, there were also women like Deeda, who not only resisted the oppression and abuse but also learnt to reinvent their lives amid a chaotic milieu. The novel demonstrates how women on plantation were enjoying a sense of

relative autonomy, as they were earning their living and were the sole decision makers. These further helped women in asserting their sense of agency, one such instance could be Deeda, a humble yet strong, assertive woman who chose her freedom and independence over marriage. Deeda says when she was proposed by Singh, she politely refused the proposal of marriage. This act of Deeda translates her resilience towards a system that often attached women with marriage by often giving them the illusion of social equals. She was often lured to domesticity but her reluctance demonstrates her rebellious, avant-garde defiance. She paved a way for many indentured women to think and act beyond; she exemplified a life in plantation where women could also be seen as independent and happy being without a marriage.

The character of Sunnariya, shows how a marriage and status quo does not guarantee mental peace as popularly thought. In contrast it shows how Deeda, a single woman is contented with her life while, Sunnariya suffers greatly. Sunnariya was molested by a plantation owner, which constrained her mobility, and later she was married to a man for whom she had no feelings. At the end Sunnariya finds happiness by engaging herself with her mother-in-law who supports and loves her. Sunnariya finds relative happiness when she starts earring in the shop. She finds solace only by practicing her relative agency. It is the shop that provides Sunnariya economic independence, and it is only in the company of fellow women she feels stronger.

For women like Deeda, the indentured labour migration seems to have a positive impact. It brought a sense of relative freedom and agency in the women. Peggy Mohan has subverted the gender relations by deconstructing the traditional way that women were to be seen and perceived. The character of Deeda is an epitome of agency, independence, rebellion and determination. Mariam Pirbhai in her *myth of Ramayana* argues that the situation of migrant women often seen as a sorrowful, and pitiable, whose purity and piousness have

been put under danger due to migration in a foreign land has been clearly revised by Mohan in her Novel, *Jahajin*, to quote “This is because Mohan does away with conventional readings of diasporic Indian women as fixed repositories of cultural memory, as dour reminders of lost or fractured identities or as helpless victims of colonial injustice. Instead Deeda’s Story functions as a narrative and historiographic recasting of Jahaji-bhain as a signifier of dynamic and transformative New World experience. (33).

Writers and theoreticians like Peggy Mohan and Ramabai Espinet have unearthed the roots by taking up routes; by taking a voyage into the lives of the indentured women via their historical and literary contributions. Mohan does it by revisiting the memories of her great-grand mother. She provides Indian indentured women a voice that has been oblique for a long period. While attempting to uncover the lives of indentured labourer women, Mohan attains an identity of a different kind, she feels a sense of affinity with her great-grandmother, who went through migration and attained an identity, and similarly Mohan also achieved multiple identities due to her historical roots as subject of multiple migrations.

Similarly Ramabai Espinet’s *The Swinging Bridge*, is an odyssey to memories and histories of multiple belonging. Mona’s journey to find her roots by her excursion to the village of her great-grandmother fills her with a sense of belonging. She resonates with her great-grandmother’s journey of struggle and resistance. She compares her current circumstances with her great-grandmother who crossed the dark water, *Kala Pani* and attained a new identity; quite like Mona’s travel of multiple crossings that turned Mona into a hybrid self.

The novel unveils a saga of struggle and resilience to attain a sense of self, by achieving a renewed identity. It exhibits the life and history of indentured women and their subsequent generations of women. It further shows the confrontation of women at multiple

levels in plantation colonies to achieve relative autonomy. In the novel, the author demonstrates her great-grandmother's life after the transatlantic journey. It shows that her great-grandmother created a world out of her struggles, and an identity for herself.

The novel further illustrates how women negotiated and reinvented a space for themselves amidst the highly controlled structure of multiple patriarchies. In the novel her great-grandmother claims her share of freedom by working in the plantation as an indentured labourer. Further, her great-grandmother claims her distinct identity in the plantation by singing Chutney⁷ songs. Gainder, a famous Chutney singer in the plantation colony, enjoyed sexual and economic independence as a widow. The *Kala Pani Crossing* turned out to be a gateway to some level of freedom away from India and its rigorous sexual and moral policing that often restricted the mobility and agency of women. In the novel Baboonie sings *matikor*⁸ the rebellious songs from rural India, such songs were considered lewd, not suitable for British middle class; hence the singing of *matikor* was discouraged. *Mabtikor* songs were revolutionary in tone, explicated the bold spirit of indentured women who practiced singing it. And according to the British plantation owners these songs were not for the women of honour and virtue. The women who practiced singing *matikor* were termed as: loose women, lacking in womanly virtues, hence they were placed lowest in the hierarchy.

While such women were seen with disgust and disrespect, holding an outcaste status were extremely powerful during the inception of the indentured labour system. When women crossed *Kala Pani*, (black water), they invented a new way of life where they were the sole decision makers of their world. Women were earning their living and making a life for themselves. They were further resisting any coercion to oppress or subjugate them. To quote, "Inscribing resistance to cultural dictates over domestic virtue.... Through orality and creative reimaginings, these women subverted the importance of mandatory behavioural

prescriptions for women in order to elaborate their own subjectivities”. (Mehta: 33). Scholars like Tejaswini Niranjana, Rawidda Baksh Sodeen argue that chutney provides “a positive sign of affirmation for and by Indian women and their fight for political and cultural inclusion in the national imaginary...situating women as agents of social change Rawidda Baksh Sodeen argue that chutney provides “a positive sign of affirmation for and by Indian women and their fight for political and cultural inclusion in the national imaginary...situating women as agents of social change” (Mehta:35).

This freedom was short-lived for many women on the plantation. Gainer was forced to marry Joshua because women were not allowed to own land. According to the sexist colonial law by the British government, a woman can only have a house of her husband, not a room of her own⁹ earned by her. This sexist law intangibly coerced Gainer in a matrimony with Joshua. Joshua later turned out to be a symbol of newly acquired colonial patriarchy in her house. Joshua, who was a newly converted Christian from Hinduism, imposed the British Victorian morality of womanly virtues. Joshua began to police and judge Gainer according to the British Presbyterian ideologies. He began to view Gainer as woman of loose morals, a characterless whore. The basis for his belief was the preconceived notion of Christians who believed that women who earn their living by singing Chutney¹⁰ (a form of Mabtikor which was later mixed with Caribbean calypso and termed as Chutney), were rands (sluts), which didn't suit to the orthodox taste of Presbyterian Christian patriarchy and often women who practiced singing Chutney it were vilified and discouraged by moral rebuttal. The newly acquired Presbyterian respectability commanded Joshua to restrict women within the confinement of Victorian morality prescribed by the Church. Hence Gainer was forbidden to sing her chutney because it was considered lewd. Such forbidding turned Gainer into a helpless subject who was left completely powerless. Barring Gainer from Chutney singing took whatever little freedom she had.

Joshua forbids Gainer to sing and dance ever again, to quote, “ Her songs were banned from the house when the children were growing up, rude songs sung in Hindi..., later her songs are unceremoniously ripped from the male-authored family history, rendering the latter an unsound second”(Espinet: 82-83). Joshua not only forbids Gainer to sing and dance, but also forbids her to partake in any ethnic or cultural festivities. It was a common practice among the newly converted Christians to look down upon their old ethnic companions, the Hindus. The Hindus were considered low class by the newly acquired missionary preaching. Thus, it was no surprise that women such as Gainer and Babooniee were subjugated and ostracized. Such were social norms of the emerging proud middle class of converted Indians. One such instance could be observed in the discussion of Mona with her mother, where she enquires about the life of her ancestors, especially about the life of her great-grandmother Gainer. It was during the discussion with her mother; Mona comes to a revelation that her mother was one such proud converted Indian who despised her own Keith and kin. Mona’s mother is extremely condescending towards fellow Indian women who do not follow Presbyterian Christianity. Mona’s mother clarifies that her great-grandmother was, to quote, “a low kind of person, you know, something like [Babooniee] the old bagger women in the Ramgoolie trace...she used to sing Ramayana before they married- not the real Ramayana you know. She used to sing the kind that village women would sing” (Espinet: 82).

Gainer was altered into a homely obedient wife ultimately submitting to the trap of colonial patriarchy. Joshua forced her to give up her Chutney which had provided Gainer the relative autonomy that many women enjoyed in the early phases of indentured labour system. The Chutney songs provided Gainer an agency to assert herself. The forceful abandoning of it turned Gainer into an enslaved person who was again entrapped into various patriarchies. To quote, Espinet, “The Spicy, empowered Indo-Trinidadian women gets tamed into submission”. (84). Hence, one can view that Chutney songs are a tool to

dismantle the patriarchy in Espinet's *The Swinging Bridge*. Chutney songs are an epitome of subversion of gender roles that provide another dynamic to the strict male-centred society. Hence Joshua's house works as a symbol of newly acquired colonial patriarchy forcing indentured women to bargain their identity for a shelter. Later we see that women did not have freedom and autonomy that was once cherished by their early great-grandmothers.

Furthermore, the novel shows forceful imposition of colonial patriarchy in the guise of colonial law; in the instance where Gainder's was trying to buy a piece land for permanent settlement. But then the gendered colonial policies did not allow women to own land. This discriminating law resulted in Gainder's submission. She was forced in a marriage which she never wanted to have. She was given economic security at the cost of her social and sexual freedom. Her marriage indicates how an empowered woman was forced to enter in a system of bondage from another. Gainder got married to Joshua, a converted Christian who despised Hindus, since Gainder was a Hindu; this marriage not only changed her religious freedom but also brought a new kind of oppression to her.

Towards the end of the novel we see Mona, the great-granddaughter of Gainder purchasing a piece of land in the Caribbean. With this act, Mona fulfilled a metaphorical wish of innumerable indentured women who, wanted to own a house of their own. The land purchased by Mona provides her with a sense of deep belongingness with her history; and most importantly with her great-grandmother.

The act of buying land further translates in a win for the historical struggles of women from centuries. Joy Mohabir argues that, "Even though Gainder's land claims were thwarted by the inherent biases of a colonial system, the spirit of her ambition lays the ontological groundwork for a feminist awaking rooted in the agential history of women labour"(37). Furthermore, it is through her act of buying the land, Mona gives a

representational space to the female ancestors who wrought tough to have a room of their own. It is this very space where Gainder had lost her freedom and identity and it is the same piece of land that Mona gives back. The thing, if allowed, might have given a different world to Gainder. Mona, towards the end of the novel, pronounces that, "I walk around the land, ... I imagine that something of me, and all of our lives here, lies buried in it, ...The land, the land had remembered. I lay face down on the earth, my first earth, breathing it". (Espinet: 269-70). The purchasing of the land is a way of Mona's paying homage to the invisible indentured women. Mona's act of purchasing a piece of land, bandages a symbolic patch on the ruptured selves of Indian Indentured women by fulfilling their most desired wish to feel settled and independent. Their wish is finally restored by their successor great-granddaughters.

Similarly Peggy Mohan's journey to India is a symbolic wandering to revisit her ancestral roots. She takes a metaphorical journey for her ancestral women who, longed to visit their homeland. The unearthing of her historical roots, provides a complete ending to Deeda's tale of Rani Saranga. Mohan meets a ninety year old man who offers an ending to the tale of Rani Saranga. This tale was being narrated to Mohan by Deeda and was recorded on a tape recorder. When Mohan plays the tape-recorded story of Deeda in India, she feels that she has fulfilled Deeda's long yearn to see her homeland. The old man is a representation of Deeda's love for her motherland. To quote, "I waited a few minutes for the reverb from the story to die down inside my head. All of a sudden I felt lighter than air" (267).

The passage of Mohan gives a voice to Deeda's invisible yearning to reach to her home. In her tale of Rani Saranga the protagonist wants to fly away on an *Udan Khatola*, (flying mat) and wants to be welcomed as a daughter-in-law, to her permanent home. Towards the end of the novel Mohan feels that she has

accomplished Deeda's symbolic yearning to fly in an *Udan Khatola*. She works as a messenger who delivers Deeda's message to her home. Deeda's longing to meet to her homeland is satisfied, to quote, when "Parbati had reached out to him, after all these years...in one instinctive gesture; I gave the old man a hug. From Parbati, I said, Deeda"(268). Through her visit to India Mohan represents a feminist spirit of Womanism¹¹ where women accomplish dreams and long yearning of other women with the spirit of universal sisterhood. It is by Mohan's India visit that Deeda gets her wish fulfilled which symbolizes a recovery of the past and buried memories.

Passages of both the authors are an attempt to unearth the roots, their journeys symbolizes the recognition of turbulent transatlantic crossings of women from generation to generation. And with each crossing women attain a sense of relative autonomy. Women authors like Ramabai Espinet and Peggy Mohan who trace their ancestry from indentured labour community share an emotional affinity with their great grandmothers. The women authors share their emotional sense of multiple identities with their great-grandmothers who migrated alone and became a subject of dual identity. The new generation of Indian diasporic women are of the view that crossings changed the identity of their great-grandmothers and similarly the multiple crossings done by the current generation of women have also turned their identity to multiple hybrid selves. The journey of both the characters Mona and Mohan is an attempt to find a historical essence as women of fractured and hybrid selves. The contemporary women who are subjects of indentured history giving voices to the early indentured women whose historical experiences are still overlooked and remain underrepresented.

The present paper endeavours to articulate the historical narratives of indentured women. Further it views *Kala Pani* as an empowering tool to achieve relative

autonomy. The narratives of *Kala Pani* helped many women in colonial India in their oceanic crossings. It further helped women in asserting their independence in plantation colonies. The *Kala Pani* narrative provided a space to woman for freedom and relative autonomy in indentured labour plantation.

The paper further illustrates various aspects of *Kala Pani*, where it shows that there were some women who enjoyed the relative autonomy throughout their lives in the plantation countries; while some lost it to multiple intertwined patriarchies. The paper further exhibits a sense of kinship that present generation of women share with their great-grandmothers. The early indentured women work as a source of inspiration as an earliest spirit of feminism. The early indentured women paved a way for their great-granddaughters to look up to. Such inspiration helped the present generation of women from the Indentured community in reclaiming their pasts, histories and memories by further facilitating contemporary women writers and theorists to create a literary canon exclusive to their unique voices and experiences.

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W.W.Hunter, *The Annals of Rural Bengal* (Calcutta, 1965), pp. 21-2

Endnotes:

¹ Treaties of *Manusmriti*, was firstly exclusively laid its principal especially in context of ocean crossing with special reference to Brahmin men, who hold the highest position, whereas women, shudras and other caste people were allowed to take up sea voyage, but with time this dictum became a taboo and in general crossing became a religious taboo. To quote, " Manusmriti, (Written circa 200BCE, Chapter 3, Verse, 158) mentions the rules- if a Brahmin did cross the waters, he is to be denied a Shradha, (the annual appeasement of spirits- Shradh-serves to remind one at important times throughout one's life that death does not sever the link between the present and the past, between the living and the dead). Such an offender is grouped with prisoners, sellers of soma, one who eats food given by the son of an adulteress, a bard, an oilman or a perjurer". (<http://historicalalleys.blogspot.in/2009/01/hindus-and-ocean-taboo.html>).

² According to *Garuda Purana* and *Markendya Purana*, says that if ancestors are happy with Shradha they

shower and bestow health, wealth, prosperity and longevity to the family. For more information visit the website, <http://www.astrospeak.com/slides/24-dos-and-donts-for-pitri-paksha-puja>. (date of access, 06/06/17)

³ The term is used in reference to how recruiters described the plantation, According to testimonies of indentured labourers, recruiter illustrated that the land would provide them with immense wealth and luxury and they could earn innumerable wealth and can return to their home after accumulating wealth.

⁴ The term he in capital is used in reference to explicate how men were on highest in the hierarchy of power, especially Brahmin Hindu men.

⁵ Mariam Pirbhai. *Critical Perspectives on Indo-Caribbean women's Literature*. Routledge: London, 2013.29.

⁶ According to many religious scriptures women have been compared to Shudra and prominent among these are Tulsidas's *Ramayana*, and *Manusmriti*. Famous quotation from Tulasi Das's *Ramayana* says it all, one of the stanzas he writes, "One would attain happiness in life only by remaining where he has been placed by the Lord. My Lord has done well in giving me a lesson; but You have fixed certain limits for everyone. A drum, a rustic, a shudra, a beast and a woman all these deserve instructions. for more readings visit <https://www.quora.com/Dhol-Ganwar-Shudra-Pashu-Nari-Sakal-Taadana-Ke-Adhikari-What-does-Tulsidas-precisely-mean-by-this-quote>, Accessed date, 10/06/17.

⁷ <http://aingram.web.wesleyan.edu/chutney.html>, accessed date 10/06/2017.

⁸ https://books.google.co.in/books?id=_n82hsbDJBMC&pg=PA587&lpg=PA587&dq=what+is+matikor+songs&source=bl&ots=znW51b3FId&sig=RJgqAHzDnhhRW6dlxKG27KI6EYQ&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwi1pb7QibPUAhWHPo8KHZiDCkoQ6AEINzAD#v=onepage&q=what%20is%20matikor%20songs&f=false, Access date, 10/06/17.

⁹ the context I am using from *A Room of One's Own* (1929) by Virginia Woolf where she discusses about the financial and social freedom that women require for their development hence she advocated for a space of one's own, owned by women for creative and financial freedom.

¹⁰ Chutney songs are a vibrant fusion of Indian Bhojpuri folk music with Caribbean calypso and soca, originating from Trinidad and Tobago, Guyana, and Suriname

¹¹ Womanism is an ideology and social theory rooted in Black feminism, coined by Alice Walker in 1979 to address the specific intersectional experiences of Black women, emphasizing racial, gender, and class oppression. It focuses on the liberation of all people, community, and the appreciation of Black women's culture, strength, and resilience