



Exploring Cultural Identity in Jahajin by Peggy Mohan

Santosh Sikarwar, Srishti, Akansha Goswami

Guest Faculty, University of Delhi

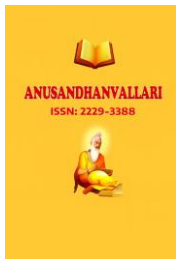
Abstract: This paper investigates the theme of cultural identity in Peggy Mohan's *Jahajin* (2007), a narrative depicting the experiences of Indian indentured labourers in Trinidad. Employing a multidisciplinary methodology, this study integrates literary analysis, historical context, and feminist theory within a conceptual framework informed by Stuart Hall's theories of cultural identity and diaspora. Through textual analysis, the research examines the protagonist's endeavour to trace the origins and evolution of the Bhojpuri language, underscoring the pivotal role of women in cultural preservation. The feminist lens foregrounds the agency and resilience of female characters like Deeda, interrogating traditional gender norms and elucidating the gendered dynamics of migration and labour. Hall's concepts of cultural identity and diaspora illuminate the fluid and dynamic nature of Bhojpuri and Indo-Caribbean identities. This comprehensive approach reveals the intricate intersections of gender, migration, and cultural identity, highlighting the transformative impact of migration on personal and communal identities.

Keywords: Indo Caribbean Women, Cultural Identity, Feminism, Gender, Migration, Language

Peggy Mohan's *Jahajin* (2007) provides a compelling narrative of the indentured labourers who migrated from British-ruled India to Trinidad to work on sugar plantations. The narrator, a young linguist, descends from these migrants and embarks on an academic journey to investigate the origin, proliferation, and eventual decline of the Bhojpuri language in Trinidad. The term 'Jahajin' denotes those who journeyed by ship. The protagonist's primary informant is Deeda, a 110-year-old woman who travelled to Trinidad with her young son on the same ship as the narrator's great-great-grandmother. The narrative intertwines the protagonist's personal exploration of her family history and the broader phenomenon of indentured migration with Deeda's migration stories and evocative folk-tales about love between two fictional characters, which later mirror the narrator's romantic engagements.

A critical blog on Mohan's work notes, "The author is interested in how these women helped preserve and propagate Bhojpuri in the sugar estates, who would have otherwise spoken the Khari Boli dialect, now the standard in Uttar Pradesh, or abandoned their mother tongues for English and Creole" (*Words Uttered in Haste*). Mohan initiates her account with the migrant's journey from Faizabad to Calcutta, where they were registered, before finally boarding the ship. She also traces her lineage by returning to India. Upon her return, she realises that her perception of Bhojpuri in Trinidad as a 'pure' language from India was not entirely accurate. Although the language originated in India, its evolution in its place of origin indicated a distinct trajectory. Mohan's work illustrates that language is a dynamic entity rather than a static one. *Jahajin* is an exploration of Mohan's roots, narrating the experiences of the 'jahajins' and tracing the continuity of the Bhojpuri language. The text employs flashbacks to recount the jahajin's experiences in relation to the author's own. Additionally, the Bhojpuri folk-tale of Saranga and Sada Birij functions as an allegory, elucidating the intricate nature of the author's intimate relationships with Fyzie (a friend) and Nishant (her lover). The dominant theme throughout the text is the author's quest for her roots—both the linguistic and cultural identity of Bhojpuri and its speakers, including herself.

Jahajin has been the subject of scholarly attention for its unique blend of personal memoir, historical narrative, and linguistic study. Critics have lauded the novel for its detailed portrayal of the Indo-Caribbean diaspora and the resilience of Bhojpuri culture and language amidst colonial displacement. Ashcroft, Griffiths,



and Tiffin (2002) discuss the preservation of cultural identity in postcolonial societies, resonating with Mohan's depiction of Bhojpuri's survival in Trinidad. Additionally, Mishra (2008) emphasises the significance of oral histories in reconstructing diasporic identities, a method Mohan effectively employs through Deeda's recounting. However, there is a research gap in examining the intersection of gender and linguistic preservation, specifically how Indo-Caribbean women like the 'jahajins' contributed to sustaining and evolving Bhojpuri in the context of indentured labour. This study aims to fill that gap by analysing the pivotal role of these women in the cultural and linguistic continuity portrayed in Mohan's narrative.

According to Mohan, the mid-1800s saw a surge in the number of women migrating, leading to an increase in the number of children on the estates. These children, left in the care of an older woman called a 'khelauni' while their mothers worked, learned their first language during this period, resulting in Bhojpuri emerging as the common language among the Indians. However, a century later, Bhojpuri in Trinidad faced language death, with only older people speaking it and the younger generation not learning it due to their parent's preference for Creole and English, with some adhering to formal Hindi.

Drawing from Stuart Hall (1993), the concepts of cultural identity and diaspora as a result of migration are explored, highlighting the dynamic nature of both identity and the Bhojpuri language. As a linguist, the author embarks on a quest to reveal the original roots of the Bhojpuri language and traces her genealogical roots back to India. She perceives this journey as continuing the jahajin tradition of migration and constant mobility. Fascinated by the spread of Bhojpuri language and culture in Trinidad due to the jahajin tradition of migrating indentured labourers from colonial India, she traces her own cultural identity's origin to India. However, upon arrival, she realises that there is no singular 'original' form of Bhojpuri language or culture, recognising the fluid nature of cultural identity. Frantz Fanon (1963) notes that the search for cultural identity is a constant endeavour for most post-colonial societies. Hall (1993) further elucidates, "We cannot speak for very long, with any exactness, about 'one experience, one identity', without acknowledging its other side –the ruptures and discontinuities which constitute, precisely, the Caribbean's 'uniqueness'." Hall conceptualises cultural identity in two ways: as a collective overarching culture and through the points of difference that constitute individual identity. He emphasises the latter, arguing that cultural identities are not pre-existing but are formed within historical and cultural contexts, undergoing constant transformation.

In the context of the jahajins, the most tangible historical force is colonialism and the experience of colonisation. Hall (1993) states, "Far from being grounded in a mere 'recovery' of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which, when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past." Hall reiterates, echoing Mohan's realisation, "It is not a fixed origin to which we can make some final and absolute Return ... The past continues to speak to us. But it no longer addresses us as a simple, factual 'past', since our relation to it, like the child's relation to the mother, is always-already 'after the break'. It is always constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative and myth."

The creation of this cultural identity and diaspora is part of a larger political and capitalist intervention. Hall (1993) remarks, "The paradox is that it was the uprooting of slavery and transportation and the insertion into the plantation economy of the Western world that 'unified' these people across their differences, in the same moment as it cut them off from direct access to their past." The migrant jahajin woman, who emerges as a symbol of mobility and preservation of cultural heritage, is not just an individual but an analytical category. In contrast, nationalist history often invisibilised the violence ingrained in the system of indentured labour. Mishra (2007) observes, "For many of these migrants, India was not a nation, but simply a 'composite' village in Bihar, the region that collectively produced, between 1844 and 1864, 62 per cent (120,409) of the total number of emigrants to the colonies."



Hall (1993) concludes, "Cultural identities are the points of identification, the unstable points of identification or suture, which are made, within the discourses of history and culture." The folk-tale of Saranga and Sada Birij's romantic love and separation serves as a leitmotif for the author's romantic tribulations, paralleling Deeda's journey. The act of crossing a river, symbolising transformation, mirrors Deeda's decision to cross the oceans for a new life. Deeda's husband, unaware of her decision due to the hardships faced, mirrors the folk-tale's theme of separation and longing.

Stuart Hall (1993) describes the East Indians of Guyana and Trinidad as ethnic collectivities exemplifying plural cultural forms. The cultural identity Mohan addresses in Jahajin is unique to the immigrant population in Trinidad, resulting from gendered migration and the quest for an 'original form'. Promised a return to India after a year of indentured labour, this promise never materialised. Further, Mishra (2007) discusses the return of descendants of indentured labourers to their ancestral homeland: "Instead of the indentured labourers, it was their children and grandchildren who returned to their ancestral homeland as modern-day tourists. But when they finally made it to India they panicked (as Naipaul did when he saw, in Amitav Ghosh's words, that the 'pure spaces of his childhood [were] not merely peopled but overwhelmingly alive') ... and when they made it to the metropolitan centres, too, they remained gripped by their own rootless history and the terror of their makeshift island communities. They had to make a virtue of impermanence but not without, in the process ... quite often forgot their working-class inheritance." It is essential to unpack the supposedly unifying experiences of this transition to acknowledge the trauma of plantation life. By examining the conditions of migration and displacement, we can address the underlying violence of this migration.

Therefore, Mohan introduces a variety of issues, including the autonomous migration of single women, women's work under the indentured system of labour, the formation of a diaspora due to the large-scale immigration of 'Indians' to Trinidad, the role of the colonial state and capitalist interventions that altered their lives forever, and the subsequent emergence of a unique 'composite culture' and cultural identity. Mohan succeeds in offering a glimpse into the complexities of conceptualising cultural identity in a diaspora and prioritises women's experiences in understanding the formation of a 'Trinidadian identity'.

Works Cited

- [1] Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*. 2nd ed., Routledge, 2002.
- [2] Beall, Jo. "Labouring under the Law: Exploring the Agency of Indian Women under Indenture in Colonial Natal, 1860–1911." *Journal of Southern African Studies*, vol. 16, no. 4, 1990, pp. 642–666.
- [3] Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Grove Press, 1963.
- [4] Hall, Stuart. "Cultural Identity and Diaspora." *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, edited by Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993, pp. 392–403.
- [5] Mishra, Vijay. *The Literature of the Indian Diaspora: Theorizing the Diasporic Imaginary*. Routledge, 2007.
- [6] Mohan, Peggy. *Jahajin*. Peepal Tree Press, 2007.
- [7] "Jahajin by Peggy Mohan." *Words Uttered in Haste*, 21 Aug. 2013, <http://wordsutteredinhaste.blogspot.in/2009/11/jahajin-by-peggy-mohan.html>.