

Judith Misrahi-Barak, Ritu Tyagi and H. Kalpana Rao, eds. *Kala Pani Crossings, Gender and Diaspora: Indian Perspectives*

Valentine Lerouge



Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/pla/2844>

DOI: 10.4000/1552b

ISSN: 3074-5136

Publisher

Société des Études Postcoloniales

Electronic reference

Valentine Lerouge, "Judith Misrahi-Barak, Ritu Tyagi and H. Kalpana Rao, eds. *Kala Pani Crossings, Gender and Diaspora: Indian Perspectives*", *Postcolonial Literatures and Arts* [Online], 3.1 | 2025, Online since 21 July 2025, connection on 17 December 2025. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/pla/2844> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/1552b>

This text was automatically generated on December 17, 2025.



The text only may be used under licence CC BY-NC-ND 4.0. All other elements (illustrations, imported files) may be subject to specific use terms.

Judith Misrahi-Barak, Ritu Tyagi and H. Kalpana Rao, eds. *Kala Pani Crossings, Gender and Diaspora: Indian Perspectives*

Valentine Lerouge

REFERENCES

Judith Misrahi-Barak, Ritu Tyagi and H. Kalpana Rao, eds. *Kala Pani Crossings, Gender and Diaspora: Indian Perspectives*. London: Routledge, 2023. 386 p. ISBN 9 7810 32639 475. £42.99.

- 1 Up until recently, the field of diaspora studies in India had overwhelmingly manifested interest in the “new diaspora,” the post-independence waves of migrations to Canada, the USA, Europe or Australia, and overlooked the “old diaspora” (Mishra 2007),¹ a category referring to earlier waves of Indian migration driven by the indentured labor system, which saw millions of Indians being forcibly transported to British, French, and Dutch colonies in the Caribbean, Africa, Southeast Asia, and the Pacific to work on plantations, railways, and mines, during the 19th and early 20th centuries. This trend in research mirrors the Indian government’s own approach of engaging with the less marginalized sections of its diasporas. Recently however, there has been a renewed academic interest in the former diasporas, and with it, the recognition that indentured laborers, despite the particular circumstances of their migration, share a common experience of displacement with other members of the Indian diasporas.
- 2 In these recent scholarly endeavors, as observed by editors Judith Misrahi-Barak, Ritu Tyagi and H. Kalpana Rao, gender remains an under-researched aspect of narratives of *Kala pani* (the “black waters”) crossings. While men comprised the majority of the indentured workforce, many Indian women also signed away years of their lives to

work on plantations and, although they participated in the hybridization or creolization of culture in their new environment, their stories have largely been overlooked in official colonial history and in Indian nationalist discourses alike.

- 3 The collection of essays and interviews *Kala Pani Crossings, Gender and Diaspora: Indian Perspectives* (2023) seeks to address this gap in research by offering a fresh examination of the history and representations of indenture through the lens of gender. Presented as a companion to a first collection of essays, *Kala Pani Crossings: Revisiting 19th century Migrations from India's Perspective* (2021), which sought to initiate conversation in India about indentureship, post-indentureship and its invisibilization, this second volume draws more attention to women's experience of indenture. Weaving together interventions drawing from multiple disciplines — diaspora studies, gender studies, and literary studies, among others — the volume sets out to produce new reflections on race, class, caste, and sexuality by excavating from the archives the experiences of indentured women, in order to question how gender and diaspora intersect to reshape ideas of home, belonging, the nation, and the self.
- 4 They rightly highlight how the focus on indentured women is essential to better understand contemporary diasporic identities and histories. Eager to counter the dominant narrative portraying indentured women solely as victims and to present them in a new and multifaceted light, the contributions to this volume balance traditional narratives of women's double subjugation — both by white plantation owners and indentured men — with stories of agency, relative freedom, and opportunities for resistance that these women created and seized, and which coexisted alongside violence and abuse. One of the key challenges of this approach is the scarcity of firsthand accounts from indentured women themselves, as they began writing about their experiences much later than other laboring groups. More recently though, a new generation of writers “comfortably positioning themselves on hyphens” (10) have started reflecting upon the destinies of their indentured ancestors. With this emerging corpus in mind, the volume ties together twelve scholarly essays at the crossroads of literary and socio-cultural perspectives, and eight interviews of writers with a history of indenture in their family tree.
- 5 The first section sheds light on the scarcity of discourses on indenture and post-indentured generations in the Indian national narrative. By doing so, it seeks to expand the perception of India's colonial past and challenge the simplistic and often exclusionary narratives perpetuated by Indian nationalism. In effect, this first section directly extends the questions raised in the first *Kala Pani Crossings*. The second section focuses on the relationships between indentured women and men, by examining how gender roles were negotiated within the confines of indentureship and how this specific migratory context allowed for a redefinition of certain aspects of marital norms and sexuality. The third section highlights new and emerging narratives of indenture in the francophone islands of the Indian Ocean and sets out to compensate the lack of historiography on indenture in France. It effectively promotes cross-oceanic communication and fosters a broader understanding of the connected history of indenture across empires. The fourth section explores how historical studies of indentured women's experiences might inform contemporary understandings of gender. It delves into the evolution of gender roles and how past struggles and adaptations shape present-day structures and representations. It shows how

contemporary Indians may benefit from theorizing the legacy of indenture through a gender framework.

- 6 While the interdisciplinary and transnational approach gives this volume its own specific flavor, its true innovation lies in its fifth and final section, comprising of interviews with writers who have indentured ancestry. This section creates a multidirectional dialogue between personal narratives and the scholarly essays, bridging the gap between academic discourse and lived experiences, and truly sets the volume apart from other studies of indenture.
- 7 The echoes between chapters effectively build the intended dialogue between scholars and writers, but also between different regions where indenture occurred, while establishing a conversation between India and its old diaspora as well. Ultimately, this dialogical approach provides a counter-narrative to the homogenizing discourse of Indian nationalism, which tends to construct an undifferentiated diasporic subject. The editors seek to challenge this monolithic model by presenting a fresh reflection on the multiplicity and hybridity which characterizes the Indian diaspora. As such, the volume breaks new ground in redefining Indianness in the 21st-century, through the acknowledgment of the plurality of diasporic experiences.
- 8 Overall, their innovative methodology and angle not only enrich the understanding of the colonial past but also critique the ideological illusions of the present, as it is indeed the editors' intent, brought to the fore in the introduction, of "writing back" (12) to contemporary India.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

BHARDWAJ, Ashutosh and Judith Misrahi-Barak, eds. 2021. *Kala Pani Crossings: Revisiting 19th century Migrations from India's Perspective*. Delhi, London, New York: Routledge.

MISHRA, Vijay. 2007. *The Literature of the Indian Diaspora: Theorizing the Diasporic Imaginary*. London: Routledge.

NOTES

1. The designations "old" and "new diaspora" are commonly used in studies of the Indian diaspora to categorize modern migrations from India.

AUTHORS

VALENTINE LEROUGE

Sorbonne Université

Valentine Lerouge is a PhD candidate in English Studies at Sorbonne Université in Paris, where she specializes in postcolonial literatures. Working with a comparative approach, her research focuses mainly on the dislocation of Partition from physical to immaterial and memorial spaces in Irish and South Asian domestic fiction, in a corpus of contemporary novels. She is a former student of the École Normale Supérieure Paris-Saclay and has obtained a Master's degree in English Literature, graduating with a thesis on the fiction and non-fiction of Arundhati Roy.