

Drawing inspiration even at this late date from Frantz Fanon and invoking in its closing lines “contemporary intersectional movements for collective liberation, transformative justice, and self-determination” (p. 154), *Monetary Authorities* works best as polemic, rather than as contribution to the historiography of the Philippines, modern Southeast Asia, decolonization or capitalism. Nevertheless, in chronicling debates on several economic dimensions of the Philippines’ experience of the disorienting and capricious forces of late-Spanish and then American imperialism, the book will stimulate readers to explore the materials on which it draws.

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NOTE

- * The Partido Komunista ng Pilipinas (PKP), founded in 1930, was the first of the Philippines’ communist parties; it is not to be confused with the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP), which splintered from the original party in 1968 and has waged an insurgency against the Manila government for the past half-century.

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Fleeting Agencies: A Social History of Indian Coolie Women in British Malaya. By Arunima Datta. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020. 254 pp.

This book provides a needed corrective to the historical studies on Tamils in colonial Malaya; and one that has theoretical importance, as well, in thinking about continuities in the predicaments of Malaysian Tamils in contemporary times. Arunima Datta has produced a well-written and meticulously researched study focused on the first few decades of the twentieth century, when the bulk of immigration from South India to Malaya for plantation work occurred. Little work, however, had been focused on female labourers and their social

predicaments within the estate sector. This work not only fills that gap in the literature but also corrects many of the assumptions made about Tamil women working in Malaya's burgeoning plantation economy then. There is much value in this work in correcting the dominant image of plantation labourers as "docile", "passive" and, ultimately, bodies without agency, determined by material forces of production. Moreover, the critical role of labouring women in the plantation economy had yet to be told with such moving elegance and complexity until now. Datta uncovers the significant role of gendered discourses about labouring women, specifically relating to preserving their "virtue" within the plantation economy, colonial governance and law, and Indian nationalism. These discourses involved the critique of colonial labour policy in compromising the virtue of Indian women, and also of the later Indian National Army (INA) and Rani of Jhansi movement during the Second World War that had been romanticized by elite Indians enamoured of the charismatic leadership of Subhas Chandra Bose.

Needless to say, this is not an entirely uplifting story, as the history of gendered violence was reinforced by archival sources hitherto ignored by other historians. But the discourse of violence purportedly inflicted by the Tamil male upon women was also, as Datta convincingly shows, a way to obscure forms of structural violence that produced tenuous domestic spaces that in turn contributed to more gendered violence. In this, the nationalist and colonialist projects were oddly aligned in their moral panics about sexualized violence. Reform and morality within the domestic space became a shared obsession among Indian nationalists and colonial officials. Datta shows that even within the violent domestic space of the plantation, women had agency, albeit contingent, limited, or "situated" (p. 3), to use Datta's felicitous term.

By situated agency, a key concept in this work, Datta means that women had "conscious awareness of the complexity in which they lived" (p. 3). Through this concept, which is somewhat akin, perhaps, to the "hidden transcript" of James Scott (1992), or the subaltern agency of those who manoeuvre within the material constraints

of power relations, Datta humanizes her subjects, and in so doing provides dignity to women and their daily struggles within plantation life. Datta, however, has something more complex to argue: that is, even in acts of conscious agency, victimhood reemerges in subtle and/or overt ways. Women were agents and victims simultaneously; moreover, their agency could redouble their victimhood in some instances. Here we might think of Judith Butler's *Psychic Life of Power*, or any theory of subjectivity grounded in dialectical reasoning, be it in Freudian and/or Marxian legacies. Resistance and subjection are inextricably connected and hard to disentangle. Yet the evidence uncovered in this empirically rich study clearly shows anything but passive victimhood, although the limited gains enacted through the law and migration opportunities from India were hardly victories in and of themselves, given the appropriations of these acts of resistance by powerful forces, be they colonial or nationalist.

Datta demonstrates that incentives for immigration were varied, but illustrative of agency and conscious choice. But within the plantation system, we see how wage structures were organized to lower wages for women, which also allowed them to be cast as "dependents" rather than as individual labourers—something women contested, she reveals. Casting women as "supplemental" labour, or dependents, would also allow for retrenchment during rubber slumps. This disadvantage notwithstanding, women labourers were quite actively pursuing their rights as labourers, as shown by Datta's impressive reading of the archive.

The stereotypical image in colonial discourse of the Tamil working-class male as "violent" in domestic spaces is the critical counterpoint and, in many ways, the fulcrum to the corrective agency we see of the labouring female. This observation marks one of the most important insights of this book. It is the stereotypical image of the male, ironically enough, that does important theoretical work for many differentially situated agents. Sometimes women utilized this very racialized stereotype to focus on legal redress for truly harrowing domestic forms of violence. On the other hand, this race discourse was used, too, by colonial planters and their staff to shift

attention away from the “everyday” forms of violence that saturated exploitative and inhuman working conditions, cramped quarters and abusive treatment, oftentimes itself rapacious and rife with repeated sexual assaults by staff and management. But only the “legible” violence of the “coolie” man was made visible. As Datta argues, “the underlying structural violence creates the conditions that produced physical violence” (p. 101). This racialized image worked as the supplement, in Derrida’s sense, that allowed the colonial plantation economy to persist with such structural inequities, with the attendant nationalist critique of immorality, and the colonial failure to protect its subjects, and ironically reinforcing negative stereotypes of Tamil men to a degree. As Datta puts it, blaming the British for the “immorality” of Tamil males “invited Indians to save their culture and women through anti-colonial movements” (p. 121).

The Rani of Jhansi regiment, in the name of women’s “safety” and “patriotism”, illustrated, in Datta’s deft analysis, the situated agency of women, although it was recalled by elite Indians in nostalgic terms that lost some sight of the volunteers’ grassroots agency and strategy. This elite portrayal of the regiment simultaneously reinforced negative views of the Tamil male worker, views that still characterize the profiling of purported Indian criminality in contemporary Malaysia. We can then see a connection to the racialized discourses that have continually haunted Malaysia from colonial times until the present, with the figure of the working-class Tamil male continuing to bear the awful traces of these earlier discourses, now internalized by Malay, Chinese and elite Indian subjects. But these discourses are also critiqued and contested, not inevitably grafted upon “docile” subjects, despite the historical silencing of these voices. These contested discourses offer a powerful lesson, the Tamil women in this superb study reveal. In previous studies, primarily male voices of contestation were amplified, hence the important corrective that this work provides.

Contemporary works on Dalits and on Tamil *bhakti* and iconoclastic religiosity also reveal in song and ritual a kind of subjection within agency, or a subject divided within himself/herself, simultaneously transcending through spirit what the corporeal cages of material life

limit. This expressive realm within Tamil culture has been doing important theoretical and critical work for centuries, but the present book has not explored much of it. Perhaps Datta, one can hope, will next take us into the realm of critical religious discourse, in both its radical and conservative elements, to explore the sacralized landscapes of Malaysia in opposition to dominant nationalist narratives. The superb recent work of Teren Sevea (2020) comes to mind, although his focus was more on complicating our understanding of Islam in Malaya. My own modest efforts in this direction would have benefited from Datta's meticulous historical analysis. "Situated agency" contributes, therefore, to theories of the subject that avoid romanticism, vulgar instrumentalism or culturalism. But we might ask further what tips the scales into hardened categories of otherness and an ossifying of identities within modern statecraft—the fodder for populist, racializing and the contemporary vestiges of divide and rule that rather absurdly make racial and autochthonous claims against their contingent and colonial origins. That is a question for another day, and—I hope—another work from this important scholar.

In sum, Arunima Datta has authored a wonderful and necessary book. Happily, we have a new and critical historical voice in Malaysian studies, if not in postcolonial historiography more broadly. *Fleeting Agencies* is a must-read for Malaysianists and scholars of colonial power relations, ethnicity and gender studies.

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