

Can the coolie experience be poeticised?

Dear Khal Torabully,

At a conference organised to discuss how the word 'coolie' is used in academia, I had the opportunity of presenting a paper, addressed specifically, to your poetic approach of the coolie experience, which you developed in 1992, in *Cale d'étoiles, Coolitude*. I also raised a set of questions in relation to *Coolitude, An Anthology of the Indian Labour Diaspora*, a co-edited book with Marina Carter, where your poetry becomes an object of academic analysis. This second anthology, *Coolitude 2*, edited by Marina, allows us to expand on the discussions, which we could only briefly cover at the conference. Thank you for accepting to continue the conversation.

My paper was entitled '*Koulitid: eski kreol sa? (Does the term Coolitude contribute to creole culture?)*'. My entry point to understanding the coolie experience was from my PhD research, which takes Mauritius as site of analysis. My line of enquiry looks at how the Creole language, despite being derived from the coloniser's tongue, French, and despite having contributed to the disappearance of African languages, developed by those enslaved from the continent, has been a tool of epistemic decolonisation in Mauritius. In contrast with Martinican creolisation and créolite and despite Aimé Césaire's scepticism: '*We would not have been able to write in creole. I don't even know if this is conceivable. One of Martinique's cultural backwardness is the expressive level of its creole language which is very low*' which is a reminder of Mauritian writer, Prosper's more aggressive position: '*As for me I rebel against this sanctioning of patois. I can only see an attempt at a levelling down towards the vulgar*', the Creole language in Mauritius has proved to be both poetic and political.

Language activists promoted a Creole nationalism in the 60s, while class struggle in the 70s and trade unionism militated for the language to be employed for popular education and adult literacy. The late 70s witnessed a golden era when cultural militants use Creole to revitalise music, theatre and the arts and in the late 1990s, an AfroKreol movement gains momentum after the death of Kaya, regrouping Creoles who appropriate the language as ancestral identity. In 2004, the Government supported the codification of Mauritian Creole and the development of a Creole orthography. Mauritius, now, has a repertoire of traditional songs and political songs of protest in Creole, contemporary hybrid forms of séga, reggae, blues and jazz, Creole literature and poetry, a reclaimed and invigorated authority over European literature like Shakespeare or Molière with the translation of their plays, adapted to local contexts to form theatres of protest, an active media engaging with the language, academics and intellectuals promoting the oral tradition, linguistic and literary capacity of the language and recently editorials and academic papers are emerging in Creole to prove that abstract ideas can be articulated in the language.

Also, the mothertongue of Martinican writers, Aimé Césaire and Edouard Glissant were French and both writers who could not envision decolonisation with an Independent nation which could build national identity around non-colonial languages. Glissant admits that the *négritude* project was necessary in the 40s and 50s for the black person to reclaim a humanhood by acknowledging his exiled condition and establishing an ancestral root.

1. The rapprochement of *coolitude* with Césaire's *négritude* brings me to my first question: Isn't *coolitude*, then, a poetics of non-engagement with epistemic decolonisation? In other words, what are the potentialities of *coolitude*, (*Césaire négritude* was, we can say, a poetic of decoloniality), in contemporary politics?

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2. My second question is related to reception. In memory scholarship, reception is an important element when analysing cultural artefacts which are forms of mediation between history and memory. In Mauritius, there is an ambivalent use of the word coolie. In one of the reports of the Truth and Justice Commission, it is stated that 'most interviewees have never heard of the term *coolie*'. However, an immigration depot, now a historical site inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage list, was initially named Coolie Ghat but was changed to Appravasi Ghat (The landing place of immigrants). Gaiutra Bahadur, in her book *Coolie Woman* reveals that 'the British didn't recruit "coolies" for their sugar cane fields. Rather they *made* "coolies."' By this logic, the system took gardeners, palanquin-bearers, goldsmiths, cow-minders, leather-makers, boatmen, soldiers, priests with centuries-old identities based on religion, kin and occupation and turned them into an indistinguishable, degraded mass of plantation labourers without caste or family (p. 43). I am wondering whether the term 'coolie' is a reductive qualification to classify a human being (manual worker) within the hierarchy of a labour market/ colonial enterprise. Whereas the status of the 'immigrant' moves away from the victim-centredness of the coolie and is more transformative, as it connotes a potential of hope from the pain of exile and inscribes a certain agency into the indenture experience. I would like to know what the reception of 'Coolitude' was in Mauritius, outside of ministers' speeches, political and national commemoration and media attention? How do you explain why certain Mauritian scholars found the 'coolie' term reductive? Is the rejection of *coolitude* in Mauritius, related to the term removing the multidimensionality of the 'migrant', who is reduced to a 'coolie', a manual worker from India. You also mentioned that your poetry was well received amongst the Indian diaspora, outside Mauritius. Could you tell us more?

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3. My third question is whether the coolie experience can/should be poeticised? For many 'postcolonial' writers such as black American poets Maya Angelou or Audré Lorde, or Mauritian writer Dev Virahsawmy or Shailja Patel in her book of poetry *Migritude* for example, poetry is a powerful creative and political tool which embodies real experience in words but also pinpoints the structures and perpetrators of power. You mention how the creation of imaginaries (the metaphor of the coral for example) was one of your poetic focus? Doesn't a coolie consciousness invent or perpetuate a poeticised imagining of history and avoids to name the residues of the violence of colonialism, a European system of mercantile capitalism which exploit bodies as indentured labourer?

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4. My fourth question at this stage relate to the sea voyage as an essential function in *coolitude* poetics. I remember you mentioned, at the Conference, that the Indian Ocean was explored before European colonisation by other Arab sailors and other explorers. However, Edward Said explains how on an epistemological level, the voyage motif is a European discursive practice which idealises colonialism (Age of Discovery for instance instead of saying Age of European colonisation). Furthermore, the position of the coolie in India is a precolonial situation (reading from the book by Raj Anand) which has little to do with the forced voyage of the diaspora. Is *coolitude* then a romanticised metaphor which neglects to point at the oppression of the perpetrators, the colonisers and the system of capitalism introduced in colonies and specially the consequences of this exploitation which continues today in different forms? Considering the refugee crisis today and the crossing of the ocean as synonymous to death, precarity, dehumanised humans, violent borders, war sponsored by arms from the West, I wonder whether *coolitude* reproduces a mytho-poetic stability which fetishises in many ways the sea as providing a safe journey. The wet ontology of the sea as waves, unstable, unpredictable, outside terrestrial politics of the State or the fear of the kalapani inform a different reading of the voyage motif. What are your views, today, more than two decades after the publication of the poems?

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5. My next point relates to the affective turn of politicising nostalgia and memory as an affective transformation of empowerment and resistance, and to Mehta's reading of *coolitude* as a 'displaced imaginary construction of nostalgia'. In feminist and critical theory, the trauma discourse in academia, literature or memory scholarship has been problematised as being unable to provide an understanding of the structures of political power, and those responsible for the abuses which caused trauma. I argue that the nostalgia of the voyage, the mourning and trauma depoliticise the historical and institutional cause of that precarious journey and risk dismissing the histories of decolonial resistance (personal resistance to oppression in the colony) which transcended negritude, creolisation or nationalisms. In the age of social media, street protest, occupy movements of people outside institutions and resistance to cultural hegemony, doesn't the nostalgia in *coolitude* make the Indian bodies and their ancestral cultures, on that 'coolie' precarious journey, invisible, disallowing the politicisation of the forced movement of bodies?

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6. To conclude I take the position of many scholars who see that the theorisation of many new semantic terms in memory scholarship is often intellectual self indulgence in European academia. In the case of Mauritius, an island still coming to terms with its colonial historiography, colonial museums, inferiority complexes towards inherited colonial languages, self orientalist practices in tourism performances, the process of epistemic decolonisation is in perpetual negotiation with recognition of creole in the last decade, commemoration of slavery and indenture, new historiographies acknowledged by the State through the report of the Truth commission in 2011, political commitment with the new government and legal action to repair the injustice caused to Chagossians and hopefully dismantle military activities in the Indian Ocean from the US and the UK illegal occupation of Diego Garcia. My intervention doesn't dismiss the potential of poetry in the form of

coolitude to potentially provoke mourning, retrospection and acknowledgement of unwritten histories. My last question is whether *coolitude* is a new semantic term or a buzzword with elitist connotation? What are your views on this?

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I thank you for the conversation which will follow from these questions/comments, which might also open up other avenues of discussion. I look forward to your reply.