

Indo-Fijian Diasporic Identity and Representation in Postcolonial Indo-Fijian Literature

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Abstract:

The indenture system was instituted after the abolition of slavery, in response to the labor demands of the British Empire during the colonial reign. To recruit laborers, the penurious peasants were enticed and promised better lives and good money. Despite the inhumane exploitation of the laborers, many girmityas chose to stay in Fiji after the system ended in the year 1920, with the hope of a better life. The traumas of indenture and struggle for identity after the end of the system became the subject for many Indo-Fijian writers, who became the voice of the diasporic community in Fiji. The collective memories of the indentured laborers, who were displaced from their homeland and relocated to their new homeland in Fiji are evidently penned by authors like Subramani, Brij Lal, Vijay Mishra and Kavita Nandan. The rootlessness of the Fiji-Indian diaspora and their quest for an identity in the 'new' home continues to dominate most Postcolonial Indo-Fijian writers till today. The narratives and content of the Indo-Fijian literature represent the insecurities and alienation that continue to haunt the descendants as well as question their identity and future in the land they now call home.

Keywords: Indenture system; Indo-Fijian; Diaspora; Postcolonial; Identity

Introduction

The arrival of the Indians to Fiji on 14th May 1879 marks a very important date not only in Fiji's history but also in the lives of the indentured laborers and their descendants. The stories of indenture, as observed by Lal [1] have gone through several reincarnations, where the earliest phase describes embarrassment, struggle and toil and the latter describes the celebration of freedom, insecurities and marginalization. In Fiji, identity research and reconstruction had been described in the literature, where Indo-Fijian authors delved into the history of the country to explain the diasporic experiences of the Indo-Fijian community. The authors, primarily reminisce rural life in Fiji during the mid and late twentieth century. The discussed authors are of Indo-Fijian descent and therefore are directly linked to the indentured history of Fiji as well as to the Indo-Fijian community. The underlying narratives describe the sad tales of suffering and sacrifice on the part of the indentured laborers and the diasporic experiences of their descendants till today.

The social and cultural lives of the Indentured laborers underwent massive changes during and after the indenture period

(which ended in 1920), resulting in the formation of a new identity: Fiji Indians [2]. Consequently, Fiji-born Indians, after the end of the indenture system, lost touch with the land of their ancestors and with the new generation born and raised in Fiji, India became out of scope to their everyday lives. Once the shackles of indenture were removed, the Indians in Fiji became a growing social and economic force and by 1945, outnumbered the indigenous Fijians (Lal, 2003). This was the beginning of the tensions between the indigenous Fijians and the Indo-Fijians in Fiji, where the latter were constantly reminded of their historical existence, raising questions about their identity and belongingness in Fiji. This paper will therefore review selected writings of Subramani, Brij Lal, Vijay Mishra and Kavita Nandan to illustrate the traumas of indenture and the Indo-Fijian diasporic identity in Fiji.

The Traumas of Indenture

To understand the Indo-Fijian diaspora, it is important to first document their first dislocation. Between 1879 and 1916, the British colonial rulers in Fiji brought the first Indian indentured laborers to work on the sugarcane plantations to fulfil

the enormous demands for cheap labor. The indigenous Fijians were spared from the destructive forces of capitalism by Fiji's first Governor, Sir Arthur Gordon who, as contended by Ramesh [3], wanted to preserve the indigenous way of life. Consequently, Indians were imported to Fiji under the indenture labor scheme which, as viewed by Robertson [4], was simply a new system of slavery.

The indenture system, therefore marks a very important entry in Fiji's history as this initiated the expansion of the capitalist Fijian economy. The colossal demand for laborers to work on sugarcane plantations, which could not be fulfilled by the indigenous population, saw hundreds of Indians coming to Fiji. Historians, who study the indenture period according to Lal [1], fail to explore the agency and lived experiences of the laborers as they primarily focused on the economic contribution. Prasad [5] agrees that the indenture system had played a major role in determining the contents of Indo-Fijian literature. The Indo-Fijian literature exemplifies the memories and experiences of the indenture period as well as the diasporic experiences that inhabit aspects of culture, religion, race and biological links.

Edward Said's construct of Orientalism can be applied in the case of the Indo-Fijian literature, which views the diaspora as the periphery, connected to the center, which is the homeland (India). Harutyunyan, [6] criticizes the classical Diaspora framework, which heavily focuses on the reasons and conditions of the diaspora in the new home, not on how their lives were before their migration. Most Indo-Fijian writers, being the descendants of the indentured laborers, had used the classical Diaspora framework, to explore the challenges in the new homeland. The collective memory of servitude, suffering, traditions, customs and religion unites their narratives to remind readers of the traumas of the indenture period and how their ancestors created a home away from home. The memories of the past that have brought about a sense of displacement and nostalgia to the indentured laborers and their descendants' continuous struggle for identity in the country they were born in, is mainly transcribed in essays, short stories, poetry, novella and memoirs.

Subramani, the son of an indentured laborer, has emerged as one of the most prominent Indo-Fijian voices. His writings encapsulate the experiences of Indo-Fijian men, women and children caught up in the vehement shadows of colonialism, indenture, ethnic tensions, and national identity. The *Fantasy Eaters* (1988) is a collection of nine short stories and a novella, which is predominantly set in the Indian community in Fiji. Subramani reveals the complex fate of the Indo-Fijians, whose existence in a multicultural country is challenged by the psychological effects of the traumas of the indenture system [7]. Subramani, through the narratives in this collection, describes the life and experiences of laborers on the plantation and their endless struggle to find home, away from home.

The traumas of indenture are recollected by Subramani through the characters in 'Sautu,' which is also the name of the village in which the story is set. The central character, Dhanpat is nearing the end of his life and thus begins experiencing mental breakdown. After his wife passed away, his children went out in quest for better opportunities overseas. Dhanpat's son Somu represents the new generation, who wanted to break free and seek an alternative identity in New Zealand but subsequently discovers that he is not detached from his village and country. Both the characters experience loneliness and alienation. Sudesh Mishra, cited in (Rajput, n.d.) identifies 'Sautu' with other villages in Fiji, which embodies the dehumanizing experiences of indenture and where the likes of Dhanpat and Somu still exist. The traumas of indenture have not withered entirely as Indo-Fijians subconsciously impinge on their historical experience and like Dhanpat, refuse to accommodate new forces and culture or become Somu, to simply leave and find a new home.

'Gone Bush', a novella in *Fantasy Eaters* somewhat mirrors the events of the physical and psychological journey of the laborers. Reading this novella not only invokes nostalgia but also describes the struggle of our forefathers in re-orienting themselves in an alien land, which later, they later called home. The other stories in the collection reflect the Indo-Fijian diasporic situation and how the female characters continue to bear the stigma and suffering of indenture. 'Tell Me Where the Train Goes', 'Gamalian Woman' and 'Kala' represent the Indo-Fijian women who attempt to break free from the doubly colonised society.

Fantasy Eaters is one of the best Indo-Fijian literature that needs to be read to visualize the life and struggles of the Indo-Fijians in Fiji. In 2017, Subramani added new short stories and reissued *Fantasy Eaters* into *Wildflowers*. Long (2017) observes richness in the contents of *Wildflowers* as it "traverses the Indo-Fijian history from indenture to the twenty-first century." The reissue of the latter collection proves the existence and recurrences of the described issues affecting the Indo-Fijians in the present society. In addition, another remarkable contribution by Subramani was the Introduction to *Indo-Fijian Experience* which describes the need for Indo-Fijians to affirm their identity as Fijians although their culture and traditions are derivatives of India. This is indeed the predicament of most Indo-Fijians in the twenty-first century, who cannot associate themselves with India because, unlike their ancestors, they have no memories of India. Their diasporic experiences are comprehensively relatable to Subramani's Introduction to the *Indo-Fijian Experience*.

Another well-known Indo-Fijian writer, Brij Lal provides a succinct historical account in his writings. Prasad [5] describes Brij Lal's writings as descriptive and reflective of the diasporic Indo-Fijian community, who had started to reconstitute the fragments of their ancestor's culture to establish their unique identity in Fiji. Brij Lal, during an interview cited in [8], reveals that the confinements between the two major groups in Fiji;

Indigenous Fijians and Indians are evidenced in the non-existence of cross-cultural interactions in the socio-political arena where the former are advantaged in certain areas of sustenance and reproduction, while the latter build upon the remnants of their indentured predecessors.

Lal's reflections in *Bittersweet: The Indo-Fijian Experience* (2005), detail the history and the representations of the Indo-Fijians in five chapters as well as a prologue that sets an undertone to the traumas associated with indenture and the diasporic experiences of the Indo-Fijian community in Fiji. The writings reflect considerable depth of research and experience which churns strong emotion, pride and respect for the indentured laborers, who suffered in the hope of providing a better life for their descendants. Brij Lal's writings on the indenture experiences and the diasporic situation of the Indo-Fijian communities in Fiji are priceless as it has recorded Indo-Fijian history as it is, unrefined and real. One need not read through each chapter in the book to cognize the experiences as the prologue in *Bittersweet: The Indo-Fijian Experience* summarizes the pervasiveness of the identity crisis amongst the Indo-Fijians in Fiji. Quanchi [9] cites Brij Lal's description of the *Indo-Fijian experience* as tragic ironies, where the Indians were made to work under conditions of extreme servitude and violence at the hands of the European settlers:

"It is about the odyssey of a people who have made something of themselves, all on their own, often against great odds, without a helping hand, but who still feel uprooted and unwanted. And it is an experience that raises troubling questions. For how many generations does one have to live in a place to be allowed to call it home?" [9].

The lines in the prologue sum up the history and the aftermath of indenture. The predicaments of the Indian communities in Fiji are detailed by Lal in his distinctive voice, which discloses the troubled identity of the Indo-Fijians caught in a complex and prejudiced world. Furthermore, the prologue questions as well as justify reasons Fiji should be the rightful home to the descendants of the indentured laborers. In the twenty-first century, many Indo-Fijians migrate to settle overseas and Lal subsequently questions the future of the Indo-Fijian community in Fiji. His essays, memoirs, fiction and life writings are a great resource for historians and scholars alike.

The Influence of Girit Ideology and Consciousness

Vijay Mishra, another well-known Indo-Fijian writer discloses the perpetual struggle for identity and representation, dis-colored through the excruciating historical experiences of the indenture. Mohit Prasad in his Doctorate Thesis (2005) acknowledges Vijay Mishra's views in providing a balance to the diasporic status of the Indo-Fijians, which offers an alternative rationalization on the diasporic subject's identity. Accordingly, Mishra in Rama's Banishment [10] argues that the girit consciousness, which developed during the period is a misrepresentation of reality:

The conscious falsification was not created by the ruling classes, but by the proletariat, the giritiyas themselves, who began to espouse values and cling to systems of beliefs quite alien to their real conditions of servitude [10].

Prasad [5], supports this viewpoint and agrees that the Indenture Period or India is not the controlling factor in determining the Indo-Fijian identity, rather, it is the historical experience that has rooted this ideology in the minds of the Indians in Fiji. Mishra claims that most Indo-Fijian literature uses India/ Girit as a center to describe the Indo-Fijian diaspora, not the other events that collectively define the Indians in Fiji (ibid). Mishra, in his writings, views the Indians as the rightful citizens of Fiji as they had contributed largely to the Fijian economy through the sugar industry and were born and bred in Fiji, which rightfully is their home.

The narratives of indenture in his revised essay on 'Girit Ideology,' Mishra [11] attempts to make his readers acknowledge their predecessor's agency in making their history, despite the violence and brutality. They were able to cope with the demands of the capitalist society and with that, they have forged a new identity for themselves and their descendants, which is something to celebrate. Mishra (ibid) encourages the Indo-Fijians to fully participate in the social, economic and political arenas instead of investing in the girit ideologies which bring in unhappiness and insecurities. His representation of the Indo-Fijians in Fiji is promising to the new generation, who knows no other country than Fiji as their home. However, Vijay Mishra's theoretical construct of the Girit Ideology and Consciousness not only affects writers but is embedded in the historical existence of the Indo-Fijians in Fiji, which although forgotten are reminded of the disparity that still exists in the society.

Finally, for Kavita Nandan, the expression of progress in the lives of the descendants of the laborers is connected with the topical accounts of the Indo-Fijian struggle. There is a similar following of the "Girit Ideology" on one side and the progressive Western values on the other. Kavita Nandan, in most of her writings, shows how the Indo-Fijian community has gone through a profound transformation from the early post-indenture days to the present. Their sensibilities are still Indian, but their pragmatic and egalitarian attitudes have greatly changed in search of better lives.

In *Stolen Worlds*, memoirs, recollections, biographies and autobiographies reflect the Indo-Fijian diasporic experiences and the ongoing legacy of the indentured laborers in Fiji. Mohit Prasad, in his Doctorate Thesis (2005), acknowledges *Stolen Worlds* as a true depiction of the lived experiences of the Indo-Fijians in the last three to four decades. The authors in this collection, reflect on their childhood and youth to identify themselves as Fiji-Indians. The narratives, however, developed to demonstrate the unresolved incongruity that exists between the Indigenous and the Indo-Fijians [12]. Kavita Nandan notes the insecurities amongst the

Indo-Fijians due to a series of coups that discriminated against them based on their ethnicity. Nandan describes the causes of Indo-Fijian migration in her poem *Words on the Pavement*, where she blames the coups that forced Indians in Fiji to migrate to countries that lured safety, security and opportunities.

Conclusion

In retrospect, like other Indo-Fijian writers, Subramani, Brij Lal, Vijay Mishra and Kavita Nandan had recorded discontentment and displacement felt by the indentured laborers and their descents in Fiji. These authors had not only kept the historical existence of the Indo-Fijians alive but had described their journey and struggles after the indenture in their new home. Subramani and Brij Lal had devoted considerable research on the traumas of indenture and its effect on the descendants. The Indo-Fijian identity and representation in literature not only describes the diasporic experiences of exile, nostalgia, assimilation, alienation and hybridity but also voices out the quest for a sense of identity and belongingness in a country, which is rightfully also their own. Vijay Mishra's "Girmit Ideology" explains how writers refer to the indenture as a source of angst, which tends to homogenize the Indo-Fijian literature, which in turn inhibits fears of security and homelessness. Kavita Nandan interprets her experience growing up in Fiji during the ethnic tensions that led to the first coup, which affected almost all Indo-Fijians. What conspicuously stands out in the discussed Indo-Fijian literature is the displacement of the Indo-Fijians, which stemmed from indenture and continued through land tenure systems and the diasporic shifts to other countries due to the 1987 and 2000 coups in Fiji. All in one, Indo-Fijian literature voices the discontentment and displacement felt by the indentured laborers and their descendants till today [13-16].

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