



## Research article

# Imperial *Myth(ya)s*: A Contextual Study of David Dabydeen's *Coolie Odyssey*

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### Abstract

The study examines how the imperial *myth(ya)s* (fabrications) of equality and opulence are unmasked in David Dabydeen's poetry collection *Coolie Odyssey* (1988). It analyzes how the Indo-Guyanese-British poet writes the title poem not as a heroic epic like that of the mythical superman Odysseus, but as an anti-epic of a "sub-man" whose coolitude subsumes a painful passage between different worlds and cultures and exhibits a "limbo consciousness." It highlights how the "sub-man" is doubly bound as a colonial subject in the Albion Estate and an immigrant in the imperial metropole. The paper also highlights how the "sub-man" is doubly bound as a colonial subject in the Albion Estate and an immigrant in the imperial metropole. The study considers how, in the ironic pairing of the poems "Coolie Mother" and "Coolie Son," David Dabydeen mocks the imperial promise of amelioration for the immigrants: a mother sacrifices her body and life to free her son from the lifelong servitude of the cane fields through education in England, only to find him actually a "Toilet Attendant," masquerading as a "Sanitary Inspector." Finally, it projects *Coolie Odyssey* as a counter-epic that reveals how strategic mythologisation perpetuates the infrastructure of illusion and exploitation and affects the indentured laborers and their deracinated descendants.

**Keywords:** Coolitude, Limbo Consciousness, Anti-epic, Indenture, Strategic Mythologization



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## Introduction

The largest displacement of South Asians occurred during the colonial period, specifically in the post-emancipation era, to meet the demand for cheap labor on the plantations in the Caribbean island colonies. In fact, a large section of the vulnerable and colonized population was systematically manipulated by imperial authorities through carefully constructed *myth(ya)s* or lies of opportunity and prosperity. These ideological deceptions persuaded them into crossing the *Kala Pani* (the Black Water) under the guise of voluntary agreement. David Dabydeen (1955–), the noted Indo-Guyanese-British writer, in this regard, points out, "The first boatload of indentured 'coolies' arrived in British Guiana in 1838, and from then on several thousand Indians crossed the 'black waters' (*kala-pani*) to the new lands" (1987, p. 9). Many lower-caste Indians, often living under conditions close to servitude, saw migration as an escape from oppressive landlords, lifelong debt, and sociosexual constrictions and as an opportunity for a new beginning in distant lands. Furthermore, many others, Dabydeen (1987) highlights, "were enticed by the fanciful tales of recruiters employed by the British, and deceived by false promises of plenty" (p. 9).

In this context, Dabydeen's credentials as a representative writer stem from the fact that he is a descendant of Indian indentured laborers whose ancestors arrived in Guyana in the 19th century. He was born in 1955 to David Harilal Sookram and Veronica Dabydeen on a sugar plantation in Berbice, Guyana, and grew up in a conflicted society marked by colonial legacies. His migration to Britain with his father in the 1960s and his academic as well as professional life shaped his diasporic consciousness, which is very much reflected in his oeuvre. His creative works include three poetry collections, such as *Slave Song* (1984), *Coolie Odyssey* (1988), and *Turner* (1994), and eight novels to date. While his first poetry collection, dealing with the plight of enslaved Africans in the Caribbean colonies, led to his first literary awards: the Quiller-Couch Prize and the Commonwealth Poetry Prize, his second poetry collection, representing the voices of indentured laborers and their descendants, was short-listed for the Geoffrey Faber Memorial Prize. His third and last poetry collection to date also gives voice to the submerged heads of the enslaved Africans based on the famous Slave Ship painting by J.M.W. Turner. Like many other Caribbean writers, Dabydeen has used dark humour in describing the quotidian and the traumatic lives lived by the diasporans (Carter & Torabully, 2002, p. 82). His work, *Coolie Odyssey*, becomes a powerful site for exposing the imperial *myth(ya)s* (lies) that justified indenture and displacement.

## Objectives

The main objective of the study is to read David Dabydeen's *Coolie Odyssey* to analyze the *myth(ya)s* or lies produced by imperial power to legitimize indenture, migration, and the exploitation of the "sub-men". The study mainly focuses on four poems from the collection, namely "Coolie Odyssey," "El Dorado," "Coolie Mother," and "Coolie Son." It discusses how *Coolie Odyssey* (1988), in general, and selected poems in

particular, exhibit and expose the ideological myths created and sustained by imperial hegemony. As Lomash Roopnarine points out, the colonial power consistently framed indenture through the push–pull model of migration: “people are pushed out of the sending environment because of deprivation and disadvantaged conditions and pulled to the receiving destination because of opportunities for a better livelihood” (2018, p. 20). Nevertheless, in reality, as Dabydeen demonstrates, imperial *myth(ya)s* in the Caribbean operated at multiple levels. Dabydeen tries to map these *Kala Pani* voices who became a part of the new types of slavery.

### **The Background**

Between 1834 and 1918, more than half a million Asian immigrants crossed the Black Water to go to the British colonies in the Caribbean, lulled by the myths created by the imperial power. Both slavery and indenture brought about “the mass migration of human resources across continents” (Singh, 2023, p.16). It was nothing but can be regarded as “the successor to the erstwhile African slave trade,” which was undertaken only to offset the labor shortage in the sugar plantation colonies (Singh, 2023, p. 16). Among the South Asian countries, India was the principal source of cheap labor for the British sugar colonies (Lal, 2018, p. 80). Consequently, India remains the common ancestral homeland for the approximately 1.3 million Indians who were spirited away as indentured labor.

The spirited, coerced, or coaxed immigrants fell prey to the push factors of the imperial power that pulled them out of their homeland, making them both the victims and products of the new types of slavery. Significantly, there were several “push factors” which were “more than simply socioeconomic” (Lai, 1993, p. 27). It often involved a measure of deception and prevarication that the recruiters practised on would-be *Girmityas*. Walton Look Lai points out how intending migrants were often “misled on the issue of wages” or working conditions (1993, p. 28). In the same context, Mariam Pirbhai (2009) shows how the indentured laborers constituted a “labour diaspora,” and how even the mode of their recruitment was often a “coercive process” (p. 15). Besides, the recruiters operated through the propagation of “false promises” of land where “the streets were paved with gold,” or simply through the systematic targeting and exploitation of individuals when they were most vulnerable (Pirbhai, 2009, p. 15).

The world from which the migrants came was in turmoil. It was assailed by deep economic and social distress. British revenue systems placed severe pressure on rural communities in the subcontinent, while the decline of indigenous handicraft industries destroyed traditional livelihoods. Frequent droughts, floods, and famines further intensified poverty. Brij V. Lal notes that most migrants did not intend to leave India permanently; for many, migration was meant to be a passing visit to foreign parts to overcome personal or economic hardship (1996, p. 168). As if to validate this self-delusion, some of the migrants did return to their homeland. However, the majority of them eventually settled in the colonies. Hope for a more prosperous future, anti-return government policies, a pathological static inertia, and the fear of facing the long voyage back inspired the *Girmityas* to opt for their tenuous settlement in the far-flung

corners of the Empire (Lal, 1996, p. 168).

Most Indians who emigrated and became part of the “lifeless system” gained very little from migration (Tinker, 1974, p. 60). In most cases, they merely moved from one form of irregular, insecure, and poorly paid labor in India to a similar condition in the sugar colonies. One of the major weaknesses of British imperialism lay in its inability to adapt. Naturally, this encouraged administrators to preserve existing arrangements rather than reform them (Tinker, 1974, p. xvi). This passive acceptance of existing conditions, simply because they already existed, was arguably one of the most damaging features of British imperialism. This bureaucratic conservatism was arguably more harmful than the unchecked exploitation that replaced genuine economic development in the colonies (Tinker, 1974, p. xvi). Because there was a sharp gap between the expectations of the migrants and the harsh realities of indentured or bonded labor, recruitment depended heavily on misrepresentation. Recruiting agents were therefore compelled or induced to offer an appealing picture of life overseas, often far removed from reality. These carefully constructed imperial *myth(ya)s* led to a fundamental flaw within the system, one that no “rule or statute could eliminate” (Tinker, 1974, p. 116).

Although the British migration system officially recognised only licensed recruiters, the actual approach to potential migrants shows a much wider network at work. The first contact was usually made by a local tout known as the “arkatia or arkati” (Tinker, 1974, p. 122). This intermediary identified vulnerable individuals and passed them on to licensed recruiters, who often relied on larger firms, frequently European, to arrange transport to places such as Calcutta or Madras. Hugh Tinker describes the “arkatia” as playing “the most villainous part in the whole operation” (1974, p. 122). Operating within a limited local area, the arkatia depended on personal knowledge and social connections. He waited for individuals to leave their village boundaries and then approached them with carefully crafted stories. If we look at Jean Baudrillard's notion of “hyperreality” in the context of colonialism, the “arkatia” and, more broadly, the imperial system constructed a hyperreal world in which the myth of a utopian promised land, El Dorado, appeared more convincing than reality itself. They promised bare-minimum security like regular wages, food, and social and financial stability, which seemed more desirable than the harsh conditions the people were actually living in. “Take your desires for reality,” as Baudrillard asserts, can be understood to have been the “ultimate slogan” of the British political establishment (1981/1994, p. 22).

Any account of the recruitment process clearly reveals how the imperial authority used deception, manipulation, and local connections to make the “sub-men” choose their lot voluntarily. In this context, we may recall how Thomas Meagher draws on Simone de Beauvoir's existential typology of the “serious man” and the “sub-man” (1947/2015, pp. 49-50) to interpret the relationship between colonizer and colonized. Meagher states, “the serious man may stand in relation to secular ideals of right, of patriotism, capitalism, colonialism, and so on” (2020, p. 119). While the sub-man's acceptance of “a leader or an abuser, implies the projection of divine characteristics onto this other [leader or an abuser], such that they function for him as does God or the projection of transcendent values for the serious man” (Meagher, 2020, p. 120). Thus, colonialism

can be understood as striving to produce the “coloniser as the serious man and the colonised as the sub-man” (Meagher, 2020, p. 123). Given this, the indentured laborers or the coolies may be positioned as the “sub-man”: whose actions are manipulated, and who “regard themselves as needing to acquiesce” (Meagher, 2020, p. 123) to the hegemonic system of imperial power. Consequently, the sub-man remains confined to an unresolved and unsettled identity, one that persists into the present and beyond. Jeremy Poynting (1985) aptly defines the uncertainty as creating a “limbo consciousness” (p. 406). In Poynting’s view, this meant a state of in-betweenness in the mind of the indentured laborers whereby they no longer fully belonged to the old world yet had not entirely integrated into the new one (1985, p. 406). It is precisely within this conflicted space that Indians in the Caribbean were compelled to construct new identities for themselves. Expanding on this idea, Veronique Bragard (2008) interprets the limbo consciousness as also involving a growing distance from “authentic” India, a direct consequence of prolonged separation from the homeland (p. 18). In a similar vein, Mariam Pirbhai (2009) emphasizes the symbolic importance of the journey itself, noting that the *Kala Pani*, or dark waters crossed by indentured laborers, represents not just a physical passage but a profound rupture from the sacred homeland and its cultural and spiritual moorings (p. 17). For the *Girmitiyas*, the processes of adaptation, exchange of cultures, and re-creation of religious rituals in the diasporic condition significantly transformed their sense of identity. Through displacement and survival, they have turned their “Indianness into a creative dynamic coolie identity (Bragard, 2008, p. 18).

The large-scale migration of Indian laborers across the nineteenth-century British Empire initially lacked a coherent cultural or theoretical framework through which it could be properly understood or represented. Addressing this absence, Marina Carter and Khal Torabully (2002) introduce the concept of “coolitude” to fill this gap (p. 1). It can effectively describe and capture the unique experiences and defining features of indentured migration, which played a crucial role in shaping the socio-cultural aspects of countries like Guyana. Historically, however, the “coolie” was portrayed negatively. It was dismissed as the “sweepings of Calcutta’s slums” and reduced to the “status of ‘neo-slave’” (Carter & Torabully, 2002, p. 45), stripped of caste, culture, and dignity. Against such dehumanizing representations, Coolitude reframes the indentured experience. It represents the transoceanic voyage as a “nodal moment of migration, a space for destruction of identity, yet also one of regeneration” (Carter & Torabully, 2002, p. 17). It becomes, as Carter and Torabully write, “the song of a forgotten voyage” in different times and spaces (2002, p. 16).

### **Textual Analysis**

Khal Torabully (1996) defines the coolie as “the one who is without the text of his/her voyage” (p. 71). In his poetry collection *Coolie Odyssey*, David Dabydeen challenges this notion by composing an “odyssey” of the coolies and transforming a historically silenced journey into a counter epic. The titular throwback to Homer’s epic itself was meant to connect European high culture with Guyanese low culture, following “a

Bakhtinian carnivalesque strategy" (Manolachi, 2018, pp. 81–82). In fact, the title poem from the collection itself is about crafting the voyage of the "sub-men" who were trying to find their places among the "serious men" during the colonial era and its aftermath. In this poem, Dabydeen poetically reclaims the coolie's journey as a site of memory and resistance. Moreover, he calls into being a counter-narrative which abrogates the classical epic form by appropriating it through the language, history, and suffering of indentured laborers.

The collection mainly focuses on the journey of the indentured between India and Guyana, then of the post-indentured generation's voyage from Guyana to England. Thus, these sub-men are doubly bound, first as laboring subjects on the Albion Estate and later as racialised immigrants in the imperial metropole. There are various "motivations and circumstances (voluntary and involuntary)" that compel the sub-men to leave their homeland (Pirbhai, 2009, p. 15). Such motivations encompassed a wide spectrum of personal and structural contexts.

The poem, "Coolie Odyssey," discloses the poetic persona's sense of proximity and distance to the homeland simultaneously. It represents his prevailing "experience as a poet, his return to the Caribbean [from England] for a funeral, and the journey and arrival of his ancestors to Guyana" (Klein, 2018, p. 163). From this position of double diaspora, the poetic persona describes his "migrant sensibility in the mythopoetics of indenture, which first exposes the imperial myth (if not the imperial lie) that migration would benefit the colonized subject" (Pirbhai, 2009, p. 103). The representative voice proclaims,

Still we persist before the grave.

Seeking fables.

We plunder for the maps of El Dorado

To make beautiful our minds in an England

Starved of Gold. (Dabydeen, 1988/2006, p. 14)

The sub-man's coolitude reflects a painful journey across different times and spaces. This experience of the descendants of the indentured laborers exhibits the previously discussed state of uncertainty and in-betweenness. In fact, the coolie voyage has imaginatively reshaped their Indianness into a creative dynamic coolie identity, and sowed the seed of their "limbo consciousness" (Bragard, 2008, p. 18). India survives in the poem only as a fragile and distant idea, as Old Dabydeen, the poetic persona's ancestor, is described as "Dreaming of India," yet this dream does not reciprocate (Dabydeen, 1988/2006, p. 13). They lie "like texts / Waiting to be written by the children" (Dabydeen, 1988/2006, p. 14). This uncertainty also persists in the imperial metropole, where the poetic persona survives by "hoard[ing] memories" (Dabydeen, 1988/2006, p. 11), feeling neither fully belonging to England nor able to return to the problematised homeland. The illusion of belonging in the imperial metropole is also dismantled through the figure of Harilall. Once admired in Guyana for spinning "in the style of [Sonny] Ramadhin," he became in England "the local Paki / Doing slow trade in his Balham cornershop" (Dabydeen, 1988/2006, p. 12). This transformation exposes the fake promise of dignity for the immigrant.

The now doubly bound diasporic subject also harks back to his ancestors' journey across time and space. The epic voyage is countered when the odyssey becomes a "plank between river and land" (Dabydeen, 1988/2006, p. 14). Dabydeen reveals it as a passage shaped by deception and control. When they first arrive, the land seems vibrant: "Canefields ripening in the sun/ Wait to be gathered in armfuls of gold" (Dabydeen, 1988/2006, p. 14). However, what comes next makes this brief vision ironic: bodies and minds consumed by plantation labor. Bragard (2008) aptly observes, "The myth of El Dorado [the imperial *myth(ya)*] is invoked to lure workers into boarding the ships" (p. 80). These lines, "Coolies come to rest/ In El Dorado" (Dabydeen, 1988/2006, p. 14), are contradictory to each other because the coolies could hardly rest on the plantation. As a matter of fact, Dabydeen hints at the imperial myth-making about the city of gold, where the migrants can have economic stability. The next line of the poem, "Their faces and best saris black with soot" (Dabydeen, 1988/2006, p. 14), captures the harsh realities which are at odds with the very myth the Empire created. In other words, it represents "the unglamorous reality" of the plantation diaspora (Klein, 2018, p. 166). The poetic sub-man stresses the fact, "Now that peasantry is in vogue/ Poetry bubbles from peat bogs" (Dabydeen, 1988/2006, p. 11). The poem begins and ends with the same approach to lay bare the ignorant mindset of imperial hegemony. Dabydeen reveals how peasant and indentured histories are converted into cultural products for consumption. Poetry is said to "bubble" from sites of deprivation, while audiences "strain for the old folk's fatal gobs," suggesting that the suffering of the coolies is treated as an aesthetic resource (Dabydeen, 1988/2006, p. 11). This mode of writing poetry gives Dabydeen an abrogating voice, but it also gives him a "sense of exploiting his history and his family" (Falk, 2011, p. 84). In this sense, the poem becomes self-reflexive, critically examining not only its subject matter but also the way it is received and consumed by its audience. Dabydeen's lay draws vividly on the realities of village life, like portraying figures such as the grandmother, "unchanging as the 'canefield and whiplash';" or the villagers, "Roopram the Idiot, Harilall, Chandra, Poonai" (Falk, 2011, p. 84). Its broader public role risks reducing these lived experiences into stories of suffering and hardship that cater to an audience "hungry for exotic reality" (Falk, 2011, p. 84).

The memories of the dead are "marked in songs," yet these songs are performed "in English basements far from home," where educated audiences listen politely to "poems that scrape bowl and bone" by "sipping wine" (Dabydeen, 1988/2006, p. 15). They absorb the memories and histories of colonial subjects. The poetic persona, while capitalising on the memories and struggles of the indentured laborers, receives the "applause fluttering" from the "white hands" (Dabydeen, 1988/2006, p. 15) of the serious man (colonial power). This situation can be understood through Graham Huggan's (2001) idea of the "postcolonial exotic." Huggan distinguishes between "postcolonialism," which he defines as an "anti-colonial intellectualism that reads and valorizes the signs of social struggle in literary and cultural texts," and "postcoloniality" as a "value-regulating mechanism within the global late-capitalist system of commodity exchange" that gives commercial value to "culturally 'othered' goods"

(2001, p. 6). In other words, postcolonial texts like the *Coolie Odyssey* may write back to the Empire, but they can also become part of a market that profits from cultural difference. According to Huggan, this commodification is to “keep the margins exotic—at once threateningly strange and reassuringly familiar” (2001, p. 22), which he exposes as the objective of the so-called mainstream power. It also puts pressure on the postcolonial writers to “become representatives of their so-called ‘original’ cultures—even when those cultures are complex and hybrid” (Falk, 2011, p. 87).

The images of “bodily consumption...reflect the members of a greedy consumer society that crudely digest these ancestral memories in a search for an ‘authentic’ history that they have been ‘starved’ of, which is starving their ‘subjects’” (Darroch, 2009, p. 147). Dabydeen himself has said, self-consciously, in an interview that he is “concerned about the critical business that thrives upon the expression of poverty or dispossession [...] they are consuming poverty, the poverty of the tribe” (Binder, 1997, p. 169).

Pirbhai (2009) draws a compelling parallel between the circumstances that compelled indentured laborers to undertake their journeys and the broader mythology crafted by the colonial hegemony. The experience of indenture was not solely defined by “horrors of upheaval, servitude, and bondage,” but it also resonated, perhaps paradoxically, with the romanticised “colonial quest narratives, such as the search for El Dorado (the mythical city of gold)” (Pirbhai, 2009, p. 55). It calls attention to the tension between imperial fantasy and lived reality. When the promised “utopian land of myth” (Darroch, 2009, p. xiii) could not be found, the colonial system turned the indentured laborers themselves into its source of wealth. They tried to extract profit through their relentless overwork in the cane fields. Dabydeen's poem, “El Dorado,” published in the same collection, offers a sharp critique of the colonial illusion of wealth. In the poem, the poet dismantles the colonial dream propagated by the colonizers by relocating ‘gold’ from the land to the body of a coolie.

Andrekos Varnava (2015) also describes El Dorado as the “enduring myth of a rich promised land”, sustained by “promises of immediate enrichment” (p. 1). He further notes, “imperial powers established and expanded their empires...often based on promising perceived and exaggerated expectations of value” (Varnava, 2015, p. 1) rather than lived realities. The sub-man, Juncha, in the poem, is “slowly dying of jaundice” and his body is literally turning into “the colour of cane” (Dabydeen, 1988/2006, p. 17). His “skin [is] flaking like gold leaf” and he “goes out in a puff of gold dust” (Dabydeen, 1988/2006, p. 17). The emphasis on the colour gold is to counter the imperial illusions projected on the indentured laborers. The coolie himself becomes the El Dorado long sought by colonizers. Ironically, “They [fellow coolies] bury him like treasure,” yet whose value has already been agreed upon under the authority of “the overseer” (Dabydeen, 1988/2006, p. 17). The image of the burial “like treasure” (Dabydeen, 1988/2006, p. 17) lays bare the hollow promises of prosperity and economic security that imperial authorities may have made to manipulate the sub-men into daring the *Kala Pani*. As Varnava reveals, utopian projects often arise from the desire to transform colonial spaces into “a paradise for its inhabitants,” yet

dystopias emerge when “such expectations go horribly wrong” (2015, p. 2). Nevertheless, while the imperial imagination sought material riches in the New World, the poem reveals that colonial wealth was in fact generated through relentless labor extracted from indentured bodies: “The coolie who worked two shillings all day” (Dabydeen, 1988/2006, p. 17). This, in fact, turns the colonial utopia of prosperity into a dystopian plantation reality.

“[I]n the end,” as Baudrillard points out, throughout history, “it was capital that first fed on the destructure of every referential, of every human objective that shattered every ideal distinction between true and false, good and evil, in order to establish...the iron law of its power” (1981/1994, p. 22). The poem “El Dorado” powerfully exemplifies this insight, exposing how imperial capital dissolves the boundary between myth and reality by transforming human suffering into economic value. Juncha's body, which “turns the colour of cane,” and who “worked two shillings all day” (Dabydeen, 1988/2006, p. 17), becomes both the producer and the product of the imperial capital that feeds on the very body it destroys. Even the death of the coolie is aestheticized: “They bury him like treasure,” ironically elevating him only after his economic value has been fully extracted (Dabydeen, 1988/2006, p. 17). In this sense, the colonial utopia of El Dorado is revealed as a hyperreal construction sustained by capital's power, in which the violence of exploitation is masked as civilisation, progress, and wealth.

The system that governed the lot of the indentured was lifeless and ruthless, in which human values yielded to production and exploitation (Tinker, 1974, p. 60). Despite this imperial illusion that indenture and migration would bring a better life to the colonized, Indian immigrants consistently resisted the degrading identity of the “coolies” and invested their hopes in the future of their children. This mindset is exemplified in Dabydeen's ironically juxtaposed poems from the same collection, namely, “Coolie Mother” and “Coolie Son.” Dabydeen gives a reality check of the former poem in the latter, wherein the poems talk to each other. “Coolie Mother” powerfully captures the mother's determination to secure upward social mobility for her son through education. Charles Sarvan notes, “The ‘coolie’ mother...has incredible courage; is iron-like in her determination that her son will have a better life, and so, though her feet and hands are cracked, though she is coughing blood, she continues to labour” (2000, p. 22). However, Dabydeen exposes the falsity of the imperial promise through “Coolie Son,” where the dream of advancement collapses into irony and self-deception.

“Coolie Mother” introduces us to Jasmattie as a “sub-woman” figure whose life is consumed by relentless labor, and she does so only in the hope of securing a better future for her son. Her body carries the marks of plantation exploitation:

“She foot-bottom crack, and she hand cut up...

And she cough blood on the ground but mash it in:

Because Jasmattie heart hard, she mind set hard” (Dabydeen 1988/2006, p. 18).

Despite, and perhaps on account of, that Jasmattie dreams of an upward social mobility for her son: “Must wear clean starch pants, or they go laugh at he, / Strap leather on he foot and he *must* read book” (Dabydeen, 1988/2006, p. 18). She does

not want him to turn like his “rum-sucker chamar dadee [father]” (Dabydeen, 1988/2006, p. 18). She sees education as the route out of “coolie” identity and concomitant poverty. Her insistence that he must “Learn talk proper, take exam, go to England university” (Dabydeen, 1988/2006, p. 18) reflects a deep faith in the imperial promise that education and proximity to the metropole will offer escape from plantation servitude. Significantly, as Alison Klein explicitly observes,

the description of Jasmattie focuses intently on her body—her hands, her feet, and the blood she coughs up; the image of the boy only comes through in his trappings, which prove he is not a low-class laborer—the pants and shoes he wears, and the books he reads. (2018, p. 168)

Jasmattie's faith that Harilall, her son, “must read book, / Learn talk proper” (Dabydeen, 1988/2006, p. 18) is very much at odds with the reality he is in now. The “Coolie Son” is: “reading book bad-bad” and has a job as a “Deputy Sanitary Inspecta” (a toilet attendant) in the imperial metropole (Dabydeen, 1988/2006, p. 19). The coolie son's situation, as represented in the poem, criticises the “idea of England as the land of Cockaigne, with plenty of jobs for everyone” (Manolachi, 2011, p. 7). The son can only write home, presenting a carefully constructed illusion of success by advocating himself as a “Deputy Sanitary Inspector” with a “big-big office,” a uniform, and keys (Dabydeen, 1988/2006, p. 19). This self-aggrandizement demonstrates how imperial myths persist even when lived reality contradicts them. Through these paired poems, Dabydeen tries to show that re-migration becomes another expression of the same imperial fantasy that shaped indenture.

Placed after the poem “Coolie Mother,” “Coolie Son” offers an ironic commentary on the *myth(ya)s* created by the hegemonic imperial forces. The poem is interestingly subtitled, “The toilet attendant writes home”, and is structured as an epistle from a son to his mother. As such, it explicitly reports information about the son's life in England to a mother in Guyana, at once ignorant of and eager for that communication. However, on another level, it at once reveals and conceals fragmentary versions of the son's life. Apparently, this signals the fulfilment of Jasmattie, the coolie mother's desire and dream, who “save[s]...one-one slow penny” (Dabydeen, 1988/2006, p. 18) so her son can live a better life by migrating to the imperial metropole. However, the metropolitan reality proves to be disruptive. Initially, the son's assessment of his prospects is tinged with optimism: “Soon I go turn lawya [lawyer] or dacta [doctor]” (Dabydeen, 1988/2006, p. 15). Nevertheless, he has to admit ultimately that financial necessity compelled him to accept the only work available to him, which is cleaning toilets. Since this fall is drastic and depressing, the son cleverly represents this menial job under the false garb of “Deputy Sanitary Inspector”—ship (Dabydeen, 1988/2006, p. 19) to avoid hurting both his mother's feelings and his own ego.

Ironically, Dabydeen makes Harilall represent his position through exaggerated titles and attire. Harilall proudly mentions the “Tie round me neck,” along with his “Brand-new uniform” and “big bunch of keys” (Dabydeen, 1988/2006, p. 19). Here, we may detect a shift in the representational strategy, from descriptive corporeality in “Coolie Mother” (Jasmattie's body) to the evocative superficiality in “Coolie Son” (Harilall's

attire). Needless to say, in "Coolie Son," these markers function as a means of satire. Though the intended addressee is cleverly kept in the dark, the reader is aware of his inferior status. The 'tie' that symbolizes prestige evokes entrapment rather than liberation in the case of Harilall. Leela Gandhi (2001), while discussing aspects of V.S. Naipaul's writings, talks about a "hyperreal England" that the colonial power constructed around their heartland (p. 140). She further notes how the "real England, encountered in the flesh, falls short of the hyperreal England, manufactured and imagined in the colonies" (Gandhi, 2001, pp. 140-141). The final line of the poem: "If Ma can see me now how she go please" (Dabydeen, 1988/2006, p. 19), becomes deeply ironic when read alongside Jasmattie's earlier sacrifices recounted in "Coolie Mother." Her indefatigable labor, the "crack" and "hand cut-up" meant to prevent her son from inheriting the stigma of his "rum-sucker chamar dadee" (Dabydeen, 1988/2006, p. 18). However, what happens is that it leads him instead into another form of socially degraded work, and this time within the imperial centre itself.

Dabydeen exposes the persistence of imperial *myth(ya)s* in these paired poems, where systemic hierarchies reproduce marginality in new forms. Carter and Torabully (2002) astutely point out,

Re-migration was one outlet for the continuing quest of the overseas Indian— a better life. Dabydeen evokes the ironic continuation of the migration fantasy in the minds of the descendants of the coolie diaspora who have themselves left the sugar islands to seek their fortunes in new metropoli, such as England. (p. 133)

This belief is also evident in the title poem "Coolie Odyssey," where, as Dabydeen notes, the sub-men "hacked and ploughed and saved," so that their children could be sent "to faraway schools" (Dabydeen, 1988/2006, p. 14). Like the persona in "Coolie Odyssey," the coolie son also inhabits a "limbo consciousness" (Poynting, 1985, p. 406), building a space of displacement wherein he neither fully feels belonging to England nor is entirely freed from the inherited burdens of caste, labor, and plantation trauma. Another of Dabydeen's poems, "The London Taxi Driver" from the same collection, hints at the same condition of the descendants of indentured laborers in London wherein the sub-man has exchanged the degrading life of rural Guyana for a similarly ignominious existence in an urban England: "He has come far and paid much for the journey/ From some village in Berbice where mule carts laze/ And stumble over broken paths . . ." (Dabydeen, 1988/2006, p. 31). Like Harilall in "Coolie Son," the taxi driver's condition also exposes the imperial *myth(ya)s* about better opportunities for the migrants in the imperial centre.

In the poem "Homecoming," also from the same collection, Dabydeen shows that imperial *myth(ya)s* continue to shape the mind even after colonialism ends. The poem describes a return from England to Guyana, but it is neither joyful nor peaceful. Instead, the speaker realizes that he has come back "As hungry as any white man for native gold, / To plant flag and to map your mind" (Dabydeen, 1988/2006, p. 50). The search for "gold" now becomes a search for cultural roots and history to sell. The speaker admits, "History we greed for in England, / Must know coolie ship, whip, brown paddy-

skins / Burst, blown far by winds" (Dabydeen, 1988/2006, p. 50). It reveals the same situation the postcolonial subject faces in the poem, "Coolie Odyssey," where the sub-man "plunder for the maps of El Dorado/ To make bountiful our minds in an England/ Starved of gold" (Dabydeen, 1988/2006, p. 14). When he expects to hear pure "Indian" speech, he instead hears "creole stupidity" (Dabydeen, 1988/2006, p. 50), which reveals their adapted identity, resulting from colonial supervision over generations. Dabydeen, in this poem, shatters the illusion that going "home" can fully restore lost roots in the postcolonial present.

In the poem, "Burning Down the Fields," Dabydeen connects the history of plantation labor with the later struggles of the Windrush generation, which exposes the persistence of imperial *myth(ya)s* into the post-imperial era. The poem opens with images of resistance: "In moonless nights you make cane-ash weep / Over the land, blackening / The tooth of the overseer," where the burning cane symbolises protest against the plantation system and the authority of the "overseer," both signifying the imperial power (Dabydeen, 1988/2006, p. 28). It may be in response to the hardships that the indentured laborers have to face, as disclosed in "El Dorado," discussed earlier, where the coolies, whose bodies are owned by the imperial power, have to work for a minimal wage only to subsist. The struggle does not end with migration to Britain. So, the speaker in "Burning Down the Fields" imagines small dreams of stability, only to realise their unattainability in the long run:

I will open up a corner-shop... I  
will make the children burn electricity late at night reading books that will take  
them to university  
and give them bright certificate. (Dabydeen, 1988/2006, p. 29)

These lines echo the imperial promise that education and hard work will lead to a better life. But they can only "besmirch the White Page with their own words" (Dabydeen, 1988/2006, p. 28).

## Conclusion

While "Coolie Odyssey" traces the layered movements from India to Guyana, from Guyana to England, and the visit to Guyana, "El Dorado" concentrates on the violence and exploitation within the Caribbean colony itself. If "Coolie Mother" constructs an image of England as a hyperreal space of hope, development, and escape, "Coolie Son" dismantles that illusion by revealing the lived reality of the limited opportunity in the metropole. The earlier poems foreground the brutal truths of the colonial plantation system, whereas the later poems shift attention to the mechanisms of neo-colonial control. In this sense, Dabydeen's poetic trajectory reflects Kwame Nkrumah's argument that in the post-independence era "imperialism simply switches tactics" (1966, p. 239) and it continues to devise "innumerable ways to accomplish objectives formerly achieved by naked colonialism" (Nkrumah, 1966, p. 239). Through this continuing structure of exploitation, Dabydeen demonstrates that imperial *myth(ya)s* do not disappear; rather, they change shape to sustain economic and cultural domination across the spatio-temporal divides.

Taken together, these poems from the collection *Coolie Odyssey* shatter the imperial *myth(ya)s* that framed indenture and other forms of servitude throughout the Empire. If the imperial power promoted such *myth(ya)s*, then the power reproduced the conditions of slavery under a different name. Dabydeen exposes this inequity through his unflinching courage and a revisionist agency. Thus, Dabydeen writes back to the Empire by directly challenging its politics of representation. As Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin (2002) observe, "post-colonial writing defines itself by seizing the language of the centre and re-placing it in a discourse fully adapted to the colonised place" (p. 37). To conclude, in *Coolie Odyssey*, Dabydeen abrogates imperial *myth(ya)s*, while simultaneously appropriating the language and literary forms of the Empire to rewrite them from the perspective of the colonized and their descendants.

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