

TO MY GRANDMOTHER¹
THE OLD TEA FACTORY AT KEARSNEY, NATAL²

Betty Govinden³

The light streams through the cracks
Haunting lines
Spectres
*shards of memory*⁴
dancing patches on the crumbling walls
*sunlight on a broken column*⁵
derelict and silent
Stone-bodies
on the coolie lines

A sad lonely mango tree
A neglected hibiscus
Marigolds under the thicket
Choking
And Pride of India
In need of pruning
Only the eternal
Bees and butterflies

Your sari hitched to your waist
You toil from morning till sunset
The open spaces of the hills and dales
your allotted prison
under the African sky
nimble fingers

¹ See my chapter, “The Indentured Experience -Indian Women in Colonial Natal”, in my book, *Sister Outsiders*, Unisa, 2008. 65-86. It includes the story of my grandmother, who died on January 13th 1948 [on my 4th birthday], 6 months after India received its Independence.

² The Kearsney Estate, run by Sir John Liege Hulett, was a tea and sugar estate, on the north coast of Natal, near the town of Stanger, 50 miles from Durban. Beall (1990: 153) observes that the “most intensive use of women’s labour on plantations was made by tea estates in the Stanger District on the North Coast”.

³ This poem was first published in Govinden, Betty, “Two Oceans Marathon –Women from the South”, *AGENDA– Empowering Women for Gender Equity*, 33 (3) 2019. 87-95.

⁴ Rushdie, 1991. 12.

⁵ Attia Hosain, 1961.



picking leaf
by leaf
by leaf
You become lettered in the ways of the fields
Reading the hills and dales
Writing your name in the wind
Wafting it across the seas

The lush green hills of leaves
hoisted up
Spread out to dry
on shelves lined with hessian
you turn the leaves
hour
by hour
by
hour

to catch the rays of the African sun
you work for a shilling a month

you look wistfully
at the rows of wooden boxes
filled with leaves
dried
drained
to begin their journey
across the billowy seas
to the soil of your heart
your hearth
your home

the leaves
the leaves
you see your fingers
fingering the leaves
the African sun sealed within
your hands reach out
to the boxes
the boxes

The light streams through the cracks
Spectres
shards of memory
moving patches on the crumbling walls
sunlight on a broken column
All is derelict and silent
Stone-bodies
on the coolie lines



A long shadow
Is cast
Over the hills and valleys of Kearsney
Abandoned by history
Across the *kala pani*
To the hills of Bezawada
In Andhra Pradesh
the River Krishna flowing old and languid
catches images
fleeting
of the Old Tea Factory
under the African sun

Dancing on the waters
Over hills and valleys
windswept with longing
my spirit
forever
entwined with yours
I have come in search of your
Dreams
Growing in your garden
Submerged in air
Under the African sky





Photos by Dean Chris Reddy.

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