

**Reterritorialising Literary Studies:  
Deconstructing the Scripts of Empire**

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**Abstract**

In this article, I demonstrate the ways in which archival material can be gainfully employed within literary studies. Focusing on the figure of the Indian coolie of colonial Malaya, I argue that adopting such an interdisciplinary paradigm is a necessary bridge to aid the quest for the story of the pioneer Indian immigrant experience for its trail stretches across two terrains of narrativisation, one historical, the other literary. As I seek out the texts that have constructed the base of the sign-system that has in many ways locked the subject in question within its confining structures, I also propose to read them against the grain, to dislodge their deeply embedded discursive pillars. In other words, I will proceed with what is primarily a deconstructive reading of the colonialist sign-systems of the coolie. The article thus demonstrates the reterritorialising of literary studies as it excavates the scripts of empire buried within the terrain of history through the mechanisms of literary deconstruction, thus re-reading history as literature.

Keywords : subaltern; deconstruction; interdisciplinary; colonialism; diaspora

**Introduction**

In her essay ‘Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography’ Spivak argues that the work of the Subaltern Studies Group is closely

aligned with the theory and method of deconstructive reading. What they attempt in their revisionist readings of Indian historiography, she asserts, is in actual effect engaging with 'a theory of change as the site of the displacement of function between sign systems ... a theory of reading in the strongest possible sense'. Their act of disrupting the established sign-systems of colonial historiography, of changing 'crime to insurgency, bondsman to worker, and so on' is the deconstruction of the discursive structures of the past (1996: 205-206). What we have here then is the application of a theoretical method that has mainly been a literary tool of criticism in the reading of historical texts by scholars from within the discipline of history. Noteworthy too is Spivak's argument that historical texts produced by governing officials of British India are part and parcel of the 'consolidation' of India's "nationalist" literature. As they contain important ideological constructs of the nation, this documentation, she asserts, is in form the 'construction of a fiction whose task was to produce a whole collection of "effects of the real"'. They contain evidences of the 'thematics of imperialism' that has infused the construction of 'India' and her people and consequently the 'reality of India' (1999: 203-205). Deconstructive reading can help in tracing and displacing these structures and though this method, historical documents can be used to offer another paradigm into literary studies.

The following discussion will consist of a reading of the story of the Indian coolie experience of colonial Malaya through primarily a deconstructive analysis of the colonialist sign-systems of the coolie found within the territory of the discipline of history. As I seek out the texts that have constructed the base of the sign-system that has in many ways locked the subject in question within its confining structures, I simultaneously read them against the grain. The latter is accomplished through interrogations of the tones and inflections of the imperial voices that articulated the Malayan Indian coolie experience and the intricacies of the entire system of reference that they subsequently put into play. There is a significant emphasis on the term 'play' here because, in many senses, the historical records, that document the subject of Indian immigration to Malaya, do so in a form that closely resembles that of a staged play. They are the scripts of empire that stage the drama of the

encounter between imperial control and its subordinate labour force. Within their pages one finds a cast of characters that have very clearly defined roles. The lead actors are notably the colonialists (mainly members of the colonial governing body and the plantocracy) and the Indian coolie plays a rather minor part. He is the subaltern, who can only come to the forefront through the dominating dialogue of empire. This casting was put together with one focal intention, the elevation of the imperialist project, its theatre the plantation world. Framed within the sub-plot of empire, the labourers were constantly edged in by prescriptions of subalternity, domains that chalked out their characters in images that accentuated their meekness and malleability to colonial manipulation. These are the domains that I envision as the crates of subalternity, frameworks assembled by the imperialists to keep the Indian labourer of colonial Malaya conscripted well within their tightly lidded casings.

The presiding designs of these encasements are the various discursive formulations that made up the narratives of the Indian labour experience. As the textual domains are formed, they simultaneously board them up within the boundary lines of the all pervading discourse of imperial control and its mechanisms of power. These were the parapets of the rules and regulations that governed the life of the Indian labourer within the fortress of imperial control that was otherwise known as the colonial plantation. The unfolding of the discursive formation that one encounters through such an investigation can be seen in line with what Michel Foucault raises in 'The Order of Discourse' (1981: 52):

the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organised and redistributed by a certain number of procedures whose role it is to ward off its powers and dangers, to gain mastery over its chance events and to evade its ponderous, formidable materiality.

The key element presiding in the above is that the ordering of discourse is an enclosed domain that is governed by parameters of selection, exclusion and domination that form powerful interspersing grids around it. These are the frameworks that work to barricade its

content against the threat of other configurations that could infiltrate and interrupt the flow of its circuit of power. What lies within its walls are bodies of knowledge, groups of statements, signs and identifications of various subject matters, linked by a governing system of order that threads its discursive forms through the bridles of power. Foucault goes on to elaborate in his other definitive work, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, that such statements are the sequential dispersion of signs within an architecture that assigns 'particular modalities of existence' within a particular discursive formation (2002: 121). Discourse is thus the formation and subsequent controlling of knowledge. Deconstructive criticism, when pondering the nature of this dispersion, can investigate the individual signs and locate hidden conflicts within the shielded domain of its very discursivity and displace their seemingly fixed sign-systems.

The scripts of empire that I investigate here do not merely document the information on the immigrants; they put into play a pattern of signification assembled with the presumptions and predications of a discourse in which one party (the colonialist) remained the predominant designer of information. According to Robert Young (2001: 77),

Colonial-discourse analysis can [...] look at the variety of the texts of colonialism as something more than mere documentation and also emphasize the ways in which colonialism involved not just a military or economic activity, but permeated forms of knowledge which, if unchallenged may continue to be the very ones through which we try to understand colonialism itself.

My investigation of the colonial narratives that record the encounter with the Malayan Indian immigrants is very much within the context that Young speaks of. The colonial configurations of the Indian immigrant labour experience in postcolonial must be interrogated so that what is infused in the nation's understanding of these subjects of their history can be reconstructed along a more contestable axis.

The most appropriate point of embarkation on a journey of interrogations such as this should notably be what was also the very

point of embarkation for the Indian immigrants. It was a journey which was galvanised by a host of texts that articulated the strong urgency for their presence in the Straits Settlements. Colonial documentation of the commencement of Indian immigration to Malaya illustrates the ways in which the inscription of the figure of the coolie is juggled by various governing officials in their bid to ensure that it fits into their desired scheme of things. In her investigation of colonialist historical and literary texts produced on British India, Sara Suleri speaks of the ‘vertiginous’ nature of ‘colonial facts’ in that they ‘frequently fail to cohere around the master-myth that proclaims static lines of demarcation between imperial power and disempowered culture, between colonizer and colonized’ (1992: 3). Such narratives with their inherent ‘rhetoric of binarism’, she argues, ought then to be read ‘against the grain’ for instances where they fail to cohere around this myth of empire.

In similar manner, my deconstructive reading of excerpts from a selection of historical documents below will reveal the instability of the myth of the Indian coolie’s perpetual deference to an all-powerful colonial authority. I do this in two segments. In the first, I look at the ways in which imperial officials assembled the structures of control over the body of the coolie. My overall frame of reference is the *Report of the Commission of Enquiry into the State of Labour in the Straits Settlements and the Protected Native States* of the year 1890 (Hereafter RCL 1890), which collates a vast number of minutes of meetings that took place between colonial plantation officials. Yet I move on to show in the second segment that this very document (along with a select number of others), reveals in the process the instability of the myth of the Indian coolie’s perpetual deference to what was supposedly an all-powerful colonial authority.

### **Scripts of indenture: Initial encounters of the coolie**

In the initial pages of the *RCL 1890*, there is an extract of a correspondence of the Secretary to Government of India to Secretary of Madras. It states, rather clearly, that the immigration of Indian peasants to the Straits Settlement “was a purely voluntary movement on the part of the people, stimulated by their own interests and wishes; it was not assisted

by any law, neither was it impeded by any law till the year 1857” (36). It is interesting that the introduction to the coolies in the document points to issues of mobility and agency in the coolie. It speaks of an active involvement in the act of migration. Early migration appeared to have offered the coolie some amount of freedom of choice. Yet, their subalternity within Indian society becomes a tool of manipulation for it is subsequently recorded that certain unscrupulous parties were kidnapping a number of Indian peasants and shipping them to the Malay Peninsula (36). What little freedom that the immigrant had is lost at that point, for measures are taken by the colonial authorities to regulate the procedure of immigration. The experience of immigration to and settlement in Malaya from that point on for the Indian labourer is overtaken by defined and exacting measures that mirror Foucauldian notions of surveillance and power. The scribes of empire etch out the subaltern part that the labourer will play within their staging of the various scenes of the plantation world.

The following passage consequently puts into motion the formal advent of the coolie into the scripts of empire. It records that the Indian government in Malaya commanded all recruiting agents to:

bring coolies intending to proceed to the Straits before Magistrate, at Nagapatnam, and state all particulars as to repayments of cost of passage, money-advances, diet during voyage, wages in Straits Settlements, nature of work, duration of engagement, return passage. Magistrate will enter these particulars in a register, copy of which will be sent to the Colonial Secretary to be reduced in individual case into a contract on arrival. Magistrate will ascertain that coolies go willingly and with full knowledge of condition. Magistrate will protect natives from crimping, and prevent desertion of families.  
(RCL, 1890: 37)

These recruiting agents were normally employed by the planters in Malaya. They were mainly Indians, who were chosen for the sole reason that they could speak the language and so possess the ability to

persuade the peasants in the villages of South India to migrate. They offered visions of a more yielding future in the new land, Malaya. Take for instance the following excerpt of a recruiting poster issued in Nagapatnam in 1890 by *Ganapathy Pillay and Co., Agents for Planters, Penang*: “Houses, fuel, and land for gardens will be given free ... There are shops and a good supply of water. There are doctors who speak Tamil. Rice is sold at market price ... The country is quite similar to our own places, and comfortable. Many of our own countrymen are working on each estate (RCL, 1890: 44).” As such, fellow Indians aided in the channelling of the imperial vision, which needed their assistance in order to poise its panoptic view profitably on its capitalist axis. The gaze of the imperialist, then, proceeds to streamline the terms of its capitalist engagement of the targeted individuals in an exacting measure. It is with this that the agreement or contract is conceived, formally binding the coolie to the labour enterprise.

The methodological process that directs the measuring gaze of the magistrate exhibited in the passage cited above is much like what Foucault calls the method of ‘hierarchical observation’ (1984:189):

In the perfect camp all power would be exercised solely through exact observation; each gaze would form a part of the overall functioning of power ... the geometry of the paths, the number and distribution of files and ranks were exactly defined; the network of gazes that supervised one another was laid down.

The immigration depot is that camp within which the intending Indian immigrants were observed in exacting measures. Each gaze that fell on every one of them put into motion the wheels of the power mechanism that was to largely dominate their lives from then on. The path that they were to walk became one that was invariably hemmed in by the shaping force of the imperial vision as it defined the geometrical lines and angles of their recruitment and the ensuing years in the plantations. It appears too, that included in this design, is a crucial need to align the coolie’s vision to their (the imperialists) agenda, as exhibited in the specification that the coolie be apprised of the ‘full

knowledge' of the conditions that he was agreeing to. The contract is a framework of signs, charting the course of imperial control, assigning the positions that the coolies were to assume within the perimeters of the plantation world.

Colonial reports operated on an angled perception for they come to us from the perspective of the coloniser, whose vision ultimately rests on the margin of colonial control. The controlling vision wrested out the details relevant to the operation of the imperial capitalist enterprises. The knowing gaze was that of the colonial official, and as such it needs to be asked whether the issue of the coolie having 'full knowledge' of the terms and conditions of his employment was ever a reality or a fabricated script for the unravelling of the larger drama of empire? I argue that this is a problematical concept for there could have been no 'full knowledge' of the conditions that they were to encounter in the Malay States. This can clearly be substantiated through the following passage:

This contract is practically the only means open to the immigrant of authentically ascertaining the terms of his engagement. He can ask questions of the depot superintendent or the Indian Immigration agent, but few men will do this, and if they do the answers cannot well embody the contents of the twenty-four printed pages of the Ordinance. His only other means of informing himself is to enquire of the recruiter, or the read the placards of the recruiting agent. Although a Tamil translation of the Ordinance was made some years ago it has not been published, and the conditions of service do not therefore exist in any document to which a scholar among immigrants can refer.  
(RCL, 1890: 54)

The dominating dialogue rested in the hands of the recruiters and their superiors. The fact that the Tamil translation of the Ordinance was never published shows that that knowledge on the part of the labourer was not a priority.

The whole process of immigration was one that left the Indian coolies susceptible to various manipulations of their very condition

of subalternity. Perhaps due to a keenness to escape the clutches of subalternity in their own villages through the act of migration, the labourers do not question the veracity of the conditions of employment that is conveyed to them. Coupled with this is also the fact that, being mostly illiterate, there appeared to be no known way that they could ascertain for themselves the actual terms and conditions that they were binding themselves to. The very people who spoke their language and were in fact informed of the conditions that lay waiting kept the information from them, for their agenda was aligned with the imperial one. The script thus remains persistently within the grasp of the imperial scribes and their henchmen. Every movement of the Indian labourers from their villages in rural South India to the plantations in the Straits Settlements was undertaken under the controlling vision of various colonial figures or persons connected to those with the colonial power (the latter being mainly Indian recruiters known as *tyndals* and later *kanganies* hired by colonial planters). At every stage of their migration, they are laid bare to the watchful gaze that ascertains their ultimate usefulness to the various imperial enterprises in the Straits Settlements. Boundaries were constantly being drawn up and set in exacting measures. However, does this necessarily endorse the argument that these labourers were passively dependent on the benevolent colonial master for their every need<sup>1</sup>? I suggest instead that it was the colonial system of representation that presented such passivity and that writers worked hard to uphold this façade. Notions of agency are evident deep within its framework and this will be revealed at a later stage of this discussion, when coolies resist and rip the frames of colonial control.

The arrival of the immigrants at the ports of the Straits Settlement brings them to yet another portal of control that serves to augment their subalternity:

On arrival in Penang, the ship is boarded by the Indian immigrant agent or his Assistant who inspects the coolies and sees that all the deck passengers ... are at once landed and sent to the depot ... The contract coolies are detained in the government depot until they sign the contracts and are handed over to the agents of the employers for transit to the estates where they are to work. A separate contract is signed for every man and transmitted to the employer for custody.

A duplicate in the Tamil language is given to the cooly and the office Register serves as the Immigration Agent's record of the transaction.  
(RCL, 1890: 41)

Once again, they are subjected to the controlling gaze of colonial officials, which sets them down in penal codification. Note that they are restrained like criminals within the depot until the contracts are signed and when that is accomplished, it (the original copy) is kept in the control of the planter. It was thus one of the scripts of power that encrypted the early Indian immigrant experience. The all-knowing gaze of the imperialist scrutinised every exacting measure within it while the labourer's unlettered gaze never truly engaged with it. The depot can be likened to a crate that encases them like packed goods until they are deemed ready to take their place on the production belt of the plantations that they are to be transported to. Again, the discourse of power shows the framing and consequent aligning of the coolies along the girdle of colonial order.

There is also evidence that the details of the contract are interpreted at the will of the employer and often transposed into terms pertaining to prisoners rather than industrial workers. There is for instance the record of a "joint and several" contract' where 'coolies of a gang signed a common document rendering themselves jointly liable for the default of any one of their number' (RCL, 1890: 52). Such means accentuate the image of the coolies linked together by the conveyor belt of control, for in this context the joining is a literal one. It also alerts one to the more sinister state of affairs that lie behind the scene of the frame. The breaching of the hold of power does not merely result with the admonition to come back but more importantly to return the signpost of power to its original circle. The ripped margins must be sewn back; the ownership of the sign must be restored for to possess it is to possess the reins of the discourse of power. The coolie must be sent back into the crate that he has fled from.

Life on the plantations was designed to confine the labourer within set boundaries. The muster re-enacted every day, is another ritual that

serves to consolidate the plantocracy's command over the labourers. It served to mark their presence down in registers, file them up according to their categories (the tapping gang, the weeding gang, etc.) and record the results of their labour at the end of the day. The following words of a planter exhibit the commandeering of its mechanism of power:

A roll call is called daily at 6 a.m., in my presence, by the Tyndals, and there are other calls at 10, 1 and 4 o'clock. At the morning call everyone on the estate is present: the later roll calls in the field are supervised by the Overseers. I determine myself the amount of task work to be done .... (RCL, 1890: Evid. 74)

The colonial eye explores the bodies lined up before him and marks every one of them. Each mark is a sign of domination on the subaltern body. The roll call is the grid of control that assembles them within the framework of their task and consequently marshals them out into the field. The register is yet another script of subalternity for the coolie's livelihood depended on his being marked down as present within its sheets. It is, yet again, a marking of the encounter between subjected bodies and the mechanism of domination, illustrating the hold that the planters have over the demarcation of roles in that play of power that they direct. It acts as a critical examination and preservation of the circle of order that takes on almost mythic propensities within the framework that is assembled.

Foucault's notion of 'the body as object of power and control' can surely be applied in this instance. The encounter between body and the power of domination of that body is seen in terms of the encounter between machinery (power) that 'explores it [the body], breaks it down and rearranges it'. It was a mechanism that 'defined how one may have a hold over others' bodies, not only so that they may do what one wishes, but so that they may operate as one wishes, with the techniques, the speed, and the efficiency that one determines ... produc[ing] subjected and practiced bodies, "docile bodies"' (1984: 182). The operation of power breaks the body down into commandable parts, each seen as a tool for the further extension of the perimeter of its control, each moulded for a precise effect. The regiment of the plantation system

operated along such lines. This weight of subalternity is consequently rendered even more indomitable by the fact that members of their own community make up the unrelenting sentries at the outpost of the enclosed space. The tyndals actively aid and abet the colonial telescopic vision in charting every movement of the Indian labourer to ensure the smooth running of the colonial enterprise.

On the trail of such lodgings of the coolie within circumscribed space is the issue of their *lodgings* itself, i.e. the housing facilities set up by their employers. Known as coolie ‘lines’ because they were long rows of houses partitioned into numerous cubicles, they were often overcrowded for sometimes as many as ten or more coolies were packed into their frames. They were in most cases practically like crates that had little space and virtually no ventilation at all:

on one estate the building is divided into a number of rooms about 10 feet square, in which six people are usually put. Other rooms in the same building are 20 feet by 14 feet, and in one of these eighteen people were living, men and women indiscriminately. Sometimes three married couples in one small room; in other cases one or two couples, as well as several single men.  
(RCL, 1890: 48)

Note the demarcation of exact space and the numbers that are lodged within their frames, evoking the image of goods packed within the frames of commercial crates. Densely aligned into such compact domains, these coolie lines were the only *lines* that the coolie had access to within the inscriptions of the drama of the plantation world.

The conditions highlighted above were only a fraction of those that boarded up the Indian immigrant experience within encasements of subalternity that were assembled by the various figures of authority that made up the plantocracy. They were intent only on extracting as much profit from the labourers. The plantation system was thus run very much along the lines of a factory, with the labourers commandeered to labour meticulously and productively. The desired scene was much like that reflected by the brush of the colonial artist responsible for the

colonial advertisement of Figure 1. The discourse that was produced showed the desire for the creation of the ideal picture of orderliness on the stage of their drama of the imperial capitalist enterprise, framed within a setting commandeered by the colonial plantocracy.

However, the route of power was never totally secluded from the specters of disruption. As the frameworks of subalternity are unpacked through the process of critical inquiry, the range of the vision takes in the variations to the composure of dominance, especially when it is confounded by bolting coolies. The Indian labourer can be seen intermittently disrupting the manoeuvres of the colonial hand that is intent on working out and maintaining the flow of power within the confines of the coveted colonial space. These incidents occur on the cusp of the discursive formations of the Indian labour experience and we glimpse coolies running away with the signs of imperial control.

One of the most significant ways in which the coolie dodged the frame of subalternity that was placed around him was through acts of desertion. This underscores two issues. Firstly, we learn more and more that the coolie never sat in total deference to his colonial master. Secondly, it demonstrates that the coolies actually had sufficient agency to cause anxiety in the planter. By this latter, I mean that planters, as I will show shortly, were often made to reinforce their position by adopting measures that they were often not happy with. Raising wages was one of this. It also caused much friction between neighbouring European planters as coolies would abscond to whichever plantation offered higher wages. Every immigration report documents a fair number of coolies absconding from the ports of disembarkation in the Straits as well as the plantations. For instance, there is evidence that a number of newly arrived coolies at the government depot at Negapatnam who find themselves 'engaged on less favourable terms become aware that better can be had, and ultimately refuse to sign contracts unless on better terms, so that those offering lower terms cannot get as many as they want' (RCL, 1890: Evid. 73). Note how the coolies here have the capacity to actually disrupt the imperialist plan.

Because of this, planters saw fit to draw up rather stringent terms in their contracts to forcefully bind the coolie to the plantation:

without some stronger hold, such as can only be obtained by a legal contract, it is probable that Kanganies and coolies would frequently transfer themselves to what they thought the best market rather than to their legitimate employer. (RCL, 1890: 55)

However, many coolies ran away in spite of being aware of the heavy penalties. It ironically becomes the very point of conflict for the labourer who runs away when he is discontented with its terms and conditions<sup>2</sup>. This, I would argue, is very much along the lines of what Ranajit Guha sees as the ‘the contingency of power relations’ which operates on an axis that is determined by an interaction of coercion and persuasion in the dominant and collaboration and resistance in the subordinate (1997: 21). Power was never totally in the grasp of the planter for he had to constantly resort to coercive methods to keep the labourer within the boundaries of his plantation. Absconding was already a choice that the labourer knew he had and many took it upon themselves to exercise that right of choice, indicating agency in the body that was assumed to be wholly under the mechanism of colonial control. Malleability in the labourer was thus not an invariable trait but rather one that had to be manoeuvred, and when labourers were not in agreement, colonial control finds itself fractured.

Barely five lines from the earlier stipulation for a legal contract cited above, it is subsequently recorded that ‘many employers argue that some system of contract is indispensable, for unless they can be absolutely certain of having a labour force bound to them and at command at certain seasons, there is risk of losing an entire crop’ (RCL, 1890: 55). The term risk highlights the correlative consequences that the coolies have on the running of the plantation enterprise, underscoring the notion that they were not permanent fixtures on the apparatus of control engineered by the plantocracy. Rather, they could become dislodged and consequently rattle the mechanism of the plantation machinery which they were engaged for. Needless to say, colonial order finds itself rattled by the visitations of such disruption. The following words of planter JMB Vermont indicate the extent to which planters were rattled: “When Mr Turner offered his coolies better treatment I

was forced to do the same, to a smaller extent; but it was against my inclination. I cannot say whether I got as many coolies as Mr Turner at that time” (RCL, 1890: Evid.77). Coolies had sufficient agency not only to ensure that wages were raised but also to cause rifts between their imperial masters. It follows thus that they were not docile pawns of imperial order.

Then there is also the fact that planters built temples of worship within the vicinity of the plantations to induce the labourers to stay and not stray. Within the pages of another report, *Indian Immigration to the FMS: Resolutions and Recommendations of a Commission appointed by the Acting Resident General FMS 1900*, it is documented that ‘any increase in the facilities offered for the observation of religious functions must benefit the cause of immigration, because natives will naturally prefer to proceed to a country where they have reason to believe that opportunities for observances exist in a form similar to what they are accustomed to in their native land’ (5). The colonial planter’s anxiety of coolie desertion is clearly evident here if they felt the need to coerce the labourer to remain in the plantation by using the temple, the seat of his cultural and religious link, as a strategic tool. However, the coolies were not averse to overturning this formula of colonial control. *The Annual Report of the Agent of the Government of India in British Malaya 1930* sets down numerous incidents of insubordination of labourers when the boundaries of their cultures are seen to be intruded upon, in similar terms of the following excerpt:

Ten labourers of Parit Perak estate were charged for rioting and assault on the Assistant Manager, who annoyed at the beat of drums, had interfered unnecessarily with a marriage celebration conducted on the estate .... (24).

In this sense, the coolie evidently acquires more agency within the boundary markers of his own cultural compound. Colonial control obviously had not much of a stake within this Other frame. These instances of disruptions to the hierarchy of order within the plantation world work to dislodge the image of the meek and docile South Indian coolie. The docile body was not so docile when seen as an agent of its

own cultural identity, one that resided within and was an affirmation in many senses of the possession of something that could not be manipulated by colonial control.

These select incidents have been significant in compiling the early experiences of the coolie experience. However, the scenes of disruption are not displayed in full form within the pages of such official documentation. As the reports are angled towards building and sequestering the structures of the colonial enterprise, agitations against the prized conduit of power are registered in muted tones, concealing the magnitude of its ramifications to the imperial project. For if the composure of superior governance is to be maintained, the expression of control must not reveal its dissident features. Such muting is reminiscent of Pierre Macherey's notion of the silences in the text, where,

the work cannot speak of the more or less complex opposition which structures it; though it is its expression and embodiment. In its every particle, the work *manifests*, uncovers, what it cannot say. This silence gives it life (1990: 217).

The silenced syllables of thoughts are rendered more conspicuous by its very muteness for it draws attention to what is not or cannot, be said. To articulate it would be to swim against the tide of the imperial discourse. The damming up of what is seen to risk *damning* the treatise of power ironically acts as a foil to the very exercise of silencing for they speak louder than what is articulated in plain terms on the page. As Macherey goes on to argue,

interrogation penetrates certain actions: 'hiding', 'diverting attention', and further on, 'cheating'. Obviously linking all these, there is there is a single impulse: 'hiding' is to keep from sight; 'diverting attention' is to show without being seen, to prevent what is visible from being seen; which also expresses the image of 'dissimulation' (219).

The interrogation of the structures of the discursive formations of the labour experience exhibited above was conducted with an eye to tracing images hidden from the mainframe of discursivity. While the greater part of what was unearthed beneath the lids pointed to a keen upholding of the surrounding architectures of subalternity, an even keener scrutiny of the supporting pillars (the signposts of control) reveals the shaky ground that they were embedded in. This article has been mainly an attempt to unpack and consequently shift the position of the force of imperialist articulations of the Malayan Indian coolies, their bodies mired for so long in grounds of subalternity. As Foucault puts it,

The body is the inscribed surface of events (traced by language and dissolved by ideas), the locus of a dissociated self (adopting the illusion of a substantial unity), and a volume in perpetual disintegration. Genealogy, as an analysis of descent [considerations of race or social type] is thus situated within the articulation of the body and history. Its task is to expose a body totally imprinted by history and the process of history's destruction of the body (1984: 83).

The body of the Indian immigrant has thus far been traced by a language that has accentuated an identification of docility. Almost all other aspects were dissolved under the weight of such markings. These are the images that have been stored away in the warehouse of history. Genealogical expositions of the imprints on the historical body of the Indian labourer of Colonial Malaya are highly necessary, for such a process will not only dislodge these firmly packed contents. More importantly, in the momentary spaces that are created through such displacements, other imprints that have been edged out of the historical vision can finally find their way into the mainframe. This is the angle that deconstructive criticism offers. As it dislodges seemingly fixed meanings of the text, it unearths too elements that point to the holes within its own discursive structure. In my deconstructive reading of the colonial archives, the dislodged crates have largely revealed the flawed feature of imperial control.

## Conclusion

The discussion has ultimately shown the reterritorialising of the terrain of literary studies as it transgressed into the boundaries of the discipline of history and its repository of archival texts, facilitated by a bridge commonly used by both disciplines, that of language and representation. These texts have for the most part deeply imbibed the ideology of empire and were written from the perspective of colonial authors. The presence of the figure of the Indian immigrant within their pages has been revealed to be principally moulded by the discourse of race and imperialism. Authors of colonial literary texts and historical texts are involved in the same project, that of narrating their encounter with the Indian immigrant community. The difference is that one is noted as a factual representation while the other is fictive. Yet, both are in actual effect textual representations, both discursive material with embedded sub-plots of their own. Colonial narratives fill in the gaps left by the abstracted statistical narrations of the official documents. Yet the latter fills in the initial experience of labour that is left out in the narrative plot of the planter. Both are equally crucial in this quest to shape the collage of the Indian coolie experience in Colonial Malaya. Instead of merely using the colonial archives as reference material, the literary critic can deconstruct the various subtexts that lie under the weight of the discourse of domination and subjugation invested in the narrative space. For, in the imperial fable of the promised land that was sold to the impoverished villagers of South India, the text that predominated was the contract of labour that they signed in hope of a new future in Malaya and the documents examined above were the sub-plots that followed, the scripts of empire that chronicled the planter-coolie relationship in colonial Malaya. When these are included into the terrain of literary studies and juxtaposed with colonial literary narratives, the range of possibilities becomes truly immeasurable.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> I am thinking here of K.S. Sandhu (1969) and Sinnappah Arasaratnam (1970) in particular, who state rather explicitly that the labourers' every need was taken care of from the time of immigration: "the labour movement was predominantly an 'arranged' one in that almost every step of its movement from its home in India to its place of employment in Malaya was arranged and taken care of by someone else. Thus there was little or no spontaneity about it and much less a 'call of adventure' or service (Sandhu, 1969: 65)."
- <sup>2</sup> According to P. Ramasamy, between 1912 and 1920, a number of labourers of various estates in Malaya staged "walk-outs" as they were unhappy with low rates or delayed payment of wages, high mortality rates, management's unkept promises and the generally unsanitary living conditions. The planters, however, incensed at such insubordination, arranged to have those very labourers charged and jailed by the police for contravening the terms of their contract. When they were released later, they were reported to have made it clear that "they preferred to stay in jail or 'even walk into the sea and be drowned'" than to return to the oppressive estates (1992: 101-102). Where is the figure of the docile malleable tool of empire in all this?