Due: March 18

Minimum word count: 1000 words

Write an essay of about 1000-2000 words on any work of South Asian Literature that you have read in this course, from either semester. You can choose to write about any topic or theme that interests you.

You are allowed to revise and re-use material from a previous assignment if you wish to, but at least half of the essay should consist of new writing.

Your essay should:

1. Have an interesting title.

2. Make an original argument about the text. In essays of this length, the best arguments tend to be based on specific observations about the text. Try to avoid making arguments that are too broad ("This text suggests that colonialism was bad") or too obvious ("This text proves that patriarchy impacted women's experiences in South Asia").

3. Draw on 2 published academic sources (essays, book chapters, or books) to support your argument. Be creative in your search for scholarly sources. You may not always find two works of scholarship that directly address the text you are writing about. For instance, Manjushree Thapa's "The Buddha in the Earth-Touching Posture" is a relatively recent story by a contemporary author and is thus unlikely to have attracted the same kind of sustained academic attention as, for instance, the *Mahabharata*. Consider expanding your focus by looking up alternate keywords instead of just the title of the text: search for scholarship on the author, the genre, or themes you are interested in. Contact me at least a week before the due date if you need help finding academic sources.

4. Make sure you anchor your arguments in textual analysis. Don't simply quote the text – analyze it. Draw attention to subtle features that may not be obvious at first glance. When quoting from the text, it can be helpful to follow the so-called 'rule of two': your analysis of the quote should typically be twice as long as the quote itself.

You are welcome to incorporate personal experiences or anecdotes in your essay (this is optional, not mandatory). I encourage you to meet me during office hours (Wednesdays, 3 to 4 pm, Feb 26 onwards) to discuss your proposed essay, especially if you have not written a term paper for a literature class before. If you can't make it to office hours, you can contact me via email and we can try and set up a virtual meeting.

If you have never written a longish essay for an English literature course, here's a quick guide that you may find useful: https://www.haverford.edu/sites/default/files/Office/Writing-Center/How-to-Write-a-Close-Reading.pdf

Donna Akbari

Professor Vikrant Dadawala

EN 3430

March 21, 2025

The Weight of What We Carry: Shame as Survival in Two Histories of Oppression

In many narratives of oppression, shame is framed as a byproduct of violence—a feeling imposed from the outside. But in *Baluta* by Daya Pawar and *Coolie Woman* by Gaiutra Bahadur, shame is far more complicated: it becomes a form of social training, passed down like an heirloom. Both texts are deeply personal reckonings with intergenerational trauma—one rooted in caste, the other in indenture. Through autobiography and archival investigation, Pawar and Bahadur explore not only how casteism and colonialism degraded marginalized lives, but also how families taught their children to carry that degradation quietly, cautiously, and even strategically. In *Baluta* and Coolie Woman, shame does not simply result from marginalization—it becomes a learned, inherited survival mechanism, passed down through caste and indenture as a means of navigating visibility, silence, and resistance.

In *Baluta*, Daya Pawar does not simply recount the impact of caste-based discrimination; rather, he exposes how shame becomes an internalized structure that governs relationships, speech, and even desire. When discussing his decision to help his mother gain employment in his school's kitchen, Pawar admits not pride, but shame. He writes, "I never spoke to her in front of the other students… I burn with shame as I tell you about how I would only speak to my mother in secret. For an education, I was willing to sever the umbilical cord" (Pawar 92). The violent metaphor of "severing the umbilical cord" does more than describe personal guilt—it reveals

how caste shame demands a cutting off from one's origins in order to access respectability. Education, a symbol of upward mobility, is portrayed here not as pure emancipation, but as a bargain that requires silence, self-erasure, and emotional disavowal. As Murage and Makokha observe in their article, "Aesthetics of Globalization in Daya Pawar's Baluta: Reflexivity and Social Change in Critical Perspective", "irrespective of the social changes that have occurred, the inferior status of the Mahar caste has remained intact," with caste determining the nature of even the most 'modern' opportunities (Murage & Makokha 73). Pawar's education thus exists in tension with caste expectations, where even the promise of a better future cannot shield him from the shame inherited through generations.

This internalized shame resurfaces in Pawar's relationship with his wife, Saee. Although she dresses according to caste custom, her appearance becomes a source of social humiliation. Pawar does not challenge the perception that she is a maid; instead, he avoids bringing friends home and distances himself emotionally. This discomfort is not isolated to Saee, but expands into a generalized disgust toward Dalit women. "I felt no attraction to the Mahar girls," Pawar writes. "For one, they did not bathe every day. Their hair was matted, their clothes dirty. I could not bear their company" (Pawar 72). The repeated emphasis on bodily filth—"matted," "dirty," "could not bear"—suggests that Pawar has internalized dominant caste ideologies that associate Dalit femininity with pollution. The passage is revealing not because Pawar moralizes or defends himself, but because he lays bare the emotional cost of living under caste: the quiet betrayals of love, the self-policing of desire, and the learned instinct to devalue one's own people in pursuit of dignity. In doing so, *Baluta* becomes more than testimony—it becomes an unflinching study of how oppression is not only imposed from above, but is absorbed and reproduced from within.

In *Coolie Woman,* silence is not portrayed as a void, but as an intentional strategy—an inheritance passed down from women whose survival depended on restraint. When the narrator travels to India in search of her ancestral past, she is met with unexpected judgment. She recalls how "the elder in Bhurahupur had reproached me for not living there, as though I could answer for my great-grandmother's actions. He seemed to feel that she had violated some ancient, unspoken pact never to leave the ancestral village" (Bahadur 40). The phrase "ancient, unspoken pact" evokes a suffocating cultural obligation—one that binds women to land, family, and silence even beyond death. Migration, instead of being viewed as a necessary escape from hardship, becomes framed as betrayal. Despite being born outside India, the narrator's appearance marks her as accountable to this pact. "Because I looked Indian," she writes, "I was expected to act Indian. I was held to a different standard than other Americans" (Bahadur 31). Here, the contrast between looked and act underscores the dissonance between identity and perception; she is both foreign and familiar, both insider and outsider.

The shame projected onto her body is inherited—rooted not in her own choices, but in the legacy of indentured women who, like her great-grandmother, were forced to carry their pain without explanation. But instead of interpreting their silence as erasure, Bahadur reclaims it as strategy: "Could it also reflect a strategy by women who had secrets to keep? Is it possible that, on some level, each individual silence was a plan?" (Bahadur 49). These rhetorical questions transform silence from absence into agency. They suggest that even in the face of social condemnation, shame and secrecy become tools of survival—passed from woman to woman like a coded language for endurance. As Bahadur writes elsewhere in her article, "Conjure Women and Coolie Women", her speculative narrative relies on "the subjunctive, a grammatical mood perfect for expressing doubts, wishes, and multiple possible truths" (Bahadur 249). In this way,

her use of imagination, memory, and personal history becomes a form of resistance against the tyranny of the colonial archive—an effort to retrieve what was denied, to speak what was unspeakable, and to create a space where the voices of indentured women might once again be heard, even if only in echoes.

Both texts suggest that while shame is often seen as a marker of social degradation, it can also become a site of resistance, where memory, storytelling, and refusal begin to reclaim dignity. In *Baluta*, Daya Pawar is fully aware of the stigma attached to telling his story as a Dalit man. He admits, "Many Dalits may see what I am doing here as someone picking through a pile of garbage. A scavenger's account of his life. But he who does not know his past cannot direct his future" (Pawar 56). Here, the metaphor of scavenging—an occupation associated with caste pollution—becomes a symbol of reclamation. By "picking through garbage," Pawar retrieves what society has discarded: the voices, memories, and traumas of the Dalit experience. His storytelling becomes an act of survival and resistance, transforming what has been socially coded as shameful into something politically powerful.

Similarly, in *Coolie Woman*, Gaiutra Bahadur uses archival research to recover the silenced voices of indentured women, particularly her great-grandmother Sujaria. She writes, "My search for the answers shifted from potholed roads and mustard fields in Bihar to archives in England… mystery darkened the lives of many women who left India as coolies." Her journey through colonial records reveals not just gaps in official history, but a pattern of structural erasure. By telling their stories, Bahadur resists that erasure and reframes their choices as courageous rather than disgraceful. She imagines her great-grandmother as a kind of hero: "I like to think she claimed the decidedly masculine title of Bahadur for women, too—and for acts of valour that have more to do with crossing boundaries than with killing anyone in battle." Both

texts suggest that shame, once articulated, loses some of its power. Through writing, Pawar and Bahadur transform silence into speech, stigma into narrative, and inherited pain into political clarity. In doing so, they show that shame, when confronted and voiced, can become a powerful act of resistance.

In both *Baluta* and *Coolie Woman*, shame emerges not as a static feeling but as a dynamic force—one that moves through the body, the family, and the archive. Whether it is Daya Pawar's refusal to speak to his mother in public or Gaiutra Bahadur's reckoning with her great-grandmother's undocumented migration, both texts reveal how shame is absorbed, inherited, and strategically wielded in response to systems of caste and colonial power. What initially appears as silence, avoidance, or even self-loathing is, in many cases, a form of survival. Yet neither author stops at survival. Through storytelling, memory, and historical recovery, they transform personal and collective shame into testimony. Their acts of writing resist erasure, challenge dominant narratives, and reclaim dignity for those whose lives were shaped in the shadows of empire and hierarchy. Ultimately, *Baluta* and *Coolie Woman* ask us to consider what it means to carry a history that others wish to forget—and to write it anyway.

Work Cited:

Bahadur, Gaiutra. "Conjure Women and Coolie Women." Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism, vol. 22, no. 2, July 2018, pp. 244–253, doi:10.1215/07990537-6985959.

Bahadur, Gaiutra. *Coolie Woman: The Odyssey of Indenture*. Hurst, 2013.

Murage, Peter Ndambiri, and Justus K. S. Makokha. "Aesthetics of Globalization in Daya

Pavāra, Dayā. *Baluta*. Translated by Jerry Pinto, Speaking Tiger, 2015.

Pawar's Baluta: Reflexivity and Social Change in Critical Perspective." Contemporary Voice of Dalit, vol. 12, no. 1, 2020, pp. 71–81, https://doi.org/10.1177/2455328X19898421.