

Diaspora and its effects on marginalised characters' identities in Lainy Malkani's *Sugar, Sugar* and the works of Milton Murayama.

Abstract

This article combines the ideas of Lainy Malkani's *Sugar, Sugar* (2017) with those of Nisei author Milton Murayama. Using Murayama's celebrated *All I Asking For Is My Body* (1975) as a touchstone, the article presents ideas related to the economic and political impact of diaspora and its existence within colonial infrastructures. The article uses examples from both texts to forge links between colonialism, diaspora and the individual, concluding on the effects of these overarching power structures on identity.

Exploring the exploitation of the indentured Indian Labourers and the corrupt colonial control they live under, Lainy Malkani's *Sugar, Sugar* accentuates the elements of the diaspora condition that the subordinate workers were exposed to during the colonial era. Malkani's Indo-Caribbean roots allow the reader to focus on a real connection between the author's identity and her work. Teaming this with the fact the stories in *Sugar, Sugar* are largely based on historical documents and letters from the British Library, Malkani creates a real sense of polarization between the indentured workers and their own identity, proving that diaspora rips away their autonomy. Similarly, Milton Murayama's *künstlerroman*, *Dying in a Strange Land*, 'follows the development [...] [and] formation of a young artist'¹ in an autobiographically-inspired novel, describing the subordination and prejudicial struggles he and his family faced as the 'protagonists reflect and refract the core life of their literary creators'.² This article will explore how both writers present the effects of diaspora on their marginalised characters' identities.

So, what is diaspora? The 1993 edition of the Oxford Dictionary describes it as simply: 'any body of people living outside their traditional homeland'.³ A catalyst for driving more and more people out of their traditional homeland can be found in the period of colonialism; 'a practice of domination, which involves the subjugation of one people to another'.⁴ During this era European countries developed colonial settlements all around the world, stripping the often rich and flourishing lands of their resources and materials, 'gradually expanding by incorporating adjacent territory and settling its people on newly conquered territory'.⁵ This absolute domination and colonial control granted the European colonies great wealth and fortune, although maintaining this economic exploitation wasn't without difficulty. A large

¹ Chris Baldick, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, (Oxford University Press: New York, 2001) p. 27.

² Rob Wilson, *Postcolonial Studies: 'Milton Murayama's working-class diaspora across the Japanese/ Hawaiian Pacific'*, Vol. 11, No. 4, (Routledge and Taylor: Honolulu, 2008) p. 475-479.

³ Oxford English Dictionary 1993 ><http://www.postcolonialweb.org/diasporas/oed.html><

⁴ Kohn, Margaret and Reddy, Kavita, *Colonialism*, The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2017 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2017/entries/colonialism/>>.

⁵ Kohn, Margaret and Reddy, Kavita, *Colonialism*, The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2017 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2017/entries/colonialism/>>.

labour force was needed which was primarily composed of both the local populace and migrants. Although the slave trade abolition hindered some of the exploitation, the once enslaved Africans and migrants from poor countries such as India and China were relocated to colonies as indentured labourers, where poor working conditions, miniscule pay, and corrupt colonial enforcement crippled their freedom, crushing their identity.

Lainy Malkani's descriptions of the brutality of colonial life are presented in 'The Complaint', a short story in the collection *Sugar, Sugar*. She depicts a young boy with 'eyes wide open in sunken sockets, [as] he swayed his head while water trickled down the sides of his gaping mouth',⁶ who, as Mr Kumar spoke to him 'was unconscious and could no longer hear him'.⁷ Malkani describes the worker as being physically and mentally exhausted, with 'sunken sockets' he struggles to sit up, drink, or even remain conscious. The labourer's inability to complete simple tasks infers the terrible working conditions the labourers faced, and the strain they were put under to maintain the mass sugar production in the colonial sphere. Malkani's representation of the worker as a young boy demonstrates that it was not only adults who suffered at the hands of the plantation owners. The children of the oppressed were also at risk of being swept away into the faceless crowd of indentured workers, ravaged by a vicious cycle of poverty and pain, stripped of their autonomy.

Another way in which diasporic literature reflects how colonialism hinders an ostracised individual's right to their own identity, is depicted in Murayama's *All I Asking For Is My Body*. Although the title is referring to the relationship between parents and children, including the concept of filial piety, I believe it can be significant in describing the way the workers on the plantation were treated. They were stripped of control of their being, which entails mind and body, disabling the right to think and act for themselves.

Frantz Fanon highlights the ideas Malkani and Murayama present in his chapter 'On National Culture' in *The Wretched of the Earth* and describes the effect of colonialism:

'Not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native's brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures and destroys it.'⁸

Fanon attacks colonialism here, saying it empties a 'native's brain of all [...] content,' which I would argue is mirroring what the young indentured boy has gone through in Malkani's 'The Complaint'. He has been stripped of all that he knows, and his new identity is simply the indentured labourer, much like the figure in Murayama's novel who isn't even entitled to his own body. I would also suggest the use of the phrase 'perverted logic' being paired with the idea that 'colonialism is not satisfied',⁹ suggests an evil presence, a power that will stop at nothing to dismantle and demonise the innocence of the children and the purity of the land.

⁶ Lainy Malkani, *Sugar, Sugar*, (HopeRoad: London, 2017) p. 17.

⁷ Lainy Malkani, *Sugar, Sugar*, (HopeRoad: London, 2017) p. 17.

⁸ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*: 'On National Culture' (London, 1963) p.170.

⁹ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*: 'On National Culture' (London, 1963) p.170.

This is further encouraged in his harsh alliteration 'distorts, disfigures and destroys',¹⁰ fully evoking the pitiless and merciless way colonialism treats its subjects.

This merciless regime of colonialism can be seen further in 'The Complaint' with the journey of Mr Kumar. He has clearly left his traditional homeland and travelled to a British colony for work, and Malkani writes of Kumar 'as a free Indian – and a wealthy merchant to boot – he believed he had some influence',¹¹ which would infer that although part of the diasporic movement, he has managed to overcome the struggle and suffering that many of his peers have been subject to. It would appear Kumar has shaped his own identity, even benefited from the riches of the new-found industry. But is this truly the case? When Kumar confronts the Protector about the indentured workers working conditions he is subtly rebelling against the hierarchy, but not without consequence:

'Mr Kumar was never seen on Water Street again.

After forging the merchant's signature, the Protector had his men frogmarch Mr Kumar down to the docks that same afternoon. In a few weeks' time he would arrive in Mauritius, to be indentured for the next five years to a sugar plantation in Bel Mar.'¹²

Mr Kumar was wrong about his influence in the colony; he was disregarded completely, in both his ideas and his humanity, involuntarily shipped from his somewhat successful shop, shipped to a sugar plantation across the sea. This shows how colonialism affects those in the diaspora; it strips away Kumar's identity and leaving him as another face in the plantation to be abused and exploited. On the other hand, I would also argue Kumar was never even truly aware of his identity in the first place; he was unaware he had no influence as if he was manipulated as a method to force him to conform. Once he confronted the system, he was cast aside with ease and without guilt.

Marxist critic Lukács would argue this inability to see the true status of Kumar is because of the 'false consciousness' imposed on him from the ruling class and capitalism. False Consciousness is a belief shared by the working class, it involves accepting the social order whilst not challenging it. This falseness is maintained by the ideologies and systems in place that keep the powerful rulers and the workers separate. This idea of maintaining the status quo is also evident in Murayama's depiction of the hierarchy in the plantation as a pyramid, with separate groups having their own housing points. This is historically accurate: 'Plantation owners worked hard to keep in place a hierarchical caste system that prevented worker organization and divided the camps based on ethnic identity'.¹³ This splitting of the ethnicities and prevention of organisation helped to maintain the class division and thwart the threat of rebellion. However, Marxism doesn't recognise the transference from one class to another, as Murayama's family does. They overcome the exploitation and succeed against the odds. This is seen in the determination to make a better version of the self, migrating for the individual's

¹⁰ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth: 'On National Culture'* (London, 1963) p.170.

¹¹ Lainy Malkani, *Sugar, Sugar*, (HopeRoad: London, 2017) p. 20.

¹² Lainy Malkani, *Sugar, Sugar* (London: HopeRoad, 2017) pp. 28-29.

¹³ > https://www.isnare.com/encyclopedia/Sugar_plantations_in_Hawaii<

own gain, as opposed to Malkani's dismissal of the inner self in *The Complaint*. Both writers therefore use the context of diaspora in different ways to develop their characters and their identities. Diaspora is more than this, though; it is a catalyst for capitalism in what Eric Williams describes as 'Triangular Trade',¹⁴ where Britain sold materials to Africa and used the proceeds to seize slaves who were sold at great profit in the West Indies, allowing Britain to buy sugar for Britain. These profits he estimates to be around £14,000 in 1739 increasing to £303,000 by 1759. That wealth, he argued, made the industrial revolution possible.

In conclusion, diaspora is a large factor in shaping the identities of the migrant workers in the colonial era, establishing them as workers with just one purpose: to work for the colonial rulers. This prevents the workers from shaping their own identity, binding them to a life of labour, oppression, and the relentless cycle of pain and punishment that was endured in those times. Nevertheless, it can be argued that this stripping of autonomy and the reinvention of one's identity is part of a bigger, more vicious enemy, in the shape of capitalism.

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¹⁴ ><https://www.scribd.com/doc/19084211/Colonialism-and-the-Rise-of-Capitalism>< p. 14.