Gender analysis of Development Studies
A French-Indian dialogue from social sciences and humanities

Session 3 February 25th
Diaspora and Gender

4.00 to 6.00 pm
Venue: French Institute of Pondicherry

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Archiving Women, Emancipating Narratives. A Reading of Gaiutra Bahadur’s Coolie Women: the Odyssey of Indenture and Ramabai Espinet’s The Swinging Bridge

Abstract

Within Diaspora studies, the Indo-Caribbean text has been gaining momentum over the past thirty years, creating a body of writing that most often bypasses the traditional vertical and national power relations between the former colonizing centre and the former colonized periphery. One can think of such writers as Cyril and David Dabydeen, Mahadai Das, Ramabai Espinet, Peter Kempadoo, Arnold Itwaru, Harold Sonny Ladoo, Shani Mootoo, Raj Kumari Singh, Ryhaan Shah, Jan Lowe Shinebourne, among others, and more recently Gaiutra Bahadur. These writers have written a variety of fiction and non-fiction narratives (poems, novels, short stories, essays) that foreground the odysseys, tribulations and ordeals of the people who became Diaspora.

In this presentation I would like to bring the attention on two narratives written by descendants of two women who crossed the Kala pani (black waters) as indentured labourers in the 19th century: Ramabai Espinet’s The Swinging Bridge (2003) brings out the life of her great-grandmother Gainder who voyaged from Calcutta to Trinidad in 1879, and Gaiutra
Bahadur’s *Coolie Woman: The Odyssey of Indenture* (2013) researches her great-grandmother Sujaria’s journey from Calcutta to British Guiana in 1903.

Bringing together *The Swinging Bridge* and *Coolie Woman* will enable a better understanding of the complex network of geographical and historical intersections, as well as generational, gender and generic crossings. These narratives of two women writers who retrace the steps of their ancestors intersect in many subtle and varied ways, not least because, in Cyril Dabydeen’s words in a review about *Coolie Woman*, they both endeavour to "foster awareness" of their history. The *translations* Gainder and Sujaria performed from their native India to their adopted Trinidad and British Guiana find unsettling and complex echoes in the *translations* that are reconstructed and reimagined by Ramabai and Gaiutra from Canada and the USA.

Both works ask questions about our relation to the world we live in today and the way history is to be deciphered, (re-)constructed, and passed on to the next generation. If leaving one’s home country in dramatic circumstances was a site of trauma for the women who crossed, the texts that are written by their great-granddaughters can be read as sites of emancipation.

**Biography**

Judith Misrahi-Barak is Associate Professor at University Paul Valéry Montpellier 3, France, where she teaches English and postcolonial literatures. A member of EMMA, she has published numerous articles and book chapters on Caribbean and Indo- and Sino-Caribbean writers, and the diaspora as well as book chapters in edited collections, among which *Tracing the New Indian Diaspora* (Om Dwivedi, ed. Rodopi, 2014), or *Turning Tides: Caribbean Intersections in the Americas and Beyond* (Heather Cateau and Milla Riggio, eds. Kingston, Jamaica: Ian Randle Publishers, 2019).

She is General editor of the series *PoCoPages* (Collection ‘Horizons anglophones’, Pulm, Montpellier). *Reimagining the Guyanas* is the latest volume (2019).


She has given Invited Lectures at many institutions in Germany, Denmark, India, Haiti, the UK, Canada, the USA. She was a Visiting Scholar at the IIAS in Shimla in March 2018.

Her more recent interests include Dalit literatures. She was Co-Investigator on the AHRC Research Network series on ‘Writing, Analysing, Translating Dalit Literature’ (2014-16). She is Co-Investigator on the AHRC Follow-on Funding for Impact and Engagement on ‘On Stage and on Page: Celebrating Dalit and Adivasi Literatures and Performing Arts’ (2020-21) https://dalitliterature.wordpress.com


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