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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Conflict and Solidarity Between Coolie and Creole in Trinidad: A Study of Selected Novel *The Dispossessed*

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Introduction

The paper explores explorative nature of the indenture labour system as it applies to workers brought from India to Trinidad between 1845 and 1917. It examines working conditions in Trinidad's sugar industry shortly after World War II. The indentured labourers are doubly dispossessed on the plantation. First dispossession occurs when they are displaced from their homelands, and second dispossession takes place when they are thrown out of work at the plantations in the wake of the failing economy. The paper raises the issues of cross culture, creolization, grinding poverty, victimization, degradation and dispossession among Indian indentured immigrants in Trinidad. Apart from this, the paper explores how African and Indian indentured labourers maintain harmonious relation on the Island, and how some of the cast and religious divisions and conflicts that had existed within the community break down. Finally, the paper examines how newly recruited Indian labourers negotiated with newly emancipated Africans on the plantations.

Keywords: Indenture, Coolie, Creole, Plantation, Victimization, Cross Culture

The term coolie originated in India as a label for cheap unskilled labourers who occupied the lowest rung in society. During the colonial period, the British colonial masters used the term coolie to describe indentured labourers from India and China who were transported to the Caribbean, South Africa and other British colonies. The word Coolie comes from the Tamil word *Kuli*, meaning wages or hire. Sometimes, the men who worked for other people, carrying load at the docks are known as coolies. Gradually, the term took on the broader meaning of someone paid to do menial work. In the 19th century, between 1838 and 1917 around half a

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million Indians were brought to the Caribbean to serve as indentured labourers on three to five years contracts, replacing the loss of free labour after plantation slavery was abolished in the British colonies. In Trinidad and Tobago, Guyana and other parts of the Caribbean the term coolie was commonly used to denote any person of Indian origin or decent. It is often considered an offensive racial slur on par with nigger. Rodney explains:

When an African abuses an Indian he repeats all that the white men said about Indian indentured “Coolies”; and in turn the Indian has borrowed from the whites the stereotype of the “Lazy nigger” to apply to the African beside him. It is through no black man can see another black man except by looking through a white person. It is time we started seeing through our own eyes. (qtd in Niranjana 14).

Later on, the Guyanese poet Raj Kumari Singh subverts the stigma behind the term ‘coolie’ and turns it into a badge of honour. She accepts it with pride: “Proclaim the word! Identify with the word! Proudly say to the world: I am a COOLIE” (Singh 85). She insists that there is no shame in origins as indentured labourers. It reminds one of the struggle, sacrifice and achievements of their ancestors:

Coolie is a beautiful word that conjures up poignancy, tears, defeat, achievements. The word must not be left to die out, buried and forgotten in the past. It must be given a new lease on life. All that they (the indentured) did and we are doing and our progeny will do, must be stamped with the name (COOLIE), lest posterity accuse us of not venerating the ancestors. (Singh 85)

The term ‘Creole’ in the West Indian context emphasizes the essentially alien quality that characterizes much of the West-Indian life. A word of Spanish origin, it originally denoted Negro slaves born in the New World, as distinct from the African born and soon it came to refer to anyone, black or white, born in the West-Indies. M. G. Smith in his essay “West Indian Culture” writes:

Creoles are natives of the Caribbean ... The creole complex has its historical base in slavery, Plantation systems, and colonialism. Its cultural composition mirrors its racial mixture. European and African elements predominate in fairly standard combinations and relationships... Perhaps this combinations of European and African traditions is the most important feature of creole life. (qtd. in Bolland 2).

Later on, habits, values, ideas, goods manufactured, and opinions expressed were all looked at and interpreted in terms of ‘Creole’ in the West-Indies. In some areas ‘Creole’ became a euphemism for coloured or black, but the connotation and orientation of this essence, ‘Creole’ varied and varies from place to place. David Lowenthal states:

In Jamaica ‘Creole’ designates anyone of Jamaican parentage except East-Indian, Chinese, and Maroons (Black Country descendants of runaway slaves, who are considered ‘African’); in Trinidad and Guyana it excludes Amerindians and East Indians: in Surinam it denotes the ‘civilized’ coloured population, as apart from tribes of rebel-slave descent called Bush Negroes” (126).

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Creoles suffered in the British colonies on various grounds. They do not relate themselves to the mainstream of the society. Trollope comments on the creole life:

How strange is the race of creole Negroes – of Negroes, that is, born out of African, ... they have no country of their own, yet they have no idea of country, and no pride of race. They lacked racial pride; for their race had been denied even personality. Whites considered themselves the only West-Indian inhabitants. Even those who baptized, punished, or slept with their slaves viewed them more as property than as persons (130).

Creole faced the same problems as coolies on the plantations. Coolies were brought in the British colonies as Indentured labourers after the abolition of the slavery system.

There was racial conflicts between East Indians and Africans as reflected within Caribbean history and literature – from the arrival of Indians to British Guyana and Trinidad (struggle for settlement rights), the racial civil war during post-independence (confrontation for national space), to the mass exodus of Guyanese and Trinidadian Indians from the Caribbean Islands (renegotiation within the First World). Africans often viewed Indians as penny-pinchers, immoral, jealous, and above all “clannish”. Indians, not to be outdone, described Blacks as idle, and morally corrupt, stereotypes that they learnt from the plantocracy. Moreover, East Indians often perceived Africans as socially inferior with very low status. On the sugar estate, a geographical apartheid of sorts divided the races further as the African space was known as the “nigga yard”, and the Indians quarters became the “boun yaad”. In the initial period of indenturship, the creoles developed a negative connotation against the coolies on the British plantations. They were against the coolies because the coolies had grabbed their work on the plantations and they had occupied their place and position. Therefore, there was conflict between two communities. Later on, they realized that the coolies also faced the same consequences as they had been facing for generations. The real enemies were the white men on the plantations in the British colonies. Finally, they showed respect and solidarity toward coolies.

Clem Maharaj’s *The Dispossessed* (1992), examines working conditions of indentured workers at Highlands. Living in an assortment of so called “ramshackle barracks” huts and shacks, highlands Indian workers survive on bare necessities. With men, women, and their children confined together in large family clusters like prisoners in overcrowded cells, their only “amenities” were smoking, drinking and gambling. Because of their dire economic circumstances, parents would rather their children work than go to school. Highlands estate, where Indian indentured labourers work has fallen into bankruptcy; that is why most of the workers have become unemployed. They work in cane field on a daily basis or any kind of casual work. It is hard to fill belly of their families. Rooplal, a cane-cutter, remarks: “Is hard times we living in. When rat get fat, man belly have less” (TD1). Symbolically, this remark is a kind of resistance against colonial masters because they exploit workers and they live comfortable life in hard times.

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It is not only pertinent to observe the mode of resistance by examining indentured workers' relationship with the dominant class during indenture period, but also more importantly, by analyzing resistance from the realm of the labourer's own indentured domain, context, and value system. Within the community there are two groups - coolie and creole. Both communities on the plantations have developed sense of prejudice against each other. V.S. Naipaul opinions about coolie and nigger in Trinidad:

East Indians and blacks in Trinidad internalized white racist stereotypes of one another. East Indians abused blacks as 'niggers' and blacks hurled back the epithet 'coolie'. Like monkeys pleading for evolution, each claiming to be whiter than the other, even now-a-days... Indians and Negroes appeal to the unacknowledged white audience to see how much they despise one another. (Naipaul 21)

Nat, an Indian worker, is not satisfied with work division on the Highland estate because most of the work on the plantations belongs to the creole community. Therefore, Nat believes that the creoles are real enemy of the coolies: "You is a creole, it have wok all over de place foh all yuh" (TD 15). On the other hand, Eddie, a creole worker in the sugar factory, expresses his view that there is no difference between a creole and a coolie: "It make no difference whedder you is creole or Indian living on dis estate, we all have one same cross to bear. Ah dohtink we should be left to catch we ass like dis. It eh we fault de estate gone bust, we used to work hard" (TD15). There is no difference between the creole and the coolie because both have been facing same problems for a long time, and both the communities work hard in order to earn money on the plantations. Look Lai has different opinion about the relationship between the coolies and the creoles: "Creoles have historically viewed Indians as posing unwanted completion for available work. Because of the constraints of indenture, Indians accepted lower wages than creole workers deemed appropriate" (54). Eddie has debunks this prejudice when he says:

dis was one of de prettiest estate in de whole world. We used to be happy here, but when Mr. Scott begin hiring de local white people as overseers, dat is when de trouble start. Dey only come here foh one ting, to drink an chase ooman, dat is what make de place go down. Look at Goddard (TD 15).

The real villains are local whitemen of the Highlands estate. Coolies and creoles become puppet in the hands of whitemen. They have to work under the supervision of Goddard, a white man, and other colonial masters. Indentured workers face the same problem. That is why Vernan, who is Nat's roommate, works as a barber in the town, expresses same feeling: "De same ole story, plenty ah wok, but no money" (TD 17). V. S. Naipaul in *The Middle Passage* points out:

Everything that made the Indian feel alien in the society gave him strength. His alienness insulated him from the black-white struggle. His religion gave him values which were not the values of the rest of the community, and preserved him from self-contempt; he never lost pride in his origins. More important than religion was his family organization, an enclosing, self-sufficient world absorbed in its quarrels and jealousies, as difficult for the outsider to penetrate as for one of its members to escape" (81).

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Eddie always tries to make harmonious relationship with the coolies, but Indian workers pass comment over creole community. For example, East Indians hate what they stereotype as Negro – Vice, illegitimacy, lack of thrift, and habit of eating drinking and be merry. They also dislike their physical appearance, miscegenation and avoid creole festivals, especially Carnival. On the other hand, Indian indentured workers live in an organized family structure. They have a sense of belonging to their coolie community. They live together and work together. They believe that they are more civilized than creoles: “Ah always say Indian have better manner dan creole” (TD29).

Indian indentured labourers craziness to define everything in ‘Indian’ terms and Indian’s belief that they cannot climb the success ladder as it has already been occupied by the creoles, made them look disdainfully at the creoles as mere nightmares. Indians believe that the creoles don’t have personalities of their own and they only work for others, the colonial white masters. V.S. Naipaul remarks: “It never crosses my mind that I could open a shop of my own. Is how it is with black people? They get so used to working for other people that they get to believe that because they black they cannot do nothing else but work for other people” (40). Coolies are in majority on the highland estate, and still they suffer from the insecurity of unemployment because of creoles. Indians do not like the life-style of creoles on the plantations. Klass is of the opinion that: “Indians feel contempt for the creole.... who allows his womenfolk complete sexual freedom, and does not even exhibit shame when his sister becomes an unmarried mother... The creole is too interested in “Feting” dancing, carnival, and expensive clothes... (to) know how to save money” (244). In this context, Despres Leo points out:

De – cooliemans talking over de whole country. Dey bond themselves together to get all we own... Dey rent we land and take it away. Dey loan black people money and take all dey own. Dey smart people, you know cunning. Dey work cheap, eat cheap, and save and save. Black people can’t punish themselves so. If we punish ourselves like cooliemans, we slave again. (qtd. in Mohanty)

The creoles are convinced that Indians have hidden their wealth on the Highland estate. Indians have plenty of money, but they do not show it. Indians believe that the Niggers sleep during the day and at night they walk around and steal. They are expert in stealing and killing. They are an evil race.

Sankar works in a factory as a cane cutter. He works hard and sometimes does extra work in order to look after his family. He has two children Dano and Sakina. He lives with a woman who takes care of his children. His reputation increases day by day on the Highland estate because he is a hard working labourer. Creole workers are jealous of him. Eddie, a creole worker, asks him: “It has any Creole wokking on dat estate yet” (TD 51). Sankar replies: “not one creole does get wok day” (TD 51). Creole workers generally work at night, and coolie workers work in the cane-field during day. This kind of labour division on the Highland estate creates tension between two communities. At the surface level, it seems that coolie and creole

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are responsible for labour division on the plantations but the reason is something different. Tex articulates the main reason behind this discussion: “De white man know how to divide an keep we apart so one go feel he better dan de odder when all de time none ah we eh really worth a fart” (TD 51). The British colonial masters know how to divide and rule. The division of labour on the plantation indicates that they want to maintain hierarchy between the coolie and the creole.

Donald Scott is the proprietor of the Highland estate. He inherited the estate as a prosperous business enterprise from his parents who had returned to Scotland thirty years ago. Calvin, a cane cutter, raises question about his qualification: “Look at Scott, tell me what qualification he did have?” (TD 53). Sankar replies: ‘Money’. Tex is not satisfied with this answer because he knows that money is not enough to rule over on this estate. He very categorically says: “Money! If you have dat, you could be what you want to be, but me, all me have from de time me born is to know how to work in one place, no odder skill, nothing to depend on” (53 TD). Tex clarifies: “He skin white, he eh go starve, he people go see he all right, but me...” (TD 53). It is not all about money, but about power, status and the colour of the skin. It is because of his colour that he is the proprietor of highland, and not because of his qualification and worth. It reflects a growing realization that the two groups must coexist, sharing power, rewards and status. During a happy occasion on the Highland estate, both the communities participate and enjoy the ceremony. For example, Choti and Bato celebrate the birth of their child. All the villagers of the Highlands estate get together and enjoy. There is no hierarchy of caste and class. They work together, prepare food, and serve each other. Men and women equally participate. Donald Scott also participates and eats in the same manner as other villagers eat: “Like every other guest, he eats from a banana leaf with his hands. He enjoys the curried, vegetables, pumpkin, dhal and rice calling for more” (TD 61). This is one example where both the communities respect each other.

Conclusion

Clem Maharaj describes the impact of industrialization and economic insecurity on the small Indian community of the Highlands estate in Trinidad when it is faced with the closing down of the sugar mills. It reveals the impact of poverty, victimization and degradation among Indian indentured immigrants in post war Trinidad. After the Second World War, most of the Indian and the creole workers have become unemployed on the Highlands estate. Indian indentured workers are forced to live in such a condition where there is no regular work on the plantations. Therefore, they resist against the colonial authority, indenture system, and the division of labour on the Highland estate. In the initial phase of indentureship, they could not confront the divide and rule policy of the colonial regime. It is to maintain hierarchy between the coolies and the creoles. Therefore, the coolie and the creole workers start hating and separating with each other. Later on, they realize that they have become unemployed because of the wrong policies of the colonial masters on the plantations.

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