

Examining how 'Sugar, Sugar' represents the effects of experience and tradition on the bodies of migrant slave workers

**Abstract**

The experiences and traditions of migrant workers between the 17<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries stem from their diaspora condition, forced upon them when they attempted to find work in safe and stable environments. In this context we can consider the bodies of these migrant workers, and investigate how they would have had to adapt to endure hardship. The hardship these workers endured is reflected in their clothing and skin, often a symbol of identity, as shown in Lainy Malkani's *Sugar, Sugar*. There is also evidence in Malkani's short stories of emotional hardship endured by the workers, particularly the women, who suffered abuse and sexual exploitation, coming to regard it as their own fault for not keeping their body 'sacred'. Additionally, I will explore the struggle of the migrant slaves attempting to hang onto their traditions whilst experiencing hardship, and the effects this has on their experiences on the sugar plantations.

During slavery on the sugar plantations in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, women were still treated harshly despite new laws that had been put in place to lessen the inhumane treatment of slaves. For example, in Jamaica, women were subject to flogging by work houses overseas. Many women were also subjected to the predatory sexual habits of their masters. Sexual assault was a common punishment used to humiliate and torture the female slaves<sup>1</sup>.

The idea of women's bodies as sacred is still pertinent today in many contexts but was thought to be of much greater importance during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Some people believed that women showing an excessive amount of skin was a crime - those who travelled to other countries often found it hard to hang on to their traditions and culture, as they were often excluded or discriminated against when wearing what was acceptable in their homeland.

Women's bodies were seen as something to be preserved and always covered in certain regions, as Stremlau has demonstrated. This tradition arguably conveys respect for the women, as well as their loyalty to the culture.<sup>2</sup> Their clothing helped them stay in touch with their culture in the face of alien circumstances and oppression. Throughout these periods of oppression, the ability of female slaves to keep this clothing without fearing exclusion or discrimination helped them to reclaim their identity.

Men travelling to find work during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries were often forced into hardship. Methods of manual labour often left bodies with scars and wounds; common jobs included mining, working in fields, and (for many women as well) working on Sugar

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<sup>1</sup> James Ramsay, *An Essay on the Treatment and Conversion of African Slaves in the British Sugar Colonies* (Cambridge University Press, 2013) p. 62- 91.

<sup>2</sup> R. Stremlau, 'Indian men and Women', *The New Encyclopaedia of Southern Culture: Volume 13: Gender*, (2009) p. 146.

Plantations.<sup>3</sup> *Sugar, Sugar* introduces the concept of the body as a house that contains the soul. This idea suggests that we are shaped from our bodily experiences - in short, what marks we gather help create who we are as individuals. This is presented in Malkani's text through the description of skin: 'I stared at him, at his black skin roasted by the heat [...] the salt they had poured into his open wounds that changed him forever [...] a white line of oxen, their bones jutting through their leathery skins.'<sup>4</sup> These descriptions of skin show the hardship the individual has suffered, and presents this hardship as defining the slave as a person. For men, marks such as these were often seen as 'scars of pride', proof that they had fought to keep themselves and their families alive.<sup>5</sup>

Whereas women were defined by their bodies, men were defined by their clothing during their time on sugar plantations. During slavery, women were given less to wear on the plantations, and men were forced to adopt European dress style. This was seen as a sign of superiority for Western civilisation and reflected the power and control the masters had over the slaves.<sup>6</sup>

After slavery was abolished, the British continued to work their tropical Plantations using a new labour force imported from the Indian subcontinent. Between 1838 and 1918 many workers came from Asia to the British Caribbean. New contracts were designed which involved long hours and very little pay, despite the tough conditions they were forced to work under.<sup>7</sup>

Malkani's *Sugar, Sugar* describes the migrant workers after this time working on the sugar plantations. As well as the previously discussed forms of hardship for men and women, there was also suffering for the families of the workers. Although they believed that retaining the cultural identity they had inherited from their homeland was vital, oppressive conditions made it incredibly difficult. Food, for example, was very important in places like India, where it represented a sense of belonging and a reminder of home. This is discussed in *Sugar, Sugar*, particularly in the stories 'The Dinner Party' and 'Sugar Cake', where food is presented as part of cultural memory.<sup>8</sup> For women particularly, cooking was considered a means of connecting them to home and family. For the workers, food helped them stay connected to their culture and provided a sense of familiarity in an otherwise alien environment.

Marriage for the workers was also a tradition difficult to pursue. In India it is traditional to be introduced to a partner by parents. However, when travelling for work and giving birth outside of India, it was often inevitable that the girls in families would marry

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<sup>3</sup> D. Mosse, S. Gupta, M. Mehta, V. Shah, J. Rees, 'Brokered livelihoods: Debt, Labour Migration and Development in Tribal Western India', *The Journal of Developmental Studies*. Volume 38, (2010), p. 59-88.

<sup>4</sup> Lainy Malkani, *Sugar, Sugar* (Britain: Hoperoad publishing, 2017).

<sup>5</sup> LP Brockett, *Handbook of the United States of America, 1880: A Guide to Emigration*. (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014), p.127.

<sup>6</sup> Beverly Bogle, 'What our African- Jamaican ancestors wore for sugar plantation work' (2013) <<http://www.januka.co.uk/what-jamaican-ancestors-wore-for-sugar-plantation-work>> [Accessed 31 October 2017] (para. 4 of 12)

<sup>7</sup> Melissa Walker, *The New Encyclopaedia of Southern Culture: Volume 11: Agriculture and Industry*. (The University of North Carolina Press, 2008) p. 356.

<sup>8</sup> Malkani, *Sugar, Sugar*,

much later than expected due to the lack of available suitors, or would otherwise remain single. Whereas at one point it would have been seen as shameful to marry outside of the Caste, now Indian women living outside of Asia frequently marry without concern for caste or race.<sup>9</sup> Marriage for the workers was also seen as oppressed by the plantation owners - any courtship was unacceptable by the owners as they believed it gave the workers too much freedom as well as distract them from their daily duties. This made it harder for the workers to maintain their tradition, as the plantation owners often punished those who pursued partners instead of working.<sup>10</sup>

Just as Malkani's *Sugar, Sugar* suggests we are shaped from our body experiences, it is also possible that we are shaped by bodies before us. From the events of slavery during the 18<sup>th</sup> century new laws developed that were intended to protect migrant workers from harm by the plantation owners. Some owners continued harsh treatment (such as the women in Jamaica being flogged in work houses overseas), but this was challenged by new laws, which aimed to stop all inhumane treatment of the slaves and finally abolished slavery completely in 1833 with the Slave Abolition Act. This abolishment allowed workers to leave their country and work on the plantations as paid workers, although as Malkani's text shows, during this period of indentured labour they were still not free from manual torture and harassment.<sup>11</sup> Yet, with these protection laws in place, the workers could stay in touch with their traditions and culture more easily. Relationships were allowed to take place provided they did not interfere with work, and traditional dress could be altered for the workers so they could work comfortably whilst maintaining the dress of their culture.

The sugarcane plantation-driven migrations led to an ethnically significant presence of Indians in the Caribbean; still today there is a significant portion of Indo-Caribbean migrants. Over 2.5 million people in the Caribbean are of Indian origin. Many have ethnically blended with migrants from other parts of the world, creating a unique syncretic culture.<sup>12</sup> This positive outcome stems from the workers who travelled to find other places to live - whether they managed to hang onto their culture and traditions or not, they managed to live in diverse areas and experienced many ways to not only reclaim, but diversify their own identities.

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<sup>9</sup> S. Desai and L. Andrist, 'Gender scripts and Age at Marriage in India, 47.3 (2010) p. 667-687.

<sup>10</sup> K. Haraksingh, 'Control and Resistance among Overseas Indian Workers: A Study of Labour on the Sugar Plantations of Trinidad, 1875-1917', *The Journal of Caribbean History; Kingston, Jamaica Vol. 14* (1981) p. 56.

<sup>11</sup> David Head, *Encyclopedia of the Atlantic World, 1400-1900: Europe, Africa, and the Americans in an Age of Exploration, Trade and Empires* (ABC-CLIO, 2017) p.608.

<sup>12</sup> Walker, *The New Encyclopaedia of Southern Culture: Volume 11: Agriculture and Industry*, p. 248.

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