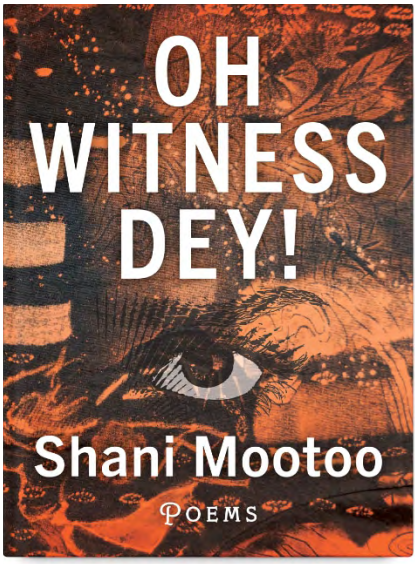

Shani Mootoo, *Oh Witness Dey!*

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Shani Mootoo's most recent poetry collection, *Oh Witness Dey!*, is a bold reckoning. Building on her decades-long engagement with themes of identity, queerness, and migration, Mootoo turns to auto-ethnography and documentary poetics, blending intimate reflection with archival material. Though rooted in Mootoo's heritage as a descendant of indentured Indian labourers in Trinidad, the collection expands its focus to offer a layered meditation on displacement, inheritance, and the imposed metrics of "authenticity" that diasporic peoples confront. Mootoo's use of fragmented narratives and non-linear sequencing mirrors the disruptions of cultural memory. It foregrounds the tensions of living within structures of colonial extraction—where people are shaped by histories they did not choose yet must continuously negotiate for survival. At the heart of *Oh Witness Dey!* lies a pressing question: What does it mean to inherit histories marked as much by loss as by survival? Mootoo responds to this question through a poetics of polyvocality, blending personal and collective voices to explore how the "afterlife of indenture"—a phrase used by Ramabai Espinet in conversation with Richard Fung and theorized by Andil Gosine and Nalini Mohabir in relation to Saidiya Hartman's "afterlife of slavery"—continues to shape Caribbean identity and Indian diasporic consciousness today (see Gosine and Mohabir).

Philip Metres describes documentary poetry as a mode that amplifies marginalized or distorted voices, engaging readers in the act of witnessing rather than merely recovering history. Rather than isolate her ancestors' story, Mootoo links Indian indentureship to the transatlantic slave trade and Indigenous dispossession, resisting isolationist narratives of identity. She traces her ancestors' journey from India to Trinidad under British rule and connects it to her own diasporic movements across Ireland, the Caribbean, and Canada.

This braided approach avoids oversimplification and appropriation, highlighting how colonial violence, divisive strategies, and blood quantum politics continue to affect global systems of oppression and fragment cultural memory. Mootoo also emphasizes community and historical relations as active sites of resistance, care, and survival rather than passive inheritances. Her work reflects the poetic interventions of Caribbean writers such as M. NourbeSe Philip, Olive Senior, and Lorna Goodison, who reflect on the histories of their communities while simultaneously demonstrating the entanglements between past, present, and future and the politics of cultural memory.

Oh Witness Dey! does not simply reclaim silenced narratives; it insists on their continued relevance. Through a slow unfolding structure rich with allusions, the collection resists simplification, compelling both the speaker and the reader to grapple with the imbrications of colonial power. Mootoo highlights the effects of European colonialism in the Caribbean, Canada, and elsewhere, illustrating how capitalism and colonial expansion are ingrained in our environment and history. In the Caribbean, migration has fostered a multi-ethnic consciousness that shapes collective identity, emphasizing cultural hybridity and shared experiences over fixed notions of authenticity. Yet even within this expansiveness, *Oh Witness Dey!* raises urgent questions about whose voices are emphasized and whose histories remain silenced.

The section titled "Praise Be," which opens the collection, immediately grapples with the tension between inheritance and the impossibility of romanticizing colonial legacies. In the opening poem, which the section is titled after, Mootoo initiates a conversation that runs throughout the book—one that confronts the fraught relationship between ancestry and displacement:

> There is no racing
>
> Past the backs
>
> Of Samarsingh and Bulaki
>
> What point pulling hair, digging dirt
>
> With DNA shovels?
>
> Fingernails scraping columns
>
> Of a ship's registry
>
> Entertaining fantasies of brotherhood
>
> Forced in the house-home

Of a stinking hull

An empty well

Just a(s) well. (13)

The poem's tone is incisive and wry, acknowledging historical realities while critically and playfully unsettling the narratives that attempt to define them. It balances recognition with resistance, blending sharp critique with a subtle, knowing irony. The speaker questions genealogical excavation—whether through physical labour, archival searches, or DNA testing—framing it as both urgent and futile. "What point pulling hair, digging dirt / With DNA shovels?" conveys scepticism, positioning the search for ancestry as potentially yielding more uncertainty than resolution. The stark image of "fingernails scraping columns / Of a ship's registry" captures the struggle to find a connection in records that reduce lives to bureaucracy. Even as the poem resists the promise of a coherent past, it refuses to disengage. Instead, Mootoo exposes how forced migration complicates the notion of home and suggests that ancestry is inseparable from histories of displacement and coercion for many. The "house-home" suggests an imposed space that is not freely chosen. This tension echoes involuntary staying and a true sense of belonging. Meanwhile, "stinking hull" evokes the ship's oppressive hold, its decay mirroring the enduring stain of colonialism.

The final lines of the first stanza, "An empty well / Just a(s) well," foreshadow the collection's meditation on loss. The well, a symbol of depth, stands empty—evoking archival silences and irretrievable pasts. Meanwhile, the wordplay on "just as well" carries a wry response, hinting that the search for clarity may only end in further disillusionment. In the second stanza, Mootoo alliteratively invokes the phrase "my ancestry is" (13), followed by references to the big bang, the African slave trade, British presence in India, and the brutal realities of sugar plantations and "coolie" ships. These allusions function not only as an acknowledgement of global colonial legacies but also as a pointed commentary on the interconnectedness of these histories. By invoking pepper and spice, sugar and rum, and the forced migration of peoples, Mootoo underscores the violence that shaped both the Caribbean and her personal history. These material references are more than historical markers; they carry what Denise Ferreira da Silva describes as "errant and unbounded and deep temporality." Ferreira da Silva argues that "[t]he figural time of matter dissolves historical time's (abstract) closures, thereby exposing the otherwise invisible and yet-so-familiar colonial links that cross oceans and continents." Similarly, Mootoo's imagery refuses a fixed historical narrative, instead revealing the ongoing entanglements of colonialism that span time and space. These intertwined histories expose the lasting threads of colonial exploitation that continue to shape the identities and experiences of Indo-Caribbean communities, urging readers to reckon with complex issues. This refrain emphasizes remembrance, highlighting how these histories remain unsettled and shape the present.

"Praise Be" carries multiple layers of irony, particularly within Mootoo's broader concern with inheritance, displacement, and colonial structures. On one level, the phrase *praise be* invokes a reverence and devotion, traditionally directed towards a higher power or established authority—spiritual, historical, or social. It expresses gratitude or homage, evoking praise for dominant systems or powers. However, Mootoo subverts this conventional association by choosing "Praise Be" as the title for the first section of the collection and for a series of poems that confront histories of erasure, violence, and dispossession. Mootoo redirects the phrase to honour the marginalized, the erased, and the forgotten. "Praise Be" becomes a call to recognize and elevate the voices, identities, and histories suppressed or silenced.

Mootoo's intent to redirect praise is strengthened in the third "Praise Be" poem, where she juxtaposes canonical European titles, from William Wordsworth's "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud" to John Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale," with a list of significant Caribbean figures such as Trinidadians Amy Leong Pang and Richard Fung, among others. Inviting readers to question whose voices are historically praised and why, while also demanding that praise be granted where it has been historically withheld, Mootoo demonstrates that redirected praise can be a form of reclamation, empowerment, and redefinition. Mootoo further affirms this idea with the list poem "The Big Despite," which names influential Caribbean figures alongside the phrase "Couldn't quell the brilliance of resilience and resistance" (58). The repetition of "Praise Be" in earlier poems with the extended list of names found in "The Big Despite" creates an incantatory rhythm of redirection and remembrance. The first "Praise Be" sets the stage for this ongoing relation between veneration and interrogation, positioning language and cultural production as sites of excavation that interrogate both power and history.

The collection's visual presentation further stages a poetics of redirection and rearticulation. Mootoo's use of typography—through shifts in font size, spacing, strikeout, and layout—mirrors the disruptions and ruptures central to the collection's themes of displacement and diasporic identity. Mootoo is also a visual artist and film-maker, so her engagement with the visual form invites the reader into a more active role, emphasizing the interplay between active engagement and deliberation. She joins a tradition of Caribbean poets experimenting with visuality in their work, such as Kamau Brathwaite, Philip, and Claire Harris. As typography alters a poem's visual landscape—expanding, contracting, or disrupting rhythm—diasporic movement reshapes both geographical and cultural spaces. These visual disruptions are not merely aesthetic choices but also metaphors for the dislocations and reconfigurations that define Indo-Caribbean histories and diasporic belonging. For instance, in the poem "We," Mootoo plays with font size to stage poetic asides. Smaller text adds an ironic, almost whispered commentary—such as "Hey, wey yuh go do?" (104)—that unsettles the collective "we" and its colonial authority. The shifting typography exposes the

tensions within this group, revealing who holds privilege (the colonizer) and who remains marginal (the colonized or "the coolie" [104]). Readers must physically adjust their gaze to register these shifts, an embodied experience that echoes how power structures determine visibility and exclusion.

Oh Witness Dey! also explores belonging by focusing on Canada's significant and politically charged multicultural context. Mootoo confronts the realities of living in a settler-colonial state, acknowledging the tensions of inhabiting stolen land and the pressures to perform a certain identity in a society shaped by colonial histories. In positioning her own diasporic identity within this broader history of dispossession and violence across Turtle Island, Mootoo calls attention to the responsibilities diasporic peoples hold towards Indigenous lands and histories. She underscores the urgency of recognizing the land's original caretakers and the need for solidarity in ongoing struggles for justice and preservation. For Mootoo, reckoning with these histories demands meaningful action against both environmental violence and the climate crisis, which she situates as an extension of colonial structures of exploitation.

Mootoo's *Oh Witness Dey!* powerfully engages with the Indo-Caribbean diaspora, linking personal and collective memory to illuminate the ongoing relevance of cultural remembrance. The fragmented, non-linear structure of the collection mirrors the ways in which history and identity are never static but rather in constant negotiation and reawakening. Through its six sections—"Praise Be," "Brief Accounts of the Brown Girl in the Ring (tra la la la la)," "Limbo (yes, like me)," "We," "Wondrous Cold," and "Cosmic"—Mootoo builds a dynamic, evolving narrative that explores the complexities of belonging, loss, and inheritance. Each section includes poems that engage with a range of thematic concerns, from the weight of colonial legacies to the urgent ecological crises we face, weaving them into a broader interconnected story of diaspora and survival. Rooted in Mootoo's longstanding engagement with multiple forms of art, *Oh Witness Dey!* is both a personal and collective archive. It engages with urgent ecological and social crises, calling for solidarity across diasporas to resist colonial erasure and environmental degradation. The collection reflects on historical struggles and imagines new ways of remembering and navigating the present while keeping the weight of the past in mind. Through its intricate interplay of form and content, the book offers a model of resistance—one that is creative, communal, and forward-looking. Ultimately, *Oh Witness Dey!* serves as a reminder of the power of storytelling and memory in shaping the future. Mootoo demonstrates how bonds are forged, even amid violence and separation, and histories reimagined. The collection ultimately highlights our world's interconnectedness, illustrating how the creation and sharing of stories help us forge bonds that transcend histories of violence and separation.

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