

The Fragile Body as Battlefield: Women, Violence, and Power in The Counting House

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Abstract

This paper examines *The Counting House* as a literary interrogation of how women's bodies become volatile and contested sites within the entangled structures of indenture, colonial capitalism, and patriarchal authority. The novel is read as a text that positions the body simultaneously as a receptacle of violence and coercion and as a fragile yet vital archive of memory and resistance. Drawing upon the theoretical frameworks of postcolonial feminism, biopolitics, and trauma studies, the analysis foregrounds how economic rationality, masculine humiliation, communal surveillance, and reproductive labor shape conditions of embodied vulnerability. At the same time, the narrative is shown to carve out precarious fissures where agency and subversion may emerge, however fraught or fragile. The paper traces the intersections of direct physical brutality with more insidious symbolic and structural violations, attending to the ways somatic memory and the gendered politics of shame and honor regulate individual and collective life. It argues that the novel not only dramatizes the multiple forms of violence inscribed upon the body but also insists on recognizing corporeality as a living historical text, one that preserves counter-histories of trauma, endurance, and survival. By situating embodiment within both the disciplinary logic of the colonial "counting house" and the disruptive potential of resistant subjectivities, the study illuminates the ambivalent role of the body as at once terrain of domination and medium of historical testimony. Ultimately, the novel compels a rethinking of how literature renders visible the intimate entanglements of power, violence, and human resilience.

Keywords: postcolonial feminism, domestic violence, body, memory, capitalism

Introduction

David Dabydeen's *The Counting House* presents a stark and morally attentive exploration of Indo-Guyanese lives shaped by the enduring legacies of indenture and the humiliations of a racialized colonial economy. The novel situates its narrative within the historical aftermath of the indenture system, foregrounding the profound disruptions it caused to family, intimacy, and community. The title itself signals the central metaphor of the text: the counting house—a site of arithmetic, accounting, and valuation—functions as a symbolic locus for the rationalized processes that transform human labor, kinship relations, and affective ties into measurable quantities of wages, debts, and commodities. In this world, economic calculations extend

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Published: 06 February 2026

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.70558/SPIJSH.2026.v3.i2.45514>

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beyond the plantation and marketplace, seeping into domestic life and reshaping gender relations. The household and the body are not shielded from these systemic forces; rather, they are made complicit in reproducing the cold arithmetic of value. The bodies that register these violences most acutely, and with the deepest consequences, are women's bodies.

This paper argues that *The Counting House* stages the female body as a battlefield—a contested terrain where multiple forms of power intersect. It is on women's bodies that economic pressures, patriarchal authority, male frustration, communal surveillance, and intimate coercions converge, leaving visible and invisible marks. The novel presents an intricate network of gendered relationships in which women are made to carry the weight of collective hardship as well as individual desires and failures. In doing so, it offers not only a critique of colonial capitalism but also an unflinching look at the internalized patriarchal structures that perpetuate violence within diasporic communities. My analysis focuses on the major women characters—Rohini, Miriam, Finee, and Droopatī—whose embodied experiences offer distinct but interconnected testimonies to the violence of history. Their lives and struggles are read in relation to the male figures Vidya, Kampta, Gladstone, and Kumar. These pairings permit a relational analysis that emphasizes how violence emerges not merely from the actions of isolated individuals but from social systems, historical inheritances, and entrenched gendered expectations enacted through interpersonal relations. The narrative thus insists on understanding violence as both structural and intimate, as simultaneously systemic and domestic.

Methodology

Methodologically, the paper will proceed in five parts. First, it will outline the theoretical tools for reading embodiment in a postcolonial context, drawing on postcolonial feminism, biopolitics, and trauma theory. Second, it will analyze how the counting house metaphor informs the novel's representation of gendered valuation, where bodies—especially female ones—are measured, exchanged, and disciplined within economic logics. Third, it will examine the layers of physical, structural, and symbolic violence enacted on women and trace how these violences accumulate across the body and memory. Fourth, it will explore the women's strategies of endurance, negotiation, and subtle resistance, emphasizing how acts of survival themselves constitute forms of defiance. Finally, the paper will discuss the novel's politics of memory, arguing that Dabydeen offers an ethical mode of attention to embodied testimony, thereby transforming the fragile female body into an archive of both suffering and resilience.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by three interrelated theoretical lenses—postcolonial feminism, Foucauldian biopolitics, and trauma theory—which together provide a nuanced understanding of the ways in which women's bodies function as sites of power, resistance, and historical memory in *The Counting House*.

1. Postcolonial Feminism: Postcolonial feminist theory emphasizes the specificity and contextuality of women's experiences under colonial and postcolonial conditions. Unlike universalizing accounts of "Third World women," it insists on examining how race, class, and migration intersect to shape gendered subjectivities. In the context of Dabydeen's novel,

characters such as Rohini and Miriam cannot be understood apart from the historical and cultural realities of Indo-Guyanese life—experiences shaped by indenture, labor exploitation, and patriarchal expectations. Postcolonial feminism thus foregrounds localized narratives, insisting that women's experiences of violence, vulnerability, and agency must be read in relation to the specific sociohistorical structures that produce them (Mohanty, 1988; Spivak, 1988).

2. Foucauldian Biopolitics and Discipline: Michel Foucault's concepts of disciplinary power and biopolitics provide a framework for understanding how social institutions regulate, surveil, and control human bodies. In the novel, spaces such as plantations, counting houses, and colonial administrative offices function as instruments of governance, sorting individuals according to economic and racial hierarchies, and rendering them both legible and expendable. The counting house itself operates as a powerful metaphor for this regulatory gaze: it quantifies labor, measures productivity, and organizes life along lines of utility and control. Bodies are not simply passive sites of oppression; they are actively shaped, disciplined, and, at times, coerced into compliance by these pervasive structures of power (Foucault, 1977; 1990).

3. Trauma and Somatic Memory: Trauma theory, particularly feminist approaches to embodiment, highlights how violence is inscribed upon the body and may resist conventional modes of narrative representation. Scholars such as Elaine Scarry and Judith Herman demonstrate that traumatic experiences leave material traces—physical pain, exhaustion, or bodily deformity—while also shaping memory and identity. In this reading, women's bodies in *The Counting House* function as living archives: they store histories of suffering, labor, and oppression that are not always articulated verbally but remain visible through gestures, scars, and patterns of behavior. This approach underscores the epistemic role of the body, suggesting that corporeal experiences are themselves forms of historical knowledge that convey the intensity and specificity of lived trauma.

Taken together, these three theoretical lenses enable a multifaceted analysis of women's bodies in the novel. They are at once material, in terms of physical vulnerability, exhaustion, or pregnancy; symbolic, as sites of honor, shame, or social expectation; and epistemic, as repositories of historical and experiential knowledge. By reading the body in this triadic manner, the analysis foregrounds how power, violence, and resilience intersect in intimate and systemic ways, illuminating the complex terrain of gender, labor, and colonial legacies in Dabydeen's narrative.

Discussion

In David Dabydeen's *The Counting House*, the titular space functions as a sustained and multifaceted metaphor, articulating a gendered economy in which human value is measured in strictly numerical terms. The counting house, traditionally understood as a site of bookkeeping and financial oversight, extends in the novel into the intimate and domestic spheres, where the logic of ledgers, wages, and accounts shapes the rhythms of everyday life. When wages are meager, remittances unpredictable, and labor itself precarious, households are subjected to relentless arithmetic pressures. Women, who are disproportionately responsible for

reproductive and domestic labor, become the living surfaces upon which this economic calculus is inscribed. Their bodies, labor, and capacity for care are effectively commodified, even as they remain formally unremunerated.

This economic rationality deeply structures social and familial relationships. Male identity, in particular, is often tied to the ability to provide materially. When the counting house reduces labor to paltry sums, men are confronted with a profound sense of inadequacy and humiliation. Figures such as Vidia and Kampta respond to these constraints by attempting to reassert control and authority within the domestic sphere, frequently at the expense of the women around them. Women, in turn, are both objects and instruments of this calculation: their reproductive potential may be viewed as an additional burden or obligation, their domestic labor indispensable yet uncompensated. Within these pressures, women exercise subtle forms of negotiation—rationing food, managing scarce resources, or leveraging sexual economies—to navigate and sometimes mitigate the harsh arithmetic of survival.

Moreover, the counting house metaphor evokes the colonial archives of indentureship: contracts, production reports, payroll records, and other bureaucratic instruments historically functioned to translate human lives into quantifiable, impersonal data. Dabydeen's narrative underscores the persistence of this ledger logic in postcolonial domestic contexts, demonstrating how economic structures continue to reduce human experience to calculable units. Women's bodies, in particular, bear the unacknowledged costs of such systemic valuation, becoming both repositories of labor and the mediums through which economic pressures are enacted and resisted. In this way, the novel links the material pressures of postcolonial economic survival with the intimate politics of gender, revealing how colonial legacies of valuation continue to shape the bodily and social lives of women.

Rohini emerges as the most complex and unsettling female figure in the narrative, embodying a form of agency shaped by extreme deprivation, colonial intrusion, and gendered powerlessness. She is ambitious, future-oriented, and relentlessly dissatisfied with the limitations of village life. Dissatisfied with the emotional and economic insufficiency of her marriage to Vidia, she seeks fulfilment through excess—sexual, material, and imaginative—revealing a profound refusal to accept the limitations imposed on indentured women. Her attraction to Gladstone signifies not merely moral deviation but a dangerous aspiration toward colonial power, status, and security, which she misrecognises as personal liberation. Rohini's agency is marked by calculation as much as recklessness. She participates in conspiratorial acts—poisoning the cow, imagining communal violence as opportunity, manipulating gossip—to engineer escape from village confinement. Yet this agency repeatedly collapses into self-destruction, exposing the fragility of individual will within oppressive social systems. Her longing for mobility, wealth, and recognition is inseparable from her internalisation of colonial hierarchies, where whiteness and authority are equated with progress. Her imagination is fixed on mobility, wealth, and escape—first through Calcutta and later through Guiana—which she associates with modernity and freedom. Unlike the other women, Rohini refuses passive endurance; instead, she adopts calculation, manipulation, and moral transgression as survival strategies. Her ethical framework is pragmatic rather than communal or religious. She rationalises violence, sacrilege, and betrayal when these appear necessary for personal

advancement. At the same time, her sexuality becomes a site of power and negotiation rather than intimacy, reflecting how female desire and agency are distorted under patriarchy and economic desperation. Rohini's character thus illustrates how colonial modernity fractures traditional moral structures, producing subjects who prioritise self-preservation and aspiration over collective responsibility. She represents a troubling but intelligible response to historical conditions that leave women few legitimate routes to autonomy.

Finee represents a generation trapped between emotional dependency and moral authority, wielding affect rather than power. Her character is marked by volatility, bitterness, and performative suffering, which she uses to assert control over her daughter and son-in-law. Having endured loss, poverty, and marital hardship, Finee clings to familial obligation as her only remaining source of security. Her frequent emotional outbursts, threats of curses, and invocations of maternal sacrifice reveal a survival strategy rooted in guilt and fear rather than strength. Despite presenting herself as morally upright, Finee is deeply compromised. She benefits from communal violence and material opportunism while simultaneously condemning moral decline. This contradiction exposes the fragility of her ethical stance. Finee's character reflects how prolonged vulnerability can erode moral clarity, turning tradition into a tool for coercion rather than guidance. She embodies the emotional cost of generational stagnation and the ways trauma reproduces itself within domestic relationships.

Droopatие functions as a figure of unreflective complicity, aligning herself with authority—patriarchal, communal, and colonial—without critical engagement. She readily accepts the logic of violence and exclusion when it appears to promise safety or advantage. Unlike Finee's anxious resistance or Rohini's calculated rebellion, Droopatие's response to crisis is conformity. She internalises dominant narratives and reproduces them within the domestic sphere, reinforcing structures that ultimately oppress her as well. Her character also exposes the moral erosion that occurs when survival is confused with obedience. Droopatие's willingness to justify brutality and her opportunistic moral reasoning reflect how ordinary individuals become agents of violence under colonial and communal pressures. She symbolises the ease with which ethical responsibility is surrendered when power appears distant and unchallengeable.

Miriam is a morally complex figure shaped by prolonged exposure to colonial domination, racial marginalisation, and gendered exploitation. Her character is defined by survival through strategic adaptation rather than idealistic resistance. Fully aware that colonial institutions deny her credibility and voice, she learns to rely on discretion, manipulation, and proximity to power rather than appeals to justice. Her relationship with Gladstone is treated pragmatically, as a means of securing protection and material stability in a hostile plantation economy. Miriam's maternal role, particularly toward Rohini, is inseparable from coercion. She shelters, feeds, and protects Rohini, yet simultaneously controls her body, desires, and speech, believing that unchecked freedom invites social annihilation. Her care is therefore authoritarian, reflecting a survival ethic in which discipline becomes a form of protection. This moral pragmatism allows Miriam to justify ethically troubling actions as necessary interventions in an environment that offers women no safe choices. Narrative control is central to Miriam's agency. By asserting

the right to begin, interrupt, and end stories, she resists colonial erasure and claims authority over meaning, even as she recognises that her public testimony will be ignored.

The novel presents the female body as a site of control, exploitation, and survival rather than autonomy. Through Rohini, Finee, Droopatie, and Miriam, women's bodies are shown to be shaped by patriarchal authority, colonial violence, and economic precarity, where bodily existence is inseparable from social function and power. Rohini's body is depicted as sexualised and surveilled, functioning as a form of illusory agency. While she perceives her youth and fertility as tools for escape and advancement, her body ultimately becomes the means through which discipline and punishment are enacted. Her transgressive desire is pathologised, revealing how female sexuality is both commodified and controlled. Finee's ageing body represents vulnerability and fear. Stripped of reproductive and sexual value, it becomes a source of anxiety rather than power, exposing how women remain threatened by sexual violence and dispossession regardless of age. Her bodily display is rendered abject, reflecting the humiliation attached to female dependency. Droopatie's body is defined by labour and endurance. Worn down by domestic responsibility, it signifies survival through adaptation rather than aspiration. Her performative illness underscores how bodily weakness becomes a strategy to retain authority within constrained social roles. Miriam's racialised body embodies colonial memory and pragmatic resistance. It functions as a site of knowledge, healing, and moral ambiguity, shaped by historical exploitation. Unlike the others, her bodily agency emerges from experience rather than desire, highlighting survival under colonial brutality. Literarily, Dabydeen uses Rohini and Miriam to foreground the fragility and resilience of women's bodies under structural violence. Through detailed somatic description and attention to quotidian labor, the novel renders trauma tangible while simultaneously depicting survival strategies that challenge simplistic readings of victimhood. Postcolonial feminist and biopolitical frameworks illuminate how women's corporeal experiences are shaped by the lingering effects of indenture, colonial economy, and patriarchal control. The novel situates the body as both battlefield and archive, exposing the physical and symbolic costs of historical and social inequities while celebrating the subtle forms of endurance and agency that women cultivate. Together, these representations reveal that the female body in the novel is a contested terrain where oppression is enacted and negotiated, underscoring the gendered and racialised costs of survival within colonial and patriarchal systems.

To fully understand the patterns of violence enacted upon women in *The Counting House*, it is essential to examine the masculinities that underpin such behavior. The male characters in the novel are not simply individual perpetrators; their actions are shaped by structural forces, economic pressures, and social expectations that define what it means to "be a man" in a postcolonial, Indo-Guyanese context. Each male figure demonstrates a distinct, yet interconnected, response to these pressures.

Vidia's treatment of Rohini serves as the most sustained illustration of how displaced humiliation manifests as domestic violence. Within the colonial economy, Vidia's work is precarious, low-paying, and socially demeaning, leaving him with little opportunity to assert his masculinity in public spaces. The sense of emasculation he experiences externally is transferred into the domestic sphere, where he attempts to reassert authority through coercion

and control. His violence is both physical and psychological, revealing a pattern in which the lack of public recognition and social respect finds expression in private domination. While his behavior is morally reprehensible, it is also socially intelligible: Vidia embodies a man shaped by intersecting pressures of racial subordination, economic precarity, and patriarchal entitlement, highlighting how broader structural forces contribute to intimate forms of oppression.

Kampta exemplifies a different response to the same structural pressures, where masculinity is performed through competition and the pursuit of social prestige. His engagement with women is often mediated by the need to demonstrate status and competence within the community. When Kampta is unable to secure economic recognition, he may attempt to compensate by asserting control over women's reputations, monitoring their behavior, or engaging in public displays of authority. In this sense, his enforcement of gender norms is tied less to immediate material gain than to the symbolic economy of honor and prestige. Kampta illustrates how competitive masculinity operates within communities: the desire to be recognized as a "worthy" man can translate into mechanisms of surveillance and control over women, reinforcing hierarchies of power even when direct economic influence is limited.

Gladstone and Kumar occupy positions that are intermediary in nature, bridging local patriarchal norms and broader institutional or economic structures. Gladstone, potentially functioning as an overseer or figure linked to the counting house, mediates between colonial authority and local men, enforcing rules and standards that reflect both economic and symbolic hierarchies. Kumar, slightly more economically secure, may enjoy certain privileges, yet still participates in patriarchal enforcement, policing women's behavior and upholding community norms of acceptable femininity. Their actions demonstrate that masculine power is multilayered: it is exercised not only through direct coercion but also symbolically, through the policing of social norms, and institutionally, through access to economic and educational resources. In this way, Gladstone and Kumar show how male authority is embedded within overlapping networks of structural and social power.

Taken together, these male figures reveal the complex dynamics of masculinity under conditions of economic and social strain. Each responds differently to pressures of racialized labor, colonial subordination, and patriarchal expectation, but all contribute to the reproduction of gendered violence. By examining their behaviors, the novel exposes how systems of oppression operate simultaneously at the level of personal relationships, communal expectations, and institutional structures, demonstrating that violence against women is not simply the result of individual malice but of historically and socially conditioned masculinities.

Across the characters in *The Counting House*, an omnipresent communal gaze operates as a pervasive organizing force, shaping behavior and social interactions. Women's bodies, in particular, are subjected to heightened surveillance, with their gestures, speech, and even silences interpreted as moral indicators. Shame functions as a crucial mechanism of social control: a visible bruise, an unintended slip, or even a rumored romantic liaison can carry long-lasting consequences, effectively altering an individual's social standing in ways that are difficult, if not impossible, to reverse. The ledger mentality of the counting house extends into this moral economy, as reputations are "accounted for" alongside material wealth, and any

reputational deficit carries tangible social costs. This system of scrutiny is deeply gendered; women are expected to embody modesty, obedience, and unceasing labor in both reproductive and domestic spheres. These expectations are actively enforced by multiple agents of the community—including neighbors, kin, and religious authorities—whose observations and judgments reinforce the pressures of conformity.

Dabydeen's narrative renders this omnipresent gaze vividly and palpably. Scenes of gossip, rumor, and public censure are depicted with precision and restraint, illustrating how social visibility itself can operate as a form of violence, sometimes surpassing physical harm in its capacity to discipline and constrain. For many female characters, the anticipation of shame and public censure governs behavior as much as—or more than—direct coercion, creating a form of bodily and psychological regulation that is both intimate and insidious. Through this lens, the novel demonstrates how social surveillance, mediated by gendered norms and moral expectations, becomes a central instrument through which power is exercised and maintained in the community.

One of the novel's most compelling strategies is its meticulous attention to somatic detail—how bodies themselves bear and transmit memory. In a society where official documents, ledgers, and economic records often conceal the true costs of labor and social suffering, women's bodies emerge as repositories of history. Scars that have healed, chronic aches that linger, the stoop induced by years of domestic toil, and even the careful, habitual gestures a mother makes while bathing or feeding a child—all register experiences that evade formal documentation. Dabydeen's prose captures these sensorial traces with precision: the tastes and smells of domestic life, the textures of worn fabrics, the subtle micro-gestures of care and endurance.

Trauma, particularly the kind inflicted by social and economic subjugation, is often non-narrative: it is encoded not in words but in sleep patterns, posture, movement, or the avoidance of particular spaces. Dabydeen honors these registers of memory by positioning bodily detail at the center of his storytelling. Readers are invited to “read” the body as a text in itself; for example, Rohini's hands do not merely perform domestic labor—they narrate a history of repetitive toil, endurance, and invisible labor that no ledger acknowledges. By foregrounding these corporeal traces, the novel challenges conventional archives of history and knowledge. It reframes what counts as evidence, privileging lived experience alongside official records and asserting that the body itself can function as a credible site of historical testimony. In doing so, the narrative bridges the personal and the political, making the intimate labor of women legible as both social critique and ethical reckoning.

If women's bodies are depicted as battlefields within Dabydeen's narrative, they are simultaneously sites of fragile yet profoundly meaningful resistance. Resistance in the novel is rarely expressed as overt defiance or rebellion; rather, it emerges through small, strategic, and often invisible actions that disrupt patriarchal power in ways that are sustainable and protective. One significant mode of resistance is infrapolitics and silence. Women employ quiet refusals, calculated silences, and the selective withholding of emotional labor as tools to navigate and undermine male authority. For example, Rohini often chooses not to respond directly to Vidia's verbal assaults or displays of domination. Her silence is not mere submission; it functions as a

careful tactic that preserves her autonomy in a domestic space structured by male control. These small acts of withholding communication or compliance become a form of invisible resistance that cannot easily be measured or punished. Another form of resistance manifests in domestic economizing. Even without children to care for, Rohini manages household resources strategically, rationing food and labor in ways that maintain her personal dignity and independence. She may, for instance, allocate scarce provisions to ensure her own physical well-being or subtly limit Vidia's leverage over her through careful management of household necessities. These acts are quotidian and often overlooked, yet they allow her to assert a form of agency within the domestic sphere, challenging the absolute authority her husband seeks to wield. Solidarity networks further extend these forms of resistance beyond the household. Women in the novel often engage in mutual aid, sharing food, information, and emotional support with one another. Miriam, for instance, acts as a source of counsel and practical assistance, creating informal safety nets that exist outside the rigid frameworks of the "counting-house" economy. These communal networks generate alternative systems of care, emphasizing relational and moral obligations that resist purely transactional or patriarchal measures of value. Finally, rituals of preserving dignity offer another subtle yet vital form of resistance. Small, seemingly ordinary acts—such as maintaining personal appearance despite scarcity, preserving religious tokens, or keeping private memories—allow women to sustain their inner moral and emotional worlds. For Rohini, these acts affirm her autonomy and humanity, asserting an inner life that cannot be fully regulated or reduced by Vidia's control or by social hierarchies.

Dabydeen's narrative ethics are most evident in his treatment of violence, which he portrays with a deliberate restraint that neither sensationalizes nor sentimentalizes suffering. Scenes of physical and emotional brutality are rendered with stark simplicity, devoid of melodrama or excessive embellishment. This stylistic choice compels readers to confront the ordinariness and ubiquity of violence, rather than consume it as spectacle or entertainment. The ethical weight of these moments arises precisely from their matter-of-fact presentation: readers are positioned not as detached observers seeking thrill, but as witnesses required to reckon with the lived realities of those who endure harm. Crucially, Dabydeen centers women's embodied experiences, allowing their bodies to serve as repositories of memory and testimony. Through meticulous attention to sensory detail—the texture of bruised skin, the subtle tensing of muscles, the lingering effects of pain—the novel foregrounds the ways in which bodies carry histories that official records, legal documents, or communal gossip often fail to capture. In this sense, the narrative enacts a form of ethical witnessing that acknowledges the material and somatic dimensions of harm, emphasizing that the consequences of violence are both physical and profoundly intimate.

Conclusion

The Counting House powerfully stages the female body as both battlefield and archive. Through Rohini, Miriam, Finee, and Droopat, and in relation to men such as Vidia, Kampta, Gladstone, and Kumar, Dabydeen explores how colonial valuation, economic precarity, and patriarchal norms intersect to produce a multilayered violence. Women's bodies register physical blows, hunger, reproductive exploitation, shame, and community surveillance; yet

these same bodies also hold knowledge, memory, and practices of survival that resist quantification. The counting house metaphor proves especially useful: it reveals how economic rationality seeps into domestic life and bodily experience, reducing persons to entries in ledgers while failing to account for corporeal costs. Dabydeen's ethics of attention—his careful rendering of somatic detail—insists on reading those costs, and on centering women's bodies as crucial sources of historical knowledge. For scholars and activists, the novel offers two imperatives. First, analyses of postcolonial violence must attend to embodiment—how histories are inscribed on skin and in gesture. Second, reparative projects must incorporate survivors' embodied testimony and community-based remedies that acknowledge cultural constraints around shame and honor. Dabydeen's literary practice performs both: it records the ledger and, more importantly, reads the margins where flesh tells its own story.

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