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The University of the West Indies in St. Augustine, Trinidad holds the transcript of an unpublished interview with a 109-year old woman named Doolarie, who traveled from India to Trinidad as an indentured laborer in 1913. In this interview, a rare first-person account from a female laborer, Doolarie describes the degrading experience of indenture, as the workers were loaded into trucks “like flour bags” and taken to the plantation. But her degradation was not only a result of her indenture; she points to the scar on her head where her husband beat her with a hoe for talking to another man. Indo-Caribbean women like Doolarie were triply vulnerable because of their gender, race, and class, and they often suffered a perilous existence on the estates. Their experiences have remained largely hidden in the archives of history, in part because of the low status they held, but also because of another, seemingly counterintuitive reason. Far more men indentured than women, and so the lives of the few female laborers took on a metaphoric weight in the rhetoric around indenture. These women became symbols for colonial and anti-colonial authors alike, used to support ideologies of empire and nationalism. As a result, the impact of indenture on real women like Doolarie is often erased.

A trope that appears again and again in fictional depictions of the British imperial system of indenture is a relationship developing between a British man in power and a female Indian laborer. The persistence of this trope reflects the tangled intersection of gender and race in struggles between ethnic groups during indenture. The characters often act as stand-ins for their home nations, and the relationship between them serves as an analogy for colonialism. For example, authors writing at the time of indentured labor used this relationship to demonstrate the benevolence of the colonial system. In Edward Jenkins’ *Lutchmee and Dilloo* (1877), the British man rescues the Indian woman, lifting her from poverty and introducing her to refined ideas, suggesting that Britain would protect India from her own barbaric tendencies and expose her to civilization and Christianity.

For contemporary Indo-Caribbean authors, however, this same relationship is used to demonstrate the devastating impact of colonialism. In both David Dabydeen’s *The Counting House* (1996) and Sharlow Mohammad’s *The Promise* (1995), a British man takes advantage of an Indian woman, sexually exploiting her and giving little in return. The characters’ interactions produce an indictment of imperialism, attacking Britain for using its civilizing mission as a justification to take labor and raw goods from India. Yet, while *The Counting House* and *The Promise* confront the racist interventions of imperialism and indenture, they maintain the more conventional views of gender that were concretized under these systems and that persist in the Caribbean today. This

paper will consider the ways that Dabydeen and Sharlow¹ restructure the metaphor of the relationship between an Indian woman and a British man in order to challenge the cultural hierarchy of imperialism, yet fail to dismantle the patriarchal view of nationalism that underlies this metaphor.

Between 1834 and 1917, after slavery was abolished in the British colonies but before most colonies achieved independence, roughly 500,000 Indians and 200,000 Chinese traveled to the West Indies to labor on the plantations under indenture. However, those hundreds of thousands of immigrants averaged four men to only one woman, creating a huge gendered disparity in the West Indian populations. Initially, this disparity created an opportunity for greater freedom for the women who traveled under indenture from traditional societies like India. As they were able to earn wages, the women had more economic independence, and their scarcity meant that they could choose a mate. Gender-related traditions shifted in the West Indies during this time period; dowries were reversed so that money went from the groom's family to that of the bride, rather than the other way around.

However, the few women who traveled to the colonies also bore the weight of becoming the protectors of their home country's culture and tradition. Historian Patricia Mohammed notes that most cultures believe that "the honor of men is vested in women's virtue," and as a result, struggles between men to retain ethnic identity manifest in terms of the power to control their own women by guarding and protecting them from other men (9). This was especially true far from home, when one's culture seemed under threat. These patriarchal power struggles resulted in women's restricted access to education and women's domestic confinement once their indenture period ended.

In addition, women's positional vulnerability can also be observed in reports of increased violence against women during this time period. Often, a man who believed his wife had consorted with another man chopped off her arm or nose or murdered her. Colonial authorities blamed this violence and many of the other ills of the system on the gender disparity, citing men's sexual frustration and jealousy as a cause. The colonial rhetoric of indentured labor, including fictional depictions, suggested that the Indian men grew barbaric and vicious without the civilizing influence of women. This rhetoric supported women's traditional role as bearers of domesticity and culture, as wives and mothers. The attacks on women were no doubt partly a result of the scarcity of women and the patriarchal nature of Indian society heightened by cultural degradation in colonialism. Yet the

¹ Sharlow Mohammad writes under the name Sharlow, or occasionally, Sharlowe.

colonizers' degradation of women and the brutal treatment of the male laborers were certainly factors that contributed to the marginalization of these women.

Although interpreted as wives and mothers, in actuality, two-thirds of the women who indentured were single. The 1915 McNeil-Lal Reports states that, "The women who come out consist as to one-third of married women who accompany their husbands, the remainder being mostly widows and women who have run away from their husbands or been put away from them" (313). Yet in most indenture narratives, the main characters are males traveling alone or a male and female couple.² The main characters of *The Counting House* and *The Promise*, respectively, both Rohini and Rati choose their own husband, but neither considers traveling to the Caribbean without him. The lack of representation of this reality suggests that images of labor remain highly gendered; men are viewed as laborers and women as wives, even though in many traditional cultures, women perform the majority of the hard labor. Chandra Mohanty notes that women usually perform agricultural and factory work yet women often defined as "housewives" as opposed to "workers." She writes, "The effects of this definition of labor is not only that it makes women's labor and its costs invisible, but that it undercuts women's agency by defining them as victims of a process of pauperization or of 'tradition' or 'patriarchy,' rather than as agents capable of making their own choices" (151). The female characters, like Rohini and Rati, who indenture with their husbands, tend to obscure the real women who traveled alone under indenture. In addition, it codes these characters as "wives," thus limiting their role and placing them in a recognizable, "safe" category for women.

Critics have faulted Dabydeen and Sharlow for their incomplete representation of their female characters. For example, Sharmila Sen suggests that Rohini's character falls into a pattern of vulnerable, promiscuous female characters in Indo-Caribbean literature and is effectively silenced because the section of the book telling her story is in third person. She argues, "Dabydeen's novel, while ostensibly attempting to give a voice to Rohini, finds itself unable to articulate that experience in the first person" (194-195). Similarly, Mariam Pirbhai suggests that Sharlow fails to capture Rati's internal life: "Though Rati is set up as the ostensible heroine of the indenture narrative, her heroism is couched in Hindu patriarchal discourse, for she is typecast as a spiritually chaste devotee to father, husband, and Brahma" (144). These are but a few examples of the systemic silencings of Indo-Caribbean females in these texts. The metaphoric role that each woman plays diminishes her position as an individual caught in the brutal system of colonialism and indenture and minimizes the small and large acts of independence that real female laborers took.

² The novels that do depict women traveling alone tend to be written by women – see Peggy Mohan's *Jahajin*, for instance.

Dabydeen bases *The Counting House* on real artifacts discovered on Plantation Albion, in British Guiana. John Gladstone, the plantation's owner, was the first Caribbean planter to petition the British government for Indian laborers, and, in a sense, is the architect of the migration of Indian indentured laborers. In the preface, Dabydeen explains that the found artifacts included "a cow-skin purse, a child's tooth, an ivory button, a drawing of the Hindu God, Rama, haloed by seven stars, a set of iron needles, some kumari seeds, and an empty tin marked 'Huntley's Dominion Biscuits,' its cover depicting a scene of the Battle of Waterloo." The preface also includes a quote by Gladstone: "No account of the coolie experience can ever be complete, for they are but the scraps of history" (Dabydeen xi). *The Counting House* is clearly a response to this sentiment, an attempt to fill in the gaps of history, to help expand our understanding of the experiences of the Indian migrants.

Like many critics of empire, Dabydeen dismisses the moral justifications for colonization and points instead to the economic benefits reaped by the colonizers. In his article "On Not Being Milton," he writes, "The British Empire was...a feudal structure with robber barons and serfs" (Dabydeen and Macedo 23). The title *The Counting House* refers to the building that held the colonizer's wealth gained through the exploitation of the laborers, drawing attention to the feudal power structure. Furthermore, the artifacts upon which the story is based, the scant remainders of the lives of the largely anonymous migrants, were found in the counting house of Plantation Albion, as if their lives were counted among the colonizers' wealth.

Dabydeen seeks to expose and upend that power dynamic, in part by imagining the lives of those migrants and establishing their place in colonial history, as reflected in the structure of the novel. Dabydeen splits the novel into three sections, each told from the point of view of a different character: Rohini, a female indentured laborer; Kampta, an Indian laborer not bound by indenture; and Miriam, a former slave. The division helps convey the variety of experiences of the laborers who were silenced by colonialism, but it also forms an ironic solidarity that is invisible to the characters themselves. While the Indian and African characters tend to see each other as rivals, the reader sees the similarity of their suffering as laborers on a British plantation.

Additionally, in order to capture the disjointed experience of the laborers, whose lives were dramatically altered by their immigration to British Guiana, *The Counting House* is written in fragmented chronology, beginning two years into the indenture of the main characters in British Guiana and then flashing back to their time in India. Gail Low notes that the characters use the same Creole slang and folk expressions both in British Guiana and in the flashback scenes that take place in their village in India. She suggests, "this has the effect of making the world of the village community echo the world of Plantation Albion, as if the

latter has corrupted – against apparent causal logic – even the temporal space of the former” (215). Dabydeen does not romanticize India before colonialism – when the novel opens, Rohini, described as “a low-caste, dark-skinned, barefooted girl” lives with her widowed mother in grinding poverty (28). To lift her spirits, Rohini polishes their few treasured belongings, “their insurance against starvation: the silver anklet belonging to her mother, two brass lotas, an enamel plate painted with maharajas on elephants” (Dabydeen 28). The image on the plate is a sign of the inequality of wealth and the cruelty of the caste system; while maharajas ride on elephants, poor peasants treasure a piece of pottery imprinted with their image.

These seductive images of wealth recur after Rohini marries her neighbor, Vidia. Chafing under the restrictions of her mother-in-law, she is drawn to the propaganda of a labor recruiter:

“British people them come and clear away all we mud and bamboo huts and put up things like this,” he said proudly, showing them a drawing of the Governor’s residence – a massive building surrounded by colonnades, its arches enriched with white marble and coloured stone. (46)

Of course, the building is the home of the head of the colonial government and is no more accessible to her than the palaces of the maharajas who ride elephants. Rohini, though, is lured by the recruiter’s descriptions and the promise of life beyond her hut. In both India and British Guiana, Dabydeen suggests, the wealthy exploit the poor. Moreover, the recruiter’s influence over Rohini and her ultimate decision to indenture illustrates the chaos caused by colonialism. The recruiter draws in the villagers by describing the Indian Rebellion of 1857 and warning of the British army’s retribution.³

Historians like Marina Carter, Shaheeda Hosein, and Gaiutra Bahadur have drawn attention to the various ways Indian women pushed against traditional gender roles within the indenture system.⁴ Women found ways to supplement their wages, selling homemade food, charcoal, or animals they had raised. They held positions of authority, acting as labor recruiters in India and *sirdars*⁵ on the

³ The novel begins shortly after the Indian Rebellion of 1857. Historians have explored the ways that British imperialism upset traditional village life in India, leading to violence and rebellion, which increased the number of people willing to indenture. Rioting Indians killed many European civilians as well as soldiers, and in retribution, the British Army summarily executed great numbers of Indians, claiming they were involved in the revolt. The British targeted Muslims in particular, viewing the uprising as an Islamic movement, although Hindus were also involved.

⁴ See Marina Carter, *Lakshmi’s Legacy*; Shaheeda Hosein, *Rural Indian Women in Trinidad*; and Gaiutra Bahadur, *Coolie Woman*.

⁵ Drivers

estates. They sought justice from the colonial administration, such as a woman named Baby who took her former lover, Talloo, and a constable to court for assault when they seized her jewelry (Bahadur 97). Yet, these initiatives are rarely depicted in fiction, and *The Counting House* is no exception.⁶

In some ways, Rohini is an example of the ways that Indian women worked against cultural gender restrictions in order to improve their lives. She takes radical action, secretly poisoning the family's cow so that when it dies, the villagers will see the family as cursed, and the family will be forced to move. However, it is worth noting that she does not consider signing a contract of indenture alone; she takes these dramatic actions so that Vidia will indenture with her. Dabydeen diverts from historical accuracy here, since women indenturing with their husbands were in the minority. In the interview described above, we see a specific example of this – Doolarie explains that she indentured by herself because both her parents had died and there was no work for her in India. That Rohini, strong-willed and aggravated as she is with Vidia's helplessness, cannot conceive of leaving Vidia, casts her clearly in the role of "wife."

The Counting House does treat with complexity one dimension of gender roles that shifted under indenture. Unlike colonial authors who suggested that the gender disparity on the plantations led only to violence, Dabydeen uses Rohini to illustrate the gendered freedoms of indentureship.⁷ For example, Rohini's wages give her a measure of economic independence, and she is aware that she could leave Vidia for another man if she desired. Indentured women often made strategic partnerships to gain protection and financial stability. There are reports of relatively high numbers of women changing mates, or having more than one romantic partner at a time, demonstrating a fluid view of partnership. Sarah Morton, a Canadian missionary, describes a conversation with an Indian woman who said, "When the last [immigrant] ship came in I took a papa. I will keep him as long as he treats me well. If he does not treat me well I shall send him off at once; that's the right way, is it not?" (Niranjana 65). At the same time, Dabydeen demonstrates the limits of Rohini's options: "What could she gain by them, these uncouth coolies who would throw a few coppers her way and expect to devour her in return" (66-7). Being Indian and female, she is still doubly marginalized. As a woman in a patriarchal society, she must exchange her body and freedom for

⁶ Peggy Mohan's 2007 novel *Jahajin*, which is based on actual interviews she conducted with elderly Indo-Trinidadians, offers an alternative view. In this novel, we see a nuanced depiction of the women who traveled alone, a population that does not often appear in indenture narratives. For example, Deeda, a married woman who cannot depend on her absent husband for survival, indentures in order to support herself and her son. The author points out that the majority of women who indentured did so alone, but also acknowledges that many were widowed or fleeing marriage and thus were not "single" in the way we may conceive of today.

⁷ See Edward Jenkins' *Lutchmee and Dilloo* and A.R.F. Webber's *Those that Be in Bondage*.

financial security by choosing between different men who would each use her as they saw fit, “devour” her in exchange for a bit more financial security.

Rohini’s double oppression becomes a factor of Vidia’s marginalization and emasculation as well. For example, when Rohini confesses to Vidia that she killed the family cow, he beats her for the first time. He does so not just because of her plot, but also because of his own sense of failure, which stems in part from his inability to impregnate her. The other workers “gossip about her lack of child, spreading malice about Vidia’s manhood” (Dabydeen 112). Vidia develops a sense of sexual inadequacy and becomes jealous of Rohini, believing that her enjoyment of and experimentation with sex with him means that she must be unfaithful. When he beats her again, he accuses her of sleeping with Africans: “Niggerman digging in your belly for gold that belong to me” (87). Vidia equates Rohini’s sexuality with wealth that is by rights his. In addition, he seems to have accepted the stereotype that Africans are hypersexual and seems terrified that they will offer her something that he cannot. His reactions demonstrate the ways that men’s struggles to retain ethnic identity result in violence against women as a means of exerting control over one aspect of their uncontrollable lives.

There is even a touch of misogyny in Rohini’s response to the abuse. At first, she is pleased that Vidia hits her, because it makes him more like Gladstone: “It proved he had his own will, even though it was not as big and important as Gladstone’s who was in charge of more than a wife, but nine-ten hundred coolies” (70). Rohini and Vidia have internalized the notion that they are inferior, although they do not see themselves as culturally inferior, so much as lacking the wealth and the power that makes the colonizers great. Ironically, in seeking a better life through indenture, they become more aware of their own poverty than they would have had they remained in India.

However, there is a deeper sense of inadequacy at work. Laboring on the plantation, in close contact with John Gladstone and his wealth, Vidia has a direct source of comparison to his poverty in a way that he never did in India. He has internalized the racial hierarchy and the idea that British industrialization is the height of civilization:

To be something you had to be like Gladstone. Gladstone was the science that invented the machines, and the world run by machines like the steam turbines and boilers which made molasses, sugar and rum from a simple plant. A coolie could stay pagan and chew on the plant, or he could learn the science of the machine. To be a Gladstone-coolie was the first stage in becoming Gladstone himself. (Dabydeen 126)

Vidia works long hours to earn material wealth in an attempt to achieve some of Gladstone's status, and he takes out his feelings of inadequacy on Rohini.

Gladstone, the British plantation owner, appears in the novel after Vidia beats Rohini, and at first, he seems to play the paternal role of British savior, protecting the beautiful young Indian woman from the violent Indian man. Moved by Rohini's bruises, he lets her stay in his house and threatens to punish Vidia. British imperialists often stated that the colonial officers acted *in loco parentis*⁸ for the laborers and used the parent-child metaphor to describe the ideal relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. At first, Gladstone fits this model, but as the novel progresses, his character challenges this view of imperialism, showing that the colonizers' intentions were rarely so pure. Further complicating these relationships is the fact that although Gladstone is not an honorable British man who rescues Rohini, he is not a villain either. In fact, he is strangely absent from the text. He appears primarily as refracted by other characters' view of him, as when Rohini imagines a conversation in which she convinces him to give up Miriam. Through Miriam's eyes, Gladstone is aging and lonely, even, at times, ridiculous: "a middle-age man rising and falling and fanning me with his flab, and he so excited he fart and dribble" (117).

Gladstone has an exploitative sexual relationship with Miriam, his servant, and he develops a similar relationship with Rohini. Rohini is initially awed by Gladstone, but their interactions quickly come to exacerbate the degradation she faces as a poor laborer. As she waxes a table, she imagines herself challenging Gladstone:

You think you can fill my mouth with your confectionary and do nastiness inside me and afterwards give me empty glass jar and tin-can...You think you can dig me up, put something inside me secretly, then bury me again so that no one can catch you and bring shame on your name? (Dabydeen 111)

Rohini realizes that Gladstone gains much more from their interactions than she does, and she knows that their relationship cannot be publicly recognized because she is considered beneath him. There is no sense that she is awakening to more refined, civilized ideas. She is primarily impressed by his wealth, not his education or his culture, and she finds herself coveting his power and fine things. She gains small favors from Gladstone: he gives her castaway objects, such as the empty biscuit tin that appears in the prologue to the novel, and he agrees to give Vidia a job in the counting house, where he will earn more money and be saved from the labor of the fields. It is clear, though, that these are throwaway favors

⁸ Latin for "in place of a parent"; See Walter Rodney on Immigration Agent General James Crosby's approach to his duties, 151.

that cost Gladstone nothing. On the other hand, he gains a great deal: a sexual relationship, a maid, and power over Rohini, who is willing to do just about anything in the hopes that some of his power and wealth will rub off on her.

When she becomes pregnant with Gladstone's baby, she dreams of her child becoming the heir to Gladstone's wealth and status: "Rohini would bear Gladstone's baby, reveling even as it burdened her with pain, swelling her body to the roundness of the globe which one day it would inherit." (133) That it is Gladstone, not Vidia, who impregnates Rohini, acts as a challenge to Vidia's manhood. Ramabai Espinet writes that Indian diasporic communities often reproduce traditional gender structures in order to maintain a sense of cultural purity, and particularly crucial is "the ownership of woman and her reproductive capacity - the only means by which the powerful male can perpetuate himself" (43). Thus Rohini's pregnancy reflects the deepest fears of the indentured laborers, that their reproductive capacities will be superseded by other races and the Hindu culture will be diluted. Rohini's pregnancy eventually destroys her and Vidia. Miriam, Gladstone's other lover, becomes jealous and forces Rohini to abort the baby. After the operation, Rohini goes mad, and Vidia takes a return trip to India, only to die on the voyage. Through this pregnancy and its effects, Dabydeen feeds into the patriarchal views of traditional Indo-Caribbean culture, suggesting that if the women are not controlled, they will consort with men of other races, bringing devastation to the Indians and their culture.

In this particular moment in the story, the violence acts as an effective critique of the abuse of women as well as the system of imperialism that encouraged such dynamics. Yet violence against and humiliation of women is pervasive throughout the novel and not always challenged by the text itself. For example, sexual assault is described in casual and graphic terms, as when the recruiter incites the villagers to rape Muslim women: "Mouth or pokey-hole or arse-hole, or puncture she belly and bore new hole, it is all one to me" (Dabydeen 48). The men of the village follow this command, raping and killing a peasant named Rashida. None of the characters in the novel challenge the ethics of such behavior except Finee, Rohini's mother, but her criticism is immediately undermined when Rohini points out that Finee stole two pots from Rashida's house while the woman was being raped.

Dabydeen suggests that he is drawing attention to the fact that "at the heart of empire...is callousness to the female," which he terms "the pornography of empire" (Dabydeen and Macedo 153). Yet the degradation of the female characters, a degradation that the male characters do not experience, precedes the arrival of colonizers in the novel and comes primarily from the Indian and African characters in the book. For example, in Rohini and Vidia's village, a peasant named Kumar calls to a young girl, "You with bow-leg as if egg hatching in your panty...When period pain catch you...and your Ma stuff you with cloth, then we

really see how crooked you does walk” (Dabydeen 35). On the estate, the Indians jeer at Miriam, an Afro-Caribbean woman: “Is true nigger pokey-hair hard like wire broom and scratch up your face when you go down to suck? I hear you got to close your eyes when you go down in case the hairs juk them out and blind you” (78). Dabydeen does not effectively challenge what he terms “the pornography of empire.” The degradation of his female characters dehumanizes them, and the ubiquitous descriptions of violence against women normalizes such behavior.

In general, Dabydeen writes against the notion of characters as allegorical representatives of their country - the individual experiences of these characters are more important than their nationality. There are points, though, when Dabydeen draws a direct connection between the individual lives and the larger dynamics of colonialism, slavery, and indenture. For example, Kampta, Miriam’s lover, compares Miriam’s sexual relationship with Gladstone to the subjugation of Britain’s colonies: “So everytime you lie with Gladstone, is England you lying with? When he heave on top of you is a whole country, great and heavy, pressing down on you so you can’t escape?” (117) Kampta sees a parallel between the coercive nature of her sexual relationship with Gladstone and the suffocating weight of imperial power. This connection is similar to the moment when Rohini compares her pregnant belly to the “roundness of the globe which one day [her baby] would inherit” (133); she sees Gladstone as a representative of British imperialism and believes her child will play the same role.

This allegory of imperialism can also be observed in the ways Kampta, an unbound Indian laborer on Gladstone’s estate, challenges Gladstone’s colonial power and rhetoric on several levels. He is proud of his freedom, stating, “I ain’t no bound coolie for five-year contract. I can cut loose and leave today self” (124). His unbound status emphasizes that there were many forms of labor, while earlier authors who wrote about indenture depicted only the laborers under contract. This shows the flaw in the arguments of the planters that indentured laborers were necessary to maintain a working population. Kampta stands out from the workers in other ways: he is rebellious, stealing from Gladstone and accepting his punishment with seeming indifference. In addition, he interacts with several different racial groups, contrary to the colonial efforts to play the races against each other. He has a sexual relationship with Miriam, a woman of African descent, and at times he lives with the Amerindian tribes.

Through the interactions between Gladstone and Kampta, Dabydeen reverses the silence that colonial archives impose on the subaltern. One of the only times in the text that we hear Gladstone speak is when he prosecutes Kampta in court for theft. Documents from these archives tend to record legal and judicial proceedings from the colonizer’s point of view, but in this novel, we only hear the colonizer’s voice when he is in court, as if he exists only in archival documents.

The rest of the text is given to the voices of the laborers, making their lives appear real while the lives of the colonizers appear as constructions of empire.

Gladstone's absence from the text suggests that the true villain in the novel is the systematic exploitation of the poor that comes with divisions of wealth and labor. Rohini struggles with poverty while living under a caste system in India, but her problems intensify once she encounters colonialism and the capitalism that drives it. Although Vidia and Rohini gain some small material comforts under indenture, their relationship is destroyed by Gladstone's exploitation of Rohini's sexuality and Vidia's labor, and in the end, their lives are destroyed as well.

Dabydeen's novel draws attention to the cycle of domination of imperialism and Britain's oppression of India; Gladstone uses his Indian laborers to gain wealth, which in turn strengthens his power over them. Just as Gladstone does not save Rohini, but exploits her, neither India nor Guyana benefited from their relationship with Britain. Britain is callous, casual, taking what it needs from its colonies and then leaving the wreckage that it created. In this view of imperialism, colonizers are not malevolent or evil so much as indifferent, so far removed by wealth and power from the colonized that they cannot see the suffering that they are causing. This is the cruelty at the heart of *The Counting House*; the ties between Rohini, Vidia, Gladstone, Miriam, and Kampta are eroded by the power of capital. The character of Rohini in particular serves to maintain, rather than confront the stereotypes of Indo-Caribbean women as passive objects whose sexuality must be restricted in order to protect Indian culture.

The problematic view of woman as nation is even clearer in *The Promise*, published in 1995. Sharlow's purpose in writing this novel seems to be to fight back against imperial stereotypes of India as barbaric and uncivilized and to draw attention to the cruelty and destruction of colonialism. He does call attention to aspects of colonialism that have not received much attention, such as the ways that the colonial policies in India led more people to indenture and the sexual violence against immigrant women in the Caribbean. Yet the female protagonist, Rati, is clearly meant to represent India, and her abuse at the hands of a British manager is symbolic of the rape of her homeland by the British colonizers. This maintains the view of women as the bearers of culture whose virtue must be fought over. The use of rape as symbol also minimizes the impact of sexual abuse, suggesting that it is only meaningful when it is indicative of the subjugation of a whole people.

Like *The Counting House*, *The Promise* begins as a love story set in a village in India in the early nineteenth century. Rati, a beautiful young Brahmin

woman, and Guha, a visitor to the town, plan to marry, but Raja Ram, a rich and powerful local leader, wants Rati for himself. The novel suggests that this story would have ended there, with Rati happily married to Guha, were it not for the interference of colonialism. The British begin to take over the town and change the idyllic quality of life in Gaya, and Raja Ram gains more power as a result.

Also as in *The Counting House*, British colonizers disrupt traditional village life. Historically, colonial governments imposed heavy taxes that drove landowners into poverty, installed local leaders as landlords and tax collectors, and flooded markets with British made, mass-produced goods, which put local artisans out of work. Walton Look Lai writes that the landlord system and the heavy taxation:

succeeded in bringing to an end the underlying communalism that lay at the heart of traditional village life, despite its internal occupational and caste stratifications. In its place was erected a system which was a mix of feudal landlord-tenant relations and an uneven system of commercial agriculture, growing crops for the market beyond the horizons of the village structure, and indeed for the British metropolis. (23)

This is effectively demonstrated in the novel when the British officials give Raja Ram, the local landlord, full control over Gaya as long as he collects the taxes they have imposed. He introduces low-quality, factory-made British products to the markets, and those who cannot pay the taxes lose their land, while Raja Ram and other wealthy landowners gain more and more property. Though it is Raja Ram's cruel behavior that drives Rati and Guha to indenture, Sharlow makes it clear that British colonial authorities installed and authorized Raja Ram's power.

The novel also follows the story of John Paul, the young British owner of the plantation where Rati and Guha are bound. Frank Birbalsingh writes that the depiction of the plantation owners as well as the indentured laborers in Sharlow's book "enables us to see the human dimensions of the indenture experience in greater fullness, not just as a conflict between victims and victimisers, but as an experience in which either side felt justified in what they did." While it is true that Sharlow broadens the scope of his novel by depicting both sides of the experience, the characterization of the British characters is more limited than that of the Indian characters. Rati, Guha, and the other Indians in the novel are complex, with both strengths and flaws, but the British characters, like John Paul and Emmanuel Chase the plantation manager, tend to be caricatures, brutal aristocrats interested only in extracting all they can from the colonial people.

This simplification is dangerous, repeating the very Manichean binary that the colonizers used as justification for imperialism. The British presented a vision

of the world as east versus west, barbaric versus civilized. The view of India and Britain in *The Promise* is simply reversing that binary, suggesting that all evil originated from outsiders, as opposed to acknowledging the complexity of culture and power dynamics in India and in its invaders. In *The Counting House*, Gladstone is generally an absent figure, an occasional representative of the destruction of imperialism. His behavior is often cruel, as he takes advantage of his female laborers and employs corporal punishment against Kampta. Yet, he is a complex figure, attempting to protect Rohini from Vidia's abuse and exposed by Miriam as a vulnerable, middle-aged man. By contrast, in *The Promise*, John Paul and Chase are motivated almost entirely by their greed and lust.

The planters' treatment of Rati acts as a metaphor for Britain's violent conquest of India. John Paul attempts to convert her to Christianity in order to gain power over her, while Chase, who has control over every aspect of her life, uses this control to assault her repeatedly. At one point in the novel, Sharlow makes the comparison overt: "The rape of the sub-continent was in full swing...Realizing that imperialism must be supported by the concept of a superior civilization, the British now held that all things Indian were contemptible. As in the previous system of slavery, Christianity was employed as the forerunner, paving the way for a college of organized schemes and outright lies" (161). This parallels John Paul and Chase's actions towards Rati and the other Indians: under the guise of civilizing the laborers, they exploit their labor. Sharlow suggests that the British colonizers were cruel and selfish, taking what they wanted from India by force and giving nothing in return.

Notably, Sharlow draws attention to a harsh reality of plantation life: the sexual abuse of female indentured laborers. Sexual exploitation was common, a fact that earlier novelists ignored or brushed over. Yet, just as with Dabydeen, the use of rape as a metaphor for colonialism and Rati as a stand-in for India feeds into the view of women as the contested ground over which men fight and the notion that men's honor is vested in controlling women's sexuality. Rati is viewed by the men in the novel as a prize, a symbol of power. For example, when John Paul discovers that Chase has assaulted Rati, he is upset, not so much by the assault as the fact that Chase has had sexual intercourse with Rati and he has not: "He felt utterly defeated. Once again, he saw how Chase was the complete master...The Indian woman was his reward" (100). He sees Rati as a possession, a thing that he has earned and that Chase has taken away from him.

While this is meant as a criticism of the British, the mindset is not specific to the colonizers – nearly every other male in the text views Rati as an object to be seized. In addition to Raja Ram's attempts to take Rati by force, Manu, a recruiter who promises to help Guha and Rati, separates the two and attempts to rape Rati. Even Bodil, Rati's friend, expects Rati to give herself to him, saying: "You think it easy for Bodil to live and to see Rati's beauty every day...and not

to have desire for one single day?” (Sharlow 196) When the men celebrate the end of the crop harvest, Indrani, another female laborer, urges Rati to dance for the men: “Here there are so many men, miserable without women. Proper *dharma* is to make our hard-working men happy” (117). This repetition of sexual violence supports and normalizes such a mindset, suggesting that if a woman is pretty enough, men will lose their ability to control themselves around her. Somewhat startlingly, the female characters support the view that it is the women’s duty to please the men in order to ease their burden.

As in Dabydeen’s novel, the British men in *The Promise* destroy the relationship between Guha and Rati. Guha is killed as he and Rati attempt to escape, and Rati is taken back to the plantation, where she ekes out a living and eventually forms a family. The novel ends on a somewhat happy note, showing how much better the lives of her children are, but it is clear that indenture and imperialism have left a lasting impact on the lives of the Indian characters.

Both *The Counting House* and *The Promise* turn the metaphor of a relationship between an Indian woman and a British man into a criticism of the systems of imperialism and indenture. Yet there is a danger in these metaphors, as they tend to erase the real experiences of women like Doolarie, described at the beginning of this essay. Instead these depictions suggest that women are the bearers of culture and must be restricted to the domestic sphere. This view, a common one in many traditional societies, was concretized by the imperial indentured labor system in which women were doubly oppressed and became a site of contestation between ethnic groups.

Novels such as Peggy Mohan’s *Jahajin* or Harold Sonny Ladoo’s *No Pain Like this Body* depict Indo-Caribbean women struggling with the day-to-day brutality of poverty and gender oppression, but do so in a way that memorializes the lives of real people like Doolarie. For example, in *Jahajin*, the female indentured laborers experience gender-based violence, as when Sunnariya is assaulted by an overseer. Yet, the novel explores the insidious impact of the attack on Sunnariya as an individual and the rippling effects of the assault on her community, rather than likening it to an invasion of India. *No Pain Like this Body*, published in 1972, is a raw depiction of the effects of imperialism and indenture on individual laborers. Set in the beginning of the twentieth century, when the indenture system was still intact, the novel offers a sympathetic portrayal of a poor family of rice-farmers. The wife and children are terrorized by the alcoholic, abusive father, but have no way of escaping him or their destitution. Their suffering is not metaphorical; the intimate view of their lives is a testament to the precarious existence that many Indo-Caribbean laborers experienced.

Certainly, Indo-Caribbean women today have vastly improved access to education and public positions of power. For example, more Indo-Guyanese girls complete primary and secondary education than their male counterparts, and Kamla Persad-Bissessar, Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago from 2010-2015, is a woman of Indian descent. However, we can still see the impact of indenture, especially in gender roles in the domestic sphere and the high rates of violence against women.⁹ *The Counting House* and *The Promise* both reflect and support the troubling view of woman as representatives of Indian culture and heritage, who must be protected and controlled. In our examination of the rhetoric around labor, nation and gender, it is critical that we recognize the dangers of such representations.

⁹ The rates of sexual assault are higher in the Caribbean than the world average, and in 1999, 77.3% of Indo-Guyanese women did not know about the Domestic Violence Act that had passed in 1996, the highest percentage of any ethnic group in Guyana. Additionally, census numbers suggest that traditional divisions of labor remain. According to the 2000 census, in Guyana, 34.1% of the female population over 15 was in the labor force, as opposed to 78.5% of the male population over 15, while in Trinidad 43.2% of women were in the labor force as compared to 87.9% of men. The number of women in a country's labor force indicates the prevalence of traditional gender divisions into domestic and public spheres and is often used as an indicator of women's status in a society. While this indicator can be problematic, as it continues to make domestic labor invisible, it is a fair representation of the number of women in public forms of employment.

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