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This book explores the lives of socially, politically, economically, and *archivally* marginalized Indian “coolie” women who migrated from British India, particularly south India, to British Malaya during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to labor on Malaya’s rubber plantations, especially in the Federated Malay States (FMS). The conventional historical narrative of South Asian labor migration under the British Empire emphasizes the experiences of coolie men and their instrumental role in the success of plantation colonies. This study, in contrast, traces coolie women’s experiences and their crucial contributions to the plantation colony in British Malaya. *Fleeting Agencies* goes beyond the add-and-stir approach, however. It does not merely append the history of coolie women to existing labor migration histories. Rather, in exploring the gendered everyday experiences of coolie women in spaces of work and home and in their social, political, and intimate relations, the book exposes how gender was used in shaping colonial policies regarding migration, labor production, and reproduction, and also reveals the gendered spaces and strategies of nationalist movements. It explores the relationships and experiences of coolie women across plantation societies. In so doing, it also shows how coolie women capitalized on gendered understandings of labor, morality, and patriotism to carve out channels within which they could negotiate for their own interests.

As might be expected, plantation societies, colonial politics, and nationalist movements were all designed and conceptualized largely by men in positions of authority, and consequently often favored men’s roles and voices over those of women, especially women laborers. *Fleeting Agencies* shows how colonial administrators, planters, managerial staff on estates, and Indian nationalists all deployed racialized and stereotyped images of South Asian coolie women in

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support of their own political agendas and the complex ways in which women responded to such stereotypes. As the chapters in this book show, women laborers actively engaged with, adapted, negotiated, rejected, and sometimes indirectly influenced stereotypes produced in these male-dominated spaces and institutions, and used them to form relations and find channels to make their voices heard in a world divided by political interests, to ensure their ability to make choices, and at times to ensure their daily survival. *Fleeting Agencies* is the first study to interrogate how coolie women in Malaya experienced and responded to colonial and nationalist efforts to categorize and control their identities. This book, therefore, provides important correctives to male-centered histories of colonial labor, of transnational labor migrations, and of transnational nationalist movements, which often hide the nuanced and textured sociopolitical and economic realities of colonial politics and plantation societies. It recognizes that gender was crucial and was embedded in social relations, economic institutions, and political interactions in the larger context of colonial plantation societies. *Fleeting Agencies*, thus, presents a case for centering the everyday experiences of migrant women laborers in national, transnational, migration, and colonial histories, consistently placing their everyday lives within the contexts of events in colonial politics, market economics, transnational nationalist movements, and world war.

The central argument of *Fleeting Agencies* is that coolie women played crucial roles in the rubber plantations of Malaya as producers and reproducers of labor, and that despite being exploited, oppressed, and used by more powerful actors, including colonial planters and administrators, middle-class Indian nationalists, and their own husbands or sexual partners, they did not consent to be passive victims but exercised agency in navigating the complex dilemmas of plantation life in protean ways ranging from strategic compliance to armed resistance. In so doing, coolie women in Malaya played diverse and vital roles in local and transnational histories: roles which have not, to date, been fully explored by historians.

Fleeting Agencies, thus, catechizes colonialism, Indian nationalism, and, most importantly, the concepts of *agency* from a subaltern perspective and places labor, migration, and gender at the center of history.¹ Drawing on archival records and oral history interviews, *Fleeting Agencies* explores the ways in which coolie women articulated moments of agency and acts of

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survivance within extended periods of exploitation and subjugation.² It highlights the artistry and creativity of coolie women in negotiating with various hierarchies and power structures, unveiling the ways they actively engaged with the contexts they found themselves in and deployed different modes of agency that they understood to be appropriate to particular situations. Coolie women's determined efforts to carve out better spaces and roles for themselves in realms ranging from employment to marriage suggest a conscious awareness of the complex power dynamics in which they lived and a degree of strategic thought and action that has been largely overlooked in previous accounts of colonial plantation societies.

In its efforts to re-evaluate established understandings of the term “agency,” this study—through an exploration of coolie women's engagement with patriarchy, colonialism, and colonial migration policies, estate economies, and social arrangements—unravels the complex ways in which individual decision-making was related to constraints of gender, class, race, and temporality in everyday history. The work shows how coolie women negotiated these hierarchical social structures both in times of comparative stability and in times of upheaval and chaos. It offers a fresh perspective on agency by identifying and critically examining how temporally fleeting discourses and actions emerge within the extended contexts of colonialism, nationalism, patriarchy, and war. In so doing, the book develops an innovative theoretical framework, *situational agency*, to explore and understand the ways migrant women negotiated the complex textures of temporality, gender, race, class, and migration. So, whilst the issues raised in this book are rooted within the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, they have contemporary social and political relevance. *Fleeting Agencies* is, above all, about those working-class women whose agency and importance are yet to be acknowledged in the pages of history.

Through this book, I weave together a wide range of snapshots of different phases in coolie women's lives to tell a history of their everyday work, and their social, intimate, and political lives within colonial estate societies.³ To this end, the work not only investigates coolie women's engagements with their immediate environment of estate society, but also travels deeper to explore their engagements with British colonialism, Indian nationalism, and Japanese occupation during World War II. To achieve this, the book uses archival fragments documenting coolie women's “marginal” lives to explore the

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significance of a wide range of interactions between coolie women and other individuals, spaces, and infrastructure. In the process, the book throws light on a kaleidoscopic range of everyday relations between coolie women and coolie men, colonial administrators, planters, estate managers, and Indian nationalist leaders.

Focusing on the implicit and fleeting moments of agency exhibited by coolie women, this study delineates a route toward understanding the roles, experiences, and struggles of colonial labor migrants, and thereby provides an *entrée* into larger questions: How did subaltern subjects navigate colonial policies of labor and migration? How did coolie women perceive their roles in plantation societies, and how did they use those perceptions to negotiate for what they desired? To what extent did migration transform social and intimate relations of labor migrants? How did migrant laborers respond to colonial and nationalist constructions of the “coolie imaginary”? How did colonial and nationalist intrusions into the everyday lives of migrants shape their experiences, perceptions, and strategies, and how did migrant laborers contribute to the making and unmaking of colonial and nationalist agendas in the realm of colonial politics? In other words, how did migrant laborers engage with colonial understandings of morality, domesticity, and victimhood in a distant colony away from their homeland, and how did they perceive and engage with the Indian nationalist agenda of patriotism and “national” solidarity?

In exploring these questions, this study decenters colonial and nationalist discourses about migrant labor in colonial plantation societies by showing how gendered behaviors of migrant laborers, their workspace interactions, and everyday life choices have, at times, facilitated or frustrated both colonial and nationalist agendas.

Given the conflicting political interests of colonial and nationalist actors, ideas produced about coolie women were neither uniform nor simple. Yet, if there was one common theme in colonial and nationalist attitudes toward coolie women, it was that they were useful pawns to be categorized, stereotyped, and deployed in the realm of colonial power politics. This work shows, however, that coolie women were anything but passive subjects. Slicing open various insidious stereotypes and categories into which coolie women have often been homogeneously packed, *Fleeting Agencies* analyzes the politics behind the construction of such categories, the ways coolie women made

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sense of such identities, and, in different contexts, appropriated, strategically deployed, or rejected them. Investigating and analyzing gendered stereotypes of “coolie women” and coolie communities, this book raises important questions concerning the construction of stereotypical categories, suggesting that real identities may be far more transient than these categories imply. This book, thus, emphasizes that a single dominant narrative cannot effectively represent the history of Indian labor migration in Southeast Asia. Instead, it shows that under the most accessible but often deceptive layers of history, which are easily available in the archives maintained by the dominant forces in a society, may be found far more complex and tangled stories. It is the responsibility of historians to engage with such diverse entanglements and seek to draw them into the light, rather than simply accept the dominant narrative that emerges from a surface-reading of the archives. That is what this study seeks to do.

Reconceiving the images of coolie women presented by the dominant narratives has important implications for understanding gender, labor, migration, nation, and community, not only in colonial Malaya and India but across the British Empire. Such a re-historicization allows us to foreground the significance of gender in interlinking various regional and transnational histories during the colonial past. On another level, exploring colonial history through coolie women’s lives illuminates how gender and migration became an important ground of debate in colonial and postcolonial imaginations. The subjugation of coolie women and silencing of their stories did not necessarily end with the demise of colonial rule in Malaya.

This chapter begins with a discussion of the term “coolie.” Thereafter, it situates its subject, coolie women, within larger frameworks of gender, migration, and colonial history and discusses how histories of migrant groups such as coolie women offer us lenses to (re)vision, reinterpret, and connect various regional histories, particularly those of South and Southeast Asia within colonial contexts. Next, it introduces the concept of *situational agency*, which forms the connecting tissue through which the following chapters in this book remain linked. It then moves to discuss the challenges and rewards of archival research, particularly concerning subaltern subjects whose “voice” may be hard to discern in the archives. Herein, the chapter discusses the rich variety of materials upon which this research has drawn, from over ten archives in India, Malaysia, Singapore, the United Kingdom, and the United

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States of America. In the process, it also considers the challenges of curating archival records in migration history and shows how silences in the archives can be placed in a productive dialogue with presences to evoke more nuanced readings, enabling analysis of less-explored themes of colonial and subaltern histories. Finally, an outline of the following chapters is presented.

NOTES ON THE TERM “COOLIE”

The social stereotypes, prejudices, and presumptions surrounding the term “coolie” give me additional themes and textures to work with. “Coolie” does not have any given meaning attached to it; rather it is the economic, political, social, and racial concerns that influenced the evolution of derogatory ideas about “coolies” which have conditioned our understanding and perception of those to whom the term was applied. Hence, before proceeding further it is necessary to (re)visit and reexamine the concept of a “coolie,” which, left unexamined, may limit our understandings concerning laboring women in colonial history.

There are various claims regarding the origins of the term “coolie.” The most commonly heard, at least in Malayan history, is that it derives from the Tamil word *kuliab*, which refers to a person of low caste who performs menial and hard physical labor. Most rubber-estate coolies in colonial Malaya were Tamils, and in this study, whenever the term “coolie” is mentioned, it refers to Indian Tamil coolies, both men and women, unless otherwise indicated. I use the term “coolie” consciously but in a non-derogatory manner to refer to the professional category that is the subject of this book. I understand that using the term “coolie” as a professional category, as archival records suggest, is contentious since the term in the present day carries a heavy derogatory baggage. But the chapters in this study unpack some of the prejudices attached to the term, showing how such conceptions resulted from social constructs used both in the past and the present to (re)inscribe power, racial, and class hierarchies. Using the term “coolie” to describe the professional category, *Fleeting Agencies* thus suggests a (re)visioning of the term and a restoration of the term to working-class people, some of whom still identify with it.

Nineteenth- and twentieth-century colonial administrative records, including registers of migration and employment, use the term “coolie” to

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refer to Asian laborers, Indians, Chinese, and Javanese alike, engaged in any form of manual labor—whether on rubber estates, public-works departments, railways, or mines. With regard to Indian migrant laborers, the term “coolie”, used as a professional category, was widespread within the British Empire and beyond: plantations in India, Fiji, Trinidad, Guiana, Suriname, Mauritius, the Maldives, and other European colonies had much earlier set the trend of referring to Indian migrant laborers, particularly on plantations, as “coolies.”

In my interviews with Indian ex-coolies and descendants of Indian coolies in present-day Malaysia, I came to understand that the surviving coolie women and men often distanced themselves from the term as a result of contemporary connotations of racial and class identity in which they did not wish to invest. Nonetheless, a few individuals continue to identify as former “coolies” or descendants of “coolies.” For them, the term had nostalgic connotations, and they took some pride in the fact that they or their ancestors were part of the “coolie army” that built modern Malaysia.⁴

Pushpa, daughter of a coolie couple who migrated to Malaya in the 1920s, and Pachaimmal, daughter of a coolie couple and a coolie herself in Malaya, referred to themselves as descendants of coolies or ex-coolies.⁵ When asked whether the term “coolie” offended them, both explained that the term itself did not necessarily mean anything negative to them, but when the term is used to disrespect their profession or the community to which they belonged, it becomes offensive. During the conversations, they claimed that they were proud of their coolie connection and for them the term “coolie” meant hardworking laborers who were self-made men and women. Pushpa and Pachaimmal may be exceptional today in their appropriation of their coolie connection. In most of my personal interactions with second- and third-generation Indians in Malaysia, whose parents had immigrated to Malaya as coolies, they referred to their parents as “rubber-estate workers” and seemed to consciously avoid using the term “coolie.”⁶ Nonetheless, the qualified appropriation of the term by Pushpa and Pachaimmal unveils complex connotations of racial, class, caste, and gender histories.

Both present-day consciousness and pride in coolie connections and class identity by some and efforts to ignore and distance themselves from coolie histories and identities by others serve as a reminder of a related class consciousness that was used by Indian nationalists for whom the cause of overseas Indian coolies was a significant issue. The plight of coolies served as

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a clarion call for the masses to raise their voices against the British Empire. Gopal Krishna Gokhale of the Indian National Congress, for instance, who was a member of the Bombay Legislative Council, while requesting the Council to abolish the indenturing of Indians to other British plantation colonies, on 4 March 1912 argued:

It is degrading to the people of India from a national point of view... Wherever this system exists, the Indians are known only as *coolies* [emphasis mine], no matter what their position may be. Now, Sir, there are disabilities enough in all conscience attaching to our position in this country. And I ask, why must this additional brand be put upon our brow before the rest of the civilized world? I am sure, if only the Government will exercise a little imagination and realize our feeling in the matter, it will see the necessity of abolishing the system as soon as possible.⁷

Elite and upper-middle-class Indian nationalists like Gokhale used the oppression of coolies as a bargaining tool with the colonial government, but they simultaneously made efforts to other the coolie population to ensure that *all* overseas Indians were not identified as “coolies” by other ethnicities in the overseas colonies. The politics of othering coolies was, thus, prevalent in colonial politics on the grounds of race, caste, and class. The efforts of present-day Malaysian-Indians to distance their identity from the coolie community or even to erase their own “coolie” past, thus, continues long-established trends of othering. Even though many ex-coolies and their descendants reject the term “coolie,” the term is loaded with historical significance beginning from the immigration policies and records of British Malaya, to the lives of migrant men and women as recorded in colonial discourses as well as in nationalist discourses in India and Malaya. As Gaiutra Bahadur, in her recent ethnohistorical book focusing on a coolie woman of Guyana, convincingly asserts, the term “coolie” carries “burdens of history.”⁸

Along with class, race, and caste connotations, the term “coolie” has also reflected a gendered labeling and understanding of labor migration history. To date, the term “coolie” remains a code word for male plantation laborers, although plantations constantly depended on considerable numbers of coolie women for production of various resources from the plantations. By the

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1930s, immigrant Indian women formed 30 to 40 percent of the total coolie force on European rubber estates in Malaya, but their active engagement in the socioeconomic and political life of the estates has been occluded and sometimes misrepresented in labor studies, and in Indian as well as Malaysian history.⁹ Using the term “coolie” to include both women and men, this study democratizes its scope on the grounds of gender.

Using the term “coolie,” in a non-derogatory way, to acknowledge the contributions of individuals, particularly women, who made the rubber empire of Malaya, *Fleeting Agencies* thus seeks to respect and celebrate the rich history of migrant laborers in the country.

SITUATING THE HISTORY OF COOLIE WOMEN

In narrating what I perceive as only a part of the untold, unexplored many-hued histories of coolie women’s lives, *Fleeting Agencies* has engaged with two significant turns in history—the *gender turn* and the more recent *transnational migration turn*. At its heart, transnational labor migration histories have focused mostly on men’s stories. An overwhelming number of migration histories have deployed Eric Hobsbawm’s idea of “men moving,”¹⁰ and have gone into extreme depths of archives to find histories of migrant men laboring in different regions in the colonial past.¹¹ But such rigor, while not entirely absent, has been much less common when it comes to exploring histories of women labor migrants.¹² More disturbing than mere neglect is that while some of us have pushed for recognition of coolie women’s histories, other parallel studies of coolie migration have recycled the fallacies of earlier scholarship, failing to engage meaningfully with gendered issues or coolie women’s histories.¹³ Undeniably, coolie women’s histories are much more difficult to find in the archives, and the trend of ignoring the gender politics and gender relations of coolie histories may suggest a degree of fear, disinterest, or even aversion by historians, particularly labor-migration historians, to addressing the silences, gaps, and absences in the archives.

Neglect of women in labor migration histories has not only silenced women’s stories, but has also partially, perhaps almost completely, occluded the histories of gender relations and the key role of gender as a tool in colonial negotiations

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and debates, much of which remains visible in present-day patterns of labor migration.¹⁴ Several excellent scholarly works have highlighted the importance of women's labor in colonial plantation societies. G. Roger Knight has shown how crucial women's labor was to colonial capitalism. Knight, through his study of sugar plantations in colonial Indonesia, reveals that the policy of increasing the numbers of women plantation workers on sugar estates from the 1880s, to the point that they eventually comprised half the labor force, was a well-thought-out gendered labor policy to ensure that planters could employ more laboring hands for less cost, as women's labor was markedly cheaper than men's.¹⁵ The increased labor force ensured elaborate but cheap routines of weeding and fertilization of young sugar plants, which, in turn, ensured increased quality and quantity of production and hence profit for the Dutch estate companies. Similarly, a recent and important study by Elise van Nederveen has shown the crucial role of women estate workers in the global colonial economy—both at the metropole and in the colonies.¹⁶ Scholarship by Rhoda Rheddock and Sobita Jain has shown how crucial migrant women's labor was to colonial plantation economies across the world—in Fiji, Jamaica, Mauritius, Sri Lanka, Cameroon, and Trinidad. By placing women workers center stage, they highlight how, in most colonial plantations around the world, plantation labor remained one of the lowest-paid occupational categories, invariably including large numbers of women. They show how such gendered labor arrangements influenced women's control of familial resources, patterns of authority in domestic spaces, forms of marriage, and the ability of women to negotiate their positions in plantation systems.¹⁷ Following the path initiated by these scholars, *Fleeting Agencies* not only considers the crucial importance of coolie women to the rubber plantations and the colonial economy in Malaya, but also shows how coolie women shaped colonial and nationalistic imaginings of migrant labor in plantation societies. Some coolie women, for instance, embraced colonial stereotypical categorizations to gain sympathy from planters, judges, and even coolie society while performing “immorality,” while others revolted against stereotypical identities to claim labor rights as estate workers. Yet others participated in anti-colonial movements, not necessarily on patriotic grounds propagated by nationalist leaders, but to ensure survival and protection in a context of chaos and uncertainty. Studying the multidimensional everyday histories of migrant Indian coolie women in British Malaya and the four