



The Counting House

DAVID DABYDEEN

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Also by David Dabydeen

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**For Janet Jagan, her son Cheddi Jr ('Joey')
and Anna Rutherford**

the King was in the counting house
counting out his money
the Queen was in the parlour
eating bread and honey
the maid was in the garden
hanging out the clothes
when down came a blackbird
and pecked off her nose

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PROLOGUE

'When I enquired of them the nature of their grievances, a hundred Negro and Indian voices arose, vying against each other to tell a story, like crabs in a sack seeking escape by clambering over each other. I called upon them to speak in turn, assuring them that I would give each story equal weight and benign consideration, but my words fell on deaf ears. I mounted my horse and departed, leaving the loudest to bully the rest into silence.'

Mr Fielding

'No account of coolie experience can ever be complete for they are the scraps of history.'

Mr Gladstone

African slaves were freed in the West Indies in 1838, and between then and 1917 the British shipped half-a-million Indians ('coolies') to the region as replacement labour. Specially appointed native recruiters lured peasants to the West Indian plantations by promises of quick wealth and fertile land. The Indian Mutiny of 1857 also led to mass migration.

In the ruined counting house of Plantation Albion, British Guiana, three small parcels of materials survive as the only evidence of the nineteenth-century Indian presence. The first two parcels consist mostly of lists of Indian names, accounts of the wages paid to them, and scraps of letters. The contents of the third parcel are a cow-skin purse, a child's tooth, an ivory button, a drawing of the Hindu God, Rama, haloed by seven stars, a set of iron needles, some kumari seeds, and an empty tin marked 'Huntley's Dominion Biscuits', its cover depicting a scene of the Battle of Waterloo.

PART I

ROHINI

Rohini swept and re-swept the hut, rinsed and dried their two plates and cups, then searched around for more work. She reached for the cutlass and began to chop the firewood into even smaller pieces. She wanted to rest but her hands fretted, like Vidia fretting over his money, wanting more, wanting a sack stuffed with coins, or a belly stuffed with child. For the moment he saved his money in glass jars buried under a calabash tree. They were perfectly safe there. He took his chances with the spirits which lived in the branches, no longer bothering to leave a spoonful of sugar or a lily-leaf of fresh cow's milk at the base of the tree as an offering to ward off their malice. The living, thieving coolies were more dangerous than they. The jars were originally clear, but he painted them black as if to keep even the worms from gazing upon his money and turning it into stone. At the end of each week he went out into the darkness, dug them up, and brought them back to the hut. He would wait for hours for the clouds to discourage the moon, and no coolie was in sight, before returning the jars. She watched him come and go, pitying his habit. When he laid out the coins she felt a sudden compassion for the smallness of his fortune, the meagre piles of copper which rose a mere few inches from the surface of the table. At the same time she hated his ambitiousness, the foolishness of it. She remembered when they first saw the city of Calcutta, his eyes straining with greed for the bigness of the buildings, as if he wanted all of them to belong to him. They had walked for sixteen days from their village in Kandeera, dozens of them heading to the depot to be registered as emigrants to Guiana. Each village on the way looked like their own: a group of mudhuts set down in baked or waterlogged earth, each as paltry as his pile of coins. Goats wandered through the litter of excrement, rags, balls of straw, eating everything, even sniffing at the children put out to play in the dirt. Rohini was born

in such circumstances, and her mother and grandmother before her. Her inheritance was secure until the day the recruiter came and filled her head with fable.

‘Guiana is the very land of Ramayana. Ramayana set in long-time-ago place, and the whitepeople them now plough it, and they call it Guiana. And it have so much gold there that you don’t have enough hand and neck and foot to wear bangle. You wish you had ten hands like Lord Shiva, and even then you run out of skin.’

‘That is one stupidness you talking. If Guiana so rich, why you not go there yourself?’ the village-elder asked.

‘You never hear of Mukti?’ the recruiter retorted, playing on their ignorance. ‘Only backward people don’t know that Lord Rama call on some of us to serve and sacrifice. We call Mukti because we give up good fortune in this life to live worse than chamar. It is nothing but blessing we want, to bathe in the shadow of Lord Rama.’ And he turned his eyes upwards, touched his forehead and made other elaborate gestures of obeisance.

This is how Rohini remembered him, doing his duty to God. She wanted so much to believe but the elder took up a stick and chased him. ‘Gwan, gwan, gwan swine-keeper, else I break your neck!’ And the recruiter picked up his sack in a weary motion, like one doomed to the rejection of infidels. Before leaving, though, he went up to the elder with meek demeanour, bowed extravagantly, and touched his feet. But this final appeal was wasted, the elder stretching out his hand to dismiss him.

A few days later, when the elder was away on a goodwill visit to the next village, the recruiter appeared mysteriously. ‘All of you come, come, all of you,’ he called, beckoning people to him. He blew a cow-horn slung from his waist to alert the men working in the fields. ‘In this sack here,’ he said, ‘is magic. Ramayana. Guiana. White magic. You ever hear thunderclap? Well, whitepeople capture the thunder in the whole sky and put it in one piece of iron. Look!’ And he reached into his sack and withdrew a pistol. It was the first time any of them had seen one. He held it up high above his head for people to marvel at, but it looked so meek that some women began to giggle. ‘Girl!’ He pointed at Rohini. She hid behind her mother but he kept his eyes

on her. 'You there! Is it you I hear laugh? God let go one curse on you for laughing. You want God blight your belly so you don't born child?'

'Shut your mouth, you mad-rass man,' her mother screamed, hugging the child protectively to her. And suddenly the man pointed the thing to the peepul tree in the middle of the village and fired. Birds scattered. People scattered. Rohini fell and somebody stepped on her mouth and broke off a tooth. She started to bleed. A hen scrambled in the mud beside her. All she could see was a spout where its head was shot clean off. It hopped sideways and shuddered and flapped and kicked and the whole place was quiet; everyone was hiding in hut or in ditch staring at the hen pouring out bile. She lay there calling out to her mother but no word came, and the man was walking towards her with his sack opened, as if he wanted to kidnap her, and when he reached her, he took out two ripe mangoes and pieces of panap and gave them to her to eat. 'Take. Take. No frighten. It is only gun.' And he forced the fruit and sweets in her lap whilst she shuddered and flapped and kicked and the whole place was still quiet. She was bleeding as he stood over her. She could see his eye looking at her nipple. 'Who this child belong to?' he asked in a soft voice, looking around the empty village as if he wanted to offer money for her. She hated this man. Nasty money-minded bitch! Her Pa was dead, otherwise he would come out and bap! and cuff recruiter in the face and break off both hands that now reached out to pick her up and pat her. Her tooth was broken but she would bite him yet if he touched her bubby. She hated this man. She hated all of them, except Vidia who, even when she didn't ask, hurried to pick water-coconut when she thirsted and ripe running papaya to quench her mouth.

When Rohini turned seventeen, her mother, Finee, married her to Vidia. The pandit intoned the usual story of Seta's banishment and her eventual reconciliation with Lord Rama, skipping over details so as to finish early and get to the food. Iron pots bubbling with potato curry and dhal, wooden trays bearing water-melons, mangoes and jilips... most of Finee's life-savings squandered in a day. She would die, though, knowing that she had fulfilled her duty in successfully marrying off her only girl-child, as her own mother had once done for her. But Jagnat, her husband, had been a different boy from this Vidia. He was scarred everywhere, thick lines dividing his skin in patchwork fashion. The villagers said that God had started on him in too much of a hurry to bother with perfection. God had joined this piece, that piece, anything left over from other people's making. The needle sewed crudely so all the borders showed. But for all Jagnat's ugliness she had done well by him. True, God hadn't put sufficient cord in his back so it was permanently slack. As to his nose, the bone was too small to support all that flesh, so it drooped like the comb of a hen. She cried when her mother first suggested she should marry him, but the dowry was reduced according to his physical damage, so it was a good match for her family. Instead of a cow, four ducks and several brass pots, his family was offered a few hens too old to lay and some rupees to salvage their pride.

Jagnat had been a grateful husband, working without complaint in the fields, never beating her, and making shy, ineffectual advances in bed. He fumbled in the dark, and from a respectable distance. He would not allow their upper bodies to meet and they never kissed in case she sucked the flesh of his nose by accident. Nor could she fondle him under his vest lest her hands discovered the misshapen contours of his body. After the birth of Rohini he gave up sleeping with her altogether, his duty fulfilled. He died