Concerning an axiom that flutters like a door hinge or butterfly

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Think of a door-hinge or butterfly. Then imagine an axiom made up of conjoined wings that perpetually pull each other apart. This paper concerns the strange flitting of just such an axiom. Let's spell it out: "I lie and that's the truth." To be sure, we are speaking of a paradox that stumps logic and pulls in both directions at once without ever resolving itself. The philosopher Epimenides was haunted by such self-referential axioms and is credited with formulating the Liar's Paradox. "All Cretans are Liars," says Epimenides the Cretan. Now for the statement to be true, it must of itself be a lie since a Cretan utters it. If "All Cretans are Liars" is itself a lie, then surely not all Cretans are liars, and the statement is false. Since this false statement is uttered by a Cretan, then it is true that "All Cretans are Liars." And so we are led round and round the prickly pear without respite. Or take the axiom: "This sentence is a lie." If it is true that "This sentence is a lie", i.e. it is clearly untrue, then for it to be a lie it has to lie, and so it is true after all, thus we pass from one wing of the paradox to the other in a movement without end. The mathematician, Kurt Gödel, called attention to the fact that logical systems contain propositions, such as the one identified by Epimenides, that could be neither proved nor disproved. Since one is pulled hither and thither in the tug of war between two opposing concepts, there exists an "uncertainty principle" at the heart of such axioms.

At the risk of repetition but for the sake of clarity, I would like to stay a bit longer with the axiom "I lie and that's the truth." On the one hand, if it's true that I lie, then I must have made known to you my intention to deceive, since a lie is an intentional falsehood while a truth is the absence of this hidden intention. My understanding of truth coincides with Kant's as well as Derrida's in that "the contrary of the lie is neither truth nor reality but veracity or veridicity, truth-saying, meaning-to-say-the-true" (Derrida 2001, 74); in other words, it is a form of parrhesia (truth-telling) where the road from intention to utterance is unswervingly straight. Foucault makes the same point:

If we distinguish between the speaking subject (the subject of enunciation) and the grammatical subject of the enounced, we could say that there is also the subject of the enunciandum—which refers to the held belief or opinion of the speaker. In parrhesia the speaker emphasises the fact that he is both the subject of the enunciation and the subject of the enunciandum—that he himself is the subject of the opinion to which he refers (Foucault 2001, 12-13).

Intention, belief and utterance are firmly soldered together in the act of parrhesia. I speak, of course, of an intention that has no truck with context or rhetoric or with subconscious processes, day dreams, slips of tongue, etc.; clearly the subconscious cannot figure in any metaphysics of the lie. One may speak the truth while uttering a
falsehood of which one has no prior knowledge; conversely, one lies if one tells the truth while intending a falsehood. Consequently, a lie is never ironic because, *stricto sensu*, irony is a truth-telling device in that it makes explicit the speaker’s secret intention. Commenting on classical theories of the lie, Derrida observes that lying is first and foremost an intentional act:

> What matters...is the intention. Saint Augustine also underscored this point: there is no lie, whatever one may say, without the intention, the desire, or the explicit will to deceive (*fallendi cupiditas, voluntas fallendi*). This intention, which defines veracity and lying in the order of saying or the act of saying, remains independent of truth or falsity of the content, of what is said. The lie pertains to saying, and to the meaning-to-say, not to the said: "He who does not know that what he says is false does not lie if he thinks it is true, but he does lie who tells the truth when he thinks it is false, because persons must be judged according to their deliberate intention" (Derrida 2001, 68).

So if the *truth* is that I lie, then I must have made known to you my intention to deceive, thereby cancelling the falsehood. For it to be true, the lie cannot be a lie. On the other hand, since a lie is only true when it’s a falsehood, that is to say when it sets out to intentionally deceive the other, then any disclosure of my intention to deceive must itself be deceitful, otherwise I cannot be telling you the truth about my mendacity. For it to be a lie, the truth cannot be a truth. Attraction and repulsion are intrinsic features of such axioms, holding contradictory aspects in tension without resolving them, thereby generating the uncertainty principle. Gödel’s principle names an axiom that includes within its field the impossibility of truth-telling and lie-saying as well as, and this is of paramount importance, the possibility of doing both: hence the axiom as paradox. In the Ern Malley affair of 1944, for instance, James McAuley and Harold Stewart sold a lie to Max Harris, the editor of *Angry Penguins*, by submitting hoax poems in the name of Ern Malley, with the ultimate intention of disclosing the truth that modernist aesthetics was itself a lie. A lie leads to an eventual truth; this eventual truth, however, cannot be rid of the lie on which it is founded. In her polemical tract on violence, Hannah Arendt comments, albeit not without a pinch of ambiguity, that "evil is no more than a privative *modus* of the good, that good can come out of evil; that, in short, evil is but a temporary manifestation of a still-hidden good" (Arendt 1970, 56). It may also be the case (and I too must add my pinch of ambiguity to this remark) that lying is no more than a privative *modus* of veracity, that truth can come out of falsehood; that, in short, lies are but temporary manifestations of still-hidden truths. At least this is what the ever-fluttering axiom teaches us.

It is my contention, in this paper, that at the heart of most *discursive* systems—and discursive is the operative word here—resides an uncertainty principle. Logical modes of argumentation come apart or take on a hyper form when we enter the self-referential field of paradoxical axioms, such as "I lie and that’s the truth." If we were to undertake an "extrapolative leap," thereby dispensing with the logical mode of argumentation, we could claim that *discursive* modes of inquiry (juridical, historical, critical, sociological, etc.), which rely on producing their object by analysing a variety of opinions, subjects, testimonies and archives, operate on an uncertainty principle in that truth-telling and lie-saying are simultaneously possible and impossible within such systems. To illustrate my point as opposed to demonstrating it, I want to revisit a famous case relating to the alleged assault of a female labourer, Kunti, by a white overseer on the tenth day of April, 1913, in Nadewa—one of the many plantations to which Indian labourers were assigned under the system of indentured migration to the Fiji Islands. More than 60,000 coolie workers made the journey to Fiji between 1879 and 1916. Kunti’s case was brought to the attention of the Government of India when a letter bearing her name, and describing her plight in no uncertain terms, appeared in *Bharat Mitra*, a reputable newspaper based in Calcutta. The widely-subscribed *Leader* also ran the story. K.L. Gillion and Brij Lal have both noted how Kunti’s account stirred up
the masses in India. Indian nationalists, as part of their anti-colonial struggle, used the public outcry to mount an "intense campaign" to put an end to the system of indentured recruitment (Lal 2000, 196). To counter the agitation, where the abuse of Indian women served as a reminder of the immorality of British occupation, the Indian Government wrote to the Colonial Office in Fiji seeking to "expose the falsity of the story before it attains a wider currency"—regardless, it seems, of its actual veridical status (CSO MP 6609/14). R.E. Enthoven, Secretary to the Government of India, prejudiced an impartial investigation into the complaint by expressing an opinion that the report "if unrefuted, cannot fail to have the most mischievous effects"—an unequivocal reference to the story’s capacity to provide ammunition to anti-empire agitators in India (CSO MP 6609/14). The political risks were such that a potential truth had to be transformed into a lie. And so the inquiry commenced in bad faith. Guided by the political concerns of R.E. Enthoven, the colonial administration in Fiji undertook to gather witness accounts and related evidence pertaining to the Kunti affair. The version of the incident advanced by colonial functionaries and their witnesses stands in stark contrast to Kunti's testimony in *Bharat Mitra*, the account published in *Leader* and Totaram Sanadhya's retelling of it in *My Twenty One Years in the Fiji Islands*.

Interestingly, the uncertainty principle shows itself not only in the contrasting opinions held by the various parties in the controversy, but also in the possible truths and falsehoods contained in each position. In each case, the will-to-truth is never entirely separable from the will-to-lie, or, rather, there is an area of indistinction between them. It is instructive to recall Derrida's point that truth-telling and lie-saying are intentional acts based on the performative (*I speak, I believe, etc.*) and so "one will never be able to prove anything against the person who says, 'I was wrong but I did not mean to deceive; I am in good faith,' or, alleging the always possible difference between the said, the saying, and the meaning-to-say, the effects of language, rhetoric, and context..." (Derrida 2001, 68). Since it is impossible to establish the truth or falsity of a proposition without the benefit of telepathy, it is an accepted strategy among scholars to look for consistencies and inconsistencies in any statement to determine veracity. The trouble is that most discursive categories usually contain both these features and, rules of persuasion notwithstanding, tend to reproduce them in any determination. The upshot is that the uncertainty principle moves about like a virus between propositions, testimonies and statements. One is never able to completely prove or disprove any one statement, since the analyst cannot ever inhabit the perspective of the attestant—the generator of the utterance under scrutiny. *Parrhesia* happens, yes, but we can never know for sure that it happens. All accounts on the controversy surrounding Kunti’s complaint have an uncertain flutter about them and I would want to, now, add my own nervous flutter to these accounts.

First, let us confront the slippery issue of mediation. At no point do we ever come anywhere close to an unmediated account of the complaint. Kunti is never permitted the performative role of the true witness. She always speaks through an other, or, rather, is always spoken for by another. The reason is, for most part, self-evident rather than conspiratorial; Kunti is illiterate and in genuine need of representation. What intrigues me, however, is the politics of citation and re-citation. Every act of representation admits of a procedure where an earlier code—say, a performative one—is captured within a structure of interpretation. Recitation is always the condition of any citation: we hear at least two voices if not more. In any act of mediation we are privy to a conversation where it is no longer possible to positively ascertain the identity of the speakers. Lies and truths, consequently, merge in a grey area of indistinction since we know not precisely who speaks, how truly, and to whom. Kunti’s letter to *Bharat Mitra* was purportedly ghost-written by S.M. Saraswati, an Arya Samaji activist, although he later denied ever having penned it (Saraswati's, 1914 (CSO MP 6609/14); the *Leader* article is a polemical summary of the contents of this letter, thereby constituting a second-order mediation; Sanadhya's account of the incident, transcribed by the journalist Benarsidas Chaturvedi, clearly belongs to the third-order as it recounts the contents of the published letter, although the Inspector of Immigrants, R.R. Backhouse, is of the opinion that the complaint was actually drafted in
Sanadhya’s house; Backhouse’s report, written in the investigative-juridical mode with built-in rules of evidential narrative, is itself a curious exercise in mediated heteroglossia seemingly heedless of its own authority to extract or countenance mainly favourable testimonies; similarly, the report filed by A. Montgomerie, Acting Agent-General of Immigration, draws on the singular "truth" of Backhouse’s findings to mount a systemic untruth regarding the just treatment of women labourers in Fiji’s plantations; and, finally, the historian Brij Lal inverts Montgomerie’s approach in that he takes a case based on the uncertainty principle to bring into relief a structural truth about the indenture system. After using Kunti’s case as an illustrative example, Lal makes it clear that his article serves as an extended exposé of the "derogatory stereotype of the Indian female worker as ‘mercenary’ character who was responsible for all the major social and moral ills of the plantation society, such as suicide, murder, infant mortality and the general moral degradation of the Fiji Indian community" (Lal 2000, 197). He suggests that "the system of coercive labour with all its attendant problems rather than the women themselves produced the problems that bedevilled indenture" (Lal 2000, 197). It is, of course, difficult to resist Lal’s argument in a general or even ethico-political sense. The problem, as I see it, is one of extrapolation from illustration to analysis. For if the undecidable lies at the heart of the Kunti affair, is it really possible to use it as an example to build a case against the system without reproducing the undecidable? Lal supports his argument from creditable sources and statistics, and the overall picture he builds is a compelling one, but his first step leaves open the possibility that Kunti lied as much as she told the truth; it follows that the colonial account of indentured women as immoral and mercenary is as true as it is false, and Lal’s statement concerning the culpability of the system of bonded labour is similarly caught between a rock and a hard place. The uncertainty principle travels with the published letter and re-surfaces whenever there is an attempt to get to the bottom of the affair.

Motive, context, power, rhetoric, strategic silence, manipulation, affect and sexual politics haunt all accounts of the case. Sanadhya’s version, for instance, comprises a small part of a larger autobiographical tract intent on condemning the inhumanities of the indenture system. Elsewhere I have commented on the affective strategies used by Sanadhya to intervene in the very form of historical representation. For each claim he makes against the system, Sanadhya cites an atyachar or actual outrage as evidence in support of his statement. His detailed account of Kunti’s plight is an essential part of the radical strategy he uses to attack girmit, a term coined by coolies to describe a system of contractual agreement to which they had not agreed. Sanadhya’s autobiographical narrator never doubts the factual accuracies of Kunti’s story; in fact, the point of view is that of third person intimate inasmuch as the narrator’s perspective, at crucial moments in the retelling, coincides with the perspective of the protagonist while capturing the present time of the experience itself. Listen to this:

The sardar and overseer went there to rape her. On the threat of the overseer, the sardar tried to grab Kunti’s arm. Kunti freed her arm, ran and jumped into the nearby river. By god’s will, the dinghy of a boy named Jaidev was nearby (Sanadhya 1991, 44).

Even in the Singh-Kelly translation, we hear the wonderful doubling or trebling of voice in the phrase "By god’s will." For, it is acceptable to ask, who speaks here? Who or what expresses a combination of fear and relief? Is it Kunti or Sanadhya (via Chaturvedi, his amanuensis) or the grammatical subject of some culture-specific rhetoric or maybe the implied Indian reader, drawn affectively into the drama of the moment where the identity of victim and witness coincide. The answer is none of them, and all at once. The apostrophe incorporates all parties within its ambit, since the suggestion is that Kunti’s plight under indenture affects the dignity and honour of all Indians. Hence the stirring rhetorical appeal at the end: "Having listened to the story of Kunti, will not our brothers make an effort to stop this coolie-system?" (Sanadhya 1991, 44). Sanadhya’s main target is the coolie pratha which he wants abolished, and clearly it is not in his interest to subvert Kunti’s testimony. However, if Backhouse is correct in
his assessment that Saraswati wrote Kunti’s "letter...in the house of one Totaram of Nausori," then the veracity of the Sanadhya’s account of the story is put in doubt (CSO MP 8779/1913). To be sure, there is a curious lapse in the latter’s memory concerning the place of writing as well as the identity of the spectral scribe. Sanadhya maintains that Kunti had "someone" write her letter but makes no mention that this event took place in his own home in Nausori.

Backhouse’s report, written in response to the allegations published in Bharat Mitra, merely adds to the axiomatic uncertainty about the status of lies and truths. The document, which expresses the political opinion that Kunti’s story "is not to be believed," draws on interviews, anecdotes, gossip and statutory declarations to arrive at its conclusion (CSO MP 8779/1913). Tracked down and interviewed by Backhouse, Kunti sticks more or less to the published version: in short, she declares that she was sent to an isolated area for work, sexually manhandled by the overseer, struggled and screamed, drawing the notice of Sujni cutting grass nearby, which led to her being released by Cobcroft. Grabbing the opportunity, and eager to give Cobcroft the slip, she ran off in the direction of Wainibokasi and in sheer desperation threw herself into the river, whereupon she was rescued by a boatman, Sujni’s son Jugdeo, who happened to be in the vicinity. Sujni and Jugdeo contradict Kunti’s version of events in their separate statements to the official enquiry. The statutory declaration being a compliance-manufacturing document largely serving the objectives of the empowered, this not entirely unexpected. When accosted with these refutations, Kunti asserts that "both father and son...signed statements before Saraswati, confirming her story" (CSO MP 8779/1913). We know that when interviewed by the authorities at the insistence of the Indian Government, Saraswati is said to have made a statement to the District Commissioner, Scott, in which he disclaimed authorship of the controversial letter, disavowed all knowledge of Sujni and Jugdeo, and insinuated that the phantom scribe may have been no other than Totaram of Nausori (CSO MP 6609/14). We also know that Saraswati’s disclaimer was viewed with considerable suspicion by the Agent General of Immigration, Sydney Smith, who pointed out that the man never actually denied having seen Kunti and is likely to have "varnished" her original statement. Smith thought that Saraswati’s indictment of Totaram smacked of expedience as the latter had returned to India and warns against confusing "Totaram's Story," which appeared in Bombay, with Kunti’s statement published in the Calcutta-based Bharat Mitra (CSO MP 6609/14). Saraswati’s disclaimer, and its cynical reception by Sydney Smith, leaves the uncertainty principle intact in that it is impossible to determine the truth or otherwise of Kunti’s claims regarding the initial statements made by Sujni and Jugdeo. If Kunti is right, and there is no way of actually proving her wrong, then Sujni and Jugdeo have offered two contrasting statements, and cannot be relied upon as witnesses. In the final analysis, the report’s credibility depends on investigating Kunti’s claims concerning the earlier statements, but this is either not done or impossible to do, and so the report vacillates between a lie and a truth. In his report of 6 November, 1913, Backhouse attempts compensating for the lack of direct evidence by launching an investigation into Kunti’s character. Predictably, she is found wanting. Kunti is labelled troublesome by overseer Cobcroft; her husband, Jal, is revealed to be an opportunist and ex-felon; Mr Barber, her employer, deems her to be recalcitrant, and, most damningly, she stands accused of employing her sexuality in an immoral and calculating way. Backhouse finds Kunti to have been assigned less onerous tasks by a sirdar named Sundar Singh, with whom she is said to have had an improper sexual liaison. The dismissal of Sundar Singh, he insinuates, brought out the very worst in Kunti, resulting in the concoction of the lie, and its publication in Bharat Mitra:

The general impression on the estates, I think, is that improper relations exist between Sundar Singh and Kunta [sic], and that on account of Sundar Singh being dismissed, and an Overseer and a different Sirdar appointed in his stead, Kunta has been dissatisfied and has made charges which appear to be false, against the Overseer and the Sirdar Ramharak (CSO MP 8779/1913).
And so "general impression" begins to replace factual testimony. Backhouse's inference remains precisely that: an inference based dubiously on character assessment. Kunti's character as represented in the Indian newspapers and as vouchsafed by Sanadhya adds further complexity to an already complex affair. Lauded for her courage, honour, chastity and moral fibre, the picture of Kunti that emerges in Leader, Bharat Mitra and My Twenty One Years in the Fiji Islands bears little resemblance to the woman described in the official report. Uttara Singh and John Kelly, translators of Sanadhya's autobiography, comment that Indians were inclined to read and represent Kunti's resistance in terms of her satitva or "the total devotion of a wife to her husband, which was in ancient times the basis of the custom of sati" (Sanadhya 1991, 43). The sexualised body of the coolie woman, then, formed the battleground in the high-stakes war waged between colonialists and nationalists; 'truth' and 'lie' became indistinguishable as a consequence of the rhetorical weaponry deployed by both sides. Kunti herself was hardly a passive and uninterested member in this uncompromising ideological warfare; in fact, a recent feminist account of the case places her desire and agency at the very centre of the story (M. Mishra’, 2008).

You may recall my assertion that a truth may result in a lie and vice versa. It is just as possible for us to infer, in the absence of evidence pertaining to intention, that there is no actual link between Kunti's sexual liaison with Sundar Singh and the allegations she levels against Cobcroft. In other words, even if one accepts as factually true Kunti's sexual relationship with Sundar Singh, it does not follow that she lied about the incident with Cobcroft. One could even speculate, and speculations are ultimately not of the order of truths or lies, that the overseer and the new sirdar believed that they had succeeded Sundar Singh in absolutely all matters. That the Acting Agent-General of Immigration, A. Mongomerie, used Backhouse's findings to utter a political falsehood, since he could hardly be certain that it was "untrue that female indentured immigrants are violated or receive hurts or cruel treatment at the hands of their Overseers," there is no certainty as to the non-prejudicial nature of the inquiry (CSO MP 8779/1913).

No matter who speaks, the uncertainty principle appears to haunt their speech. What are the precise intentions of the editors of Bharat Mitra and Leader, the anti-indenture agitator, Sanadhya, and the Arya Samaji missionary, Saraswati, when they respond, as they do, to Kunti's allegations against Cobcroft. It is impossible to know. It is possible, nonetheless, to say that they are less concerned with matters of individual veracity or mendacity, and have a broader political purpose in sight. When they request an enquiry into the controversy, the Government of India and the Colonial Office in Fiji are actually advancing a counter-response to this political objective. Their main concern is to minimize political fallout by systematically disproving the allegations. Backhouse's report and Enthoven's request to expose the falsity of the story lest it gain wider currency tells us a great deal about colonial double-speak. Caught up in the grand political tussle where assertion is matched by rebuttal, avowal by disavowal, and power, sexuality and authority wage their separate wars, the testimonies of the little players—Kunti, Sujni, Jugdeo, Ramharak—cannot entirely shed their political dimension, and so they too surrender to the uncertainty principle. In the end, there is no possibility of closure. The lie is as intimately distant from the truth as the truth is distantly intimate with the lie.

References

My primary material is drawn from two Colonial Office documents kept in the National Archives in Suva, Fiji; respectively CSO MP 8779/1913 and CSO MP 8609/14. I am grateful for the assistance provided by the staff of this institution.


