



# From Indenture to Precarity: Coolitude and Marxist Readings of Indian Diasporic Fiction

<sup>1</sup>Ms. P. Subasri & <sup>2</sup>Dr. R. Shobia

<sup>1</sup>Research Scholar, Department of English, School of Engineering and Technology  
Dhanalakshmi Srinivasan University, Tiruchirappali

<sup>2</sup>Associate Professor and Head, Department of English

School of Engineering and Technology, Dhanalakshmi Srinivasan University, Tiruchirappali



Open Access

Manuscript ID:

BIJ-SPL3-Mar26-ES-063

Subject: English Studies

Received: 22.12.2025

Accepted: 09.01.2026

Published: 17.03.2026

DOI: 10.64938/bij.v10si4.26.Mar063

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## Abstract

Indian diasporic literature frequently focuses on migration caused by economic hardship and labor exploitation. The paper examines the Indian diasporic novels Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* (2008) and Sunjeev Sahota's *The Year of the Runaways* (2015) through the combined perspectives of Coolitude and Marxist theory. Although these novels are set in different historical periods, both depict how Indian migrant workers are controlled and exploited by capitalist systems. Coolitude, a concept developed by Khal Torabully, helps recover the shared identity, memory, and cultural strength of migrant laborers, while Marxist theory explains how capitalism turns labor into a commodity. The paper argues that Indian diasporic literature shows a strong continuity from colonial indenture to contemporary migrant precarity, revealing that systems of exploitation continue even though their forms have changed.

**Keywords:** indian diaspora, coolitude, marxism, indenture, migrants.

## Introduction

Indian diasporic literature is closely linked with stories of migration, labor, and displacement. Large-scale Indian migration did not happen by chance. It was shaped by colonial rule, poverty, caste oppression, and lack of employment opportunities. Many Indians were forced to leave their homeland because survival itself had become complex. Literary texts that focus on diaspora often show that migration is not simply a journey toward a better life

but a result of powerful economic forces that depend on cheap labor (Clifford 307).

Two critical theoretical approaches help in understanding these experiences: Coolitude and Marxist criticism. Coolitude, proposed by Khal Torabully, is a theory that challenges the colonial image of the indentured laborer as a weaker section or voiceless. Instead, it presents migrants as individuals who carry their memories, culture, and resilience with them despite displacement (Torabully 12). Marxist criticism, on the other hand, explains



how capitalism creates inequality by exploiting labor and treating workers as replaceable resources (Marx 71).

By comparing *Sea of Poppies* and *The Year of the Runaways*, the paper argues that Indian migrants continue to face exploitation in both colonial and modern contexts. Although the systems controlling migration have changed, the suffering of migrant workers remains. The paper also shows that coolitude is not limited to the past but continues to help explain migrant experiences in the present.

### **Coolitude and Marxism**

Coolitude is a concept developed to provide voice and dignity to Indian indentured laborers who were migrated to colonies across the Indian Ocean. During the colonial period, the word “coolie” was used in a belittling way to reduce workers to just a laboring body. Coolitude reclaims this identity and presents it as shared suffering, cultural memory, and survival (Torabully 15). It highlights how migrant workers create new identities through community, language, and cultural mixing.

Marxist theory helps to explain the economic reasons behind migration and exploitation. Karl Marx argues that labor becomes a commodity under capitalism, which means workers are valued only for their productivity and not valued as human beings (Marx 72). Which leads to alienation, where workers feel disconnected from their work, society, and even their own selves. These Migrant workers are especially vulnerable because they often lack legal rights and social security.

The combined lens of Marxism and Coolitude, these theories provide a complete understanding of Diasporic literature. Marxism explains the material conditions that force the people to migrate, while coolitude explains how migrants emotionally and culturally respond to displacement. Together, they show that diaspora is both an economic and cultural experience.

### **Colonial Indenture and Labor Exploitation in *Sea of Poppies***

The novel *Sea of Poppies* is set in the nineteenth century during British colonial rule in India. The novel focuses on the indenture system, which sent Indian laborers to plantations in distant colonies. Although indenture was officially presented as legal and voluntary work, the novel clearly shows that it functioned as forced labor controlled by colonial capitalism (Ghosh 118).

The opium trade plays a central role in the novel. Indian farmers are compelled to grow opium for the British Colony's profit, which leads to poverty and social collapse for Indians. Characters such as Deeti and Kalua are pushed into the indenture system because they have no other chances of survival. From the Marxist perspective, their labor is treated as a commodity, valued only for their physical output. Neel's fall from privilege further shows that capitalism does not protect anyone in the labor system once the labor loses their economic value (Marx 80).

Coolitude developed aboard the ship *Ibis*, which carries the indentured laborers across the sea. On the ship, traditional caste and social divisions begin to weaken and become meaningless. Migrants share food, pain, fear, and hope in the same way. Slowly, a new collective identity forms based on shared experience rather than social rank. The sea becomes a symbol of loss, but also symbolises the transformation. Through this journey, Ghosh shows how coolitude grows out of suffering and shared labor, turning displacement into a source of cultural strength.

### **Contemporary Migration and Precarity in *The Year of the Runaways***

*The Year of the Runaways* focuses on Indian migrants living in modern Britain. Unlike the indentured laborers in *Sea of Poppies*, these migrant characters choose migration in search of better opportunities. The characters' lives in shared, small, poorly maintained houses. And they sleep in shifts because of limited space and money scarcity. The migrants were exploited by their illegal status and



charged high rent for poor housing. These conditions reflect migrants' lack of power and fear of exposure. The migrant Employers paid below minimum wage. In this novel, Sahota exposes the hidden suffrage behind Britain's economic success, showing that migrants are essential to society but, treated as illegal, replaceable, and voiceless.

However, *The Year of the Runaways* shows that this choice reflects David Harvey's idea that neo-liberal capitalism depends on flexible and disposable workers shaped by economic pressure and limited options. Once in Britain, migrants face the issues of long working hours, low wages, unsafe conditions, and constant fear of deportation (Sahota 94).

From a Marxist viewpoint, the novel highlights how modern capitalism depends on migrant labor while denying migrants security and dignity. Employers take advantage of migrants' illegal status and easily replace them. Which reflects David Harvey's idea that neo-liberal capitalism always depends on flexible and disposable workers. Migrants become invisible contributors as a commodity to the economy.

Coolitude exists in this novel in a weaker form. Migrants share similar struggles, but strong unity is complex because fear, competition, and isolation keep them apart. Still, moments of shared suffering suggest that the memory of indenture-like exploitation has not disappeared. Coolitude survives as a fragile awareness rather than a strong collective movement.

### **From Indenture to Precarity**

When *Sea of Poppies* and *The Year of the Runaways* are compared, apparent similarities and differences are there. *Sea of Poppies* shows colonial exploitation through physical force, contracts, and ocean journeys. *The Year of the Runaways* shows exploitation through laws, debt, and economic pressure. Although indenture contracts no longer exist, informal labor systems continue to control migrant workers.

In both novels, migrants are treated as replaceable labor in unsafe conditions. Capitalism may vary depends on their work but refuses to offer

protection and dignity. Throughout history, the concept of Coolitude has changed across time from a strong collective identity in the past to a broken but continuing consciousness in the modern era. And this comparison shows that exploitation has not come to an end. It has only taken new forms under modern capitalism.

### **Conclusion**

Indian Diasporic literature reveals a serious and continuing real-time problem. Migrant laborers remain trapped in systems of exploitation even though historical conditions have changed. From colonial indenture in *Sea of Poppies* to modern migrant precarity in *The Year of the Runaways*, the Indian migrants are repeatedly treated as cheap and replaceable labor under capitalism. The problem is not only migration, but the economic structures that profit from displacement while denying the migrants basic needs, dignity, security, and collective power. The paper has shown that capitalism adapts its methods from visible coercion and indenture contracts to invisible control through laws, debt, and fear while preserving the same logic of exploitation which is never ends. As a result, migrant suffering becomes normalized and hidden within global economic systems. Contemporary migrants appear "free," but their labor conditions closely resemble those of indentured workers. The solution lies in re-reading Indian Diasporic literature through the combined frameworks of Coolitude and Marxist criticism. The Theory of Marxism exposes the material structures that create and sustain exploitation, while Coolitude theory restores the cultural memory and solidarity. Indian Diasporic fiction, therefore, must be read not only as stories of movement and identity but as critical texts that call for ethical responsibility, collective resistance, and structural change. Recognizing Coolitude as a living and evolving consciousness offers a way to resist the erasure of migrant suffering and to imagine more just forms of belonging within a global capitalist world.



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