

WITHOUT ROOTS

Reviewed by Jennifer J. Ronald

The Middle Passage: The Caribbean Revisited

V. S. Naipaul

Vintage Books/2002/\$13

243 pp.

Fragments of Empire:

Capital, Slavery & Indian Indentured Labor in the British Caribbean

Madhavi Kale

University of Pennsylvania Press/1999/\$45

235 pp.

In a region renowned for its tourist attractions, little is discussed about the people of the Caribbean and their identities.¹ Images of beach resorts, palm trees, and happy people are conjured up when one speaks of the Caribbean. It is known as a place where people visit, indulge themselves, and leave; but what about the people who call this region home? What of the history of the *Caribbean as home*?

The history of the West Indies is marked by decades of forced labor, in different forms and under different names. The people who currently serve as the majority of many Caribbean countries were initially introduced to their new homeland after an exhausting journey in search of economic opportunities. During the period of African slavery, most workers who arrived had been kidnapped or sold. They were forced to work in an inhospitable and foreign land. After slavery was abolished throughout the British Empire in 1838, plantation owners needed to replenish the labor force they had lost. After much debate between those who feared a return of slavery and those in the sugar industry whose interests were most affected by the loss of labor, an experiment was launched in 1845 to send Indian workers to the Caribbean.

In *Fragments of Empire*, Madhavi Kale explores the Indo-Caribbean indenture experience. She explains that, while the premise of the Indian indentured labor system was that the migrants were informed of the risk of the journey beforehand and, after

fulfilling their indenture contracts, could return home to India, quite often the workers were unaware of the hardships they would face, how far away from their home they would be taken and whether they would be allowed to return home. In many cases, when the indentureship was complete, plantation owners were not willing to comply with the stipulation to return workers home to India, calculating that the provisions for a long journey would not be in their best interests. Often, laborers were instead given small plots of land which they were allowed to cultivate privately, thereby building the Indian communities, which still exist today, in countries such as Trinidad, Jamaica, British Guyana, and elsewhere throughout the West Indies. While the history of each of these countries is a different story, the experiences of mistrust and displacement has founded a relationship between the Indo-Caribbean people and their imposed homeland.

Most Caribbean countries gained independence from their colonial powers during the early 1960s to the mid-1980s.² Many countries were left with weak governments, poor management of resources and little guidance to forge a unified nation among the different groups of people displaced to the Caribbean. It is during this period of reshaping and self-evaluation in the West Indies that V.S. Naipaul conducts his travels for his work, *The Middle Passage*. Naipaul sees a fragmented Caribbean, burdened with its own internal drama and oblivious to its own progress, or, as he believes, lack thereof.

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Today, the Caribbean seeks to present itself as a more unified cooperation of small countries with regional organizations that represent a united Caribbean to the international community. One such organization, the Caribbean Community and Common Market (CARICOM), aims “to provide dynamic leadership and service, in partnership with community institutions and groups, toward the attainment of a viable, internationally competitive and sustainable community, with improved quality of life for all.”³ The University of the West Indies, with three campuses across the Caribbean, serves as a regional educational institution for fifteen countries. Even within the United Nations, an organization that was created before many Caribbean countries were independent, the Caribbean asserts its combined interests through programs such as the Caribbean Environment Program. It is clear that the West Indies strives to create an organized and cohesive impression of itself to the rest of the world.

However, belonging still plagues the Caribbean. In countries like Guyana and

Trinidad, the two major ethnic groups, Africans and Indians, struggle for control over the country. Rather than seeking to create a united state, these two groups continue to resist one another. Because of the circumstances through which these two groups cultivated their livelihood in the Caribbean, both are targets of resentment and contention, a residue of the colonial era. As the Indians were brought to replace the newly emancipated Africans, the notion that the Africans were lazy and unwilling to work was impressed upon the Indian laborers. The Africans believed the Indians to be favored by the British and resented them for the advantage of arriving on the plantations by choice and with certain incentives, while the African workers had been trapped into slavery during their time of labor. The British believed both groups to be ignorant, yet viewed the Indians as the more hard-working and diligent of the two.

Kale's book focuses less on the relationship between the Africans and Indians than on the circumstances under which the Indians migrated to the British West Indian colonies. As a professor of history and specialist in British and imperial history, Kale's extensive analysis of colonial documents and resources details the first experiences of the Indian migrant laborer and illustrates the backdrop upon which Indo-Caribbean identity and subsequent Afro-Indo Caribbean relations were cultivated. As Kale explains, "Empire, I argue, has been the invisible pretext for the constitution of labor both as an analytical category and, in historiography most particularly, as an identity."

Kale uses her study as a re-evaluation of labor as it has influenced the creation of identity in the Caribbean, and she studies this experience for the Indian population, in particular. Kale's study is thorough and exhaustive. She is careful to examine a wide range of sources, from England to India to the Caribbean colonies. The theories which she sets forth are ground-breaking for anthropological and colonial studies. However, her dense and often awkward prose makes these concepts difficult to grasp.

Well known for his honest and critical travel accounts, Naipaul's observations of the Caribbean emerge from a very different, yet equally significant, moment in the history of the Caribbean, as many countries were in the midst of gaining independence or learning to manage their newly found independent statehood. Published in 1962, Naipaul's accounts express a sentiment of Caribbean self-hate. He abhors his own Trinidad for its noise, overcrowded-ness, and lack of sophistication. On the other hand, he admires Suriname and Martinique for their ability to retain elements from their colonial powers. He praises the Surinamese capital, Paramaribo, for having "half a dozen modern public buildings of which any European city might be proud."

Additionally, Naipaul's work is of a very different nature than Kale's. Kale's is a truly academic analysis of historical documents, seeking to reconstruct an understanding of labor during the colonial era by focusing on the role of Indian indentured migrant laborers. Therefore, her impression of the Caribbean is gathered through documents and reports from that era. However, in the case of Naipaul, his insight on the region is based on his own tangible, firsthand experience. The sentiments which are reflected in his journey are those of people who are contemporary to him. Even his commentary on different countries is an important reflection of intra-Caribbean rela-

tions at the time.

While Kale and Naipaul examine the culture and society of very different times in the history of Caribbeans, both studies reflect the grounds upon which Indo-Caribbean identity was first created. Kale's historical study considers the forming of this culture as it initially entered the Caribbean: the sugar plantations, the societies and the politics within the British Empire. While Naipaul does not focus on the Indians in the West Indies, we see a region fraught with idleness, a lack of development, imitation, and even idealization, of the former colonizing powers. Through Naipaul's reflections we see the Caribbean desperately trying to assert itself against the burden of imperialism.

Naipaul says of Caribbean literature: "A literature can only grow out of a strong framework of social convention. And the only convention the West Indian knows is his involvement with the white world." What can Indo-Caribbeans gain from an examination of these two crucial moments in our history, in the Caribbean and within the diaspora? Must we continue to base our identities as a struggle of defining ourselves against great powers? How do we create identities that are wholly ours? Or, how do we reframe these identities that we already have to be ours rather than asserting ourselves as contrary to others?

The journey and trauma of being displaced to a foreign land and forced to remain there has had certain impacts upon the Indo-Caribbean community. Seeking to call itself "Indian" is difficult, since, linguistically and geographically, there is no longer a bond to the motherland. Many of those who were old enough to call India home are no longer alive. While the African community was completely prohibited from retaining any "African-ness" of the motherland, the Indian community lives in limbo, not forbidden from remembering, but forgetting by separation.

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- 1 I use the terms "West Indies" and "Caribbean" interchangeably, to include countries recognized by Caribbean political and trade organizations, as well as others which are more commonly linked to the Caribbean through historical and cultural similarities, such as Suriname.
 - 2 Trinidad & Tobago received their independence in 1962, while Antigua and Barbuda became independent in 1981.
 - 3 Mission Statement of Caricom taken from www.caricom.org.