Cause for “Celebration” or “Commemoration” 150 Years on? Portrayals of Indenture in Recent South African Writing

By Lindy Stiebel (Journal of Literary Studies)

In 2010, the 150th anniversary of the arrival of the first indentured labourers from India brought across the Indian Ocean – the kala pani – on the SS Truro in 1860, was marked in a variety of ways by the descendants of those original pioneers. One of the many letters to the press during last year asked whether cultural organisations should be “celebrating” or “commemorating” this anniversary given the harsh conditions under which indentured labour was carried out. This article picks up on this point – to “celebrate” or “commemorate”? – by seeking to assess how the topic of indenture is handled in the local press and also in fictional works of selected contemporary South African writers of Indian descent; for example, Neelan Govender's Girmit Tales (2008), Rubendra Govender's Sugar Cane Boy (2008), Aziz Hassim's Revenge of Kali (2009) among others. These titles are all recent additions to what could be called a South African plantation literature which is flourishing at present in local writing circles, given perhaps the 150th anniversary mentioned above, but also given a coming of age for South African Indian fiction post apartheid.

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