

DIASPORIC CONSCIOUSNESS AND REMORSEFUL MEMORIES IN THE OVERSEAS INDIAN DIASPORA

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ABSTRACT

Literature is an artistic expression of life through the medium of language. Its purpose is to satisfy the aesthetic sense and ennoble the emotional as well as the intellectual faculties of its readers. It is a treasure of knowledge in which the writers reflect the contemporary society and its characteristic features.

The Indian Progressive Writers' Movement first began after the publication of *Angarey (Burning Coals)* a collection of short stories by four friends namely Syed Sajjad Zahir, Mohmu Duzzafar, Rashid Jahan and Ahmad Ali in 1932. These four friends came to be known as the earliest initiators of the Progressive Writers Movement (PWM) in Urdu Literature. The publication of *Angarey* was followed by an All-India agitation against the book and its all the four authors and the book was banned by the government of India.

Expatriate Indians like Mulk Raj Anand and Sajjad Zaheer set up the Progressive Writers' Association in London in 1935 and the movement was formally launched in Lucknow in April 1936. Anand, in his novels like *Coolie*, made an excellent attempt to represent the Indian underclass in Indian English Fiction. Many renowned writers of the time like Faiz Ahmad Faiz, Bhisham Sahni, Saddat Hasan Manto, Ashad Nadeem Qasmi, Munshi Premchand, Ismat Chughtai, Jan Nisar Akhtar and Firaq Gorakhpuri joined the Association and made it the strongest literary movement. These were the writers who grappled with themes that were never taken seriously in Indian English Literature until then. These themes were part of human lives which spoke of emotional realities and were not intended merely to entertain their readers. The narratives of partition in the late 1940s, were also written from a secular humanist and progressive perspective.

The Indian Diaspora is particularly used for people like expatriates, immigrants, refugees and other ethnic minorities. A large number of the diasporic writers have given expression to their creative urge and have contributed to the domain of fast growing global diasporic literature. While discussing Indo-Fijian Diaspora, we are immediately reminded of Professor Satendra Prasad Nandan, one of the twice banished Indian diasporic writer of *Girmitiya* origin, whose book of poems *Lines Across Black Waters* is caught in the hinges of *indenture* history and powerfully evokes its nightmare journey across the black waters. In his novel *The Wounded Sea*, Nandan claims that "... *indigenous racism, like local liquor, is worse than the imported kind*". In the novel *In a Far Country*, authored by K.S.

Manian, a third generation Indian Tamil Diaspora in Malaysia, Zulkifli exhorts Rajan, the protagonist, to come out of his past and assimilate himself into the host society and embrace the alien culture. *"We have to free ourselves from thoughts given to us by the past. Otherwise, we can't move forward ... once we cross over, we change"*. Jhumpa Lahiri becomes philosophical and aptly concludes that finally man is dislocated in this world. He may have a home in the native nation, may build a home in any adopted land in the alien nation but ultimately, he has to leave all the homes as death takes him to the other world – the other home where nobody knows him.

The Indian Diaspora is one of the largest Diasporas in the world. The term is particularly used for people like expatriates, immigrants, exiles, refugees and other ethnic minorities. Diaspora is not only a physical displacement but also a psychological displacement leading to alienation, nostalgia, identity crisis and language barriers. It is a well-documented fact that Indian Diaspora is widely scattered across the globe. Indians have a long history of emigration to other parts of the world. People of Indian Origin (PIOs) and Non-Resident Indians (NRIs) are now based across the globe in about 134 countries in all the continents. A large number of the diasporic writers have given expression to their creative urge and have contributed to the domain of fast growing global diasporic literature. In the galaxy of writers, there exists a group of authors who have emerged as significant voices of the globe. Indian diasporic literature. Bharti Mukharjee, Sujata Bhatt, Meena Alexander, Uma Parmeswaran, Chitra Banarjee, Salman Rushdie, V.S. Naipaul, Kiran Desai, Jhumpa Lahiri and Hanif Kureishi are the ones who are now based across the globe in Canada, America, Australia and the island countries such as Mauritius, Trinidad, Guyana, Malaysia, Fiji and many more. The Indian communities who are positioned in this zone, specifically call our attention for their historical migration and their socio-cultural and political struggle for their social identity and survival.

During the British rule in India, there emerged a new kind of slavery in the form of *Indentureship* around 1830s just to provide cheap labour and workers for British colonies. Under this Indenture system, more than 60000 Indians, lured by the labour contractors of Britishers, came to Fiji as Indentured labourers undertaking a dangerous voyage across the oceans in search of promised but largely elusive prosperity. The contract, which the illiterate Indians called *Girmit* or *Girmitiya*, an aberration of the word 'permit', was a signed contract to work for a given employer for five years, performing the tasks assigned to a worker. During this period, the labourer received a basic pay, accommodation, food rations and medical facilities. At the end of five years, he or she was free to re-indenture or to work elsewhere in the colony; and at the end of ten years, depending on the contract, worker was entitled to a free return passage to India. (Jain 1993 : 6 ; Clark etal ; 1990 : 8)

Another system prevalent to get the contract labour mainly to the tea plantations of Ceylon and the rubber plantations of Malaysia was the *Kangani* System. The word 'Kangani' is an anglicized form of the Tamil word "Kankani" meaning overseer or foreman. The Kanganis were Indians who were employed by the plantation owners to recruit labourers in India. They were men with some capital who advanced money to the prospective coolies for travelling and setting down on a plantation. (Jain 1970 : 199)

The 'indentured' and 'Kangani' labourers initially settled on the plantations of those who had hired their services. At the end of their indenture, they were allowed to settle elsewhere. The countries which received large number of Indentured or Kangani labourers include Madagascar,

South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda, Trinidad, Guyana, Kenya, Suriname, Jamaica, Ceylon (Sri Lanka), Burma (Myanmar) and Fiji.

Among those who came to Fiji as indentured labourers, nearly 45000 came from the present-day populous Uttar Pradesh and 15000 from the present-day Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh (Lal 2007 b:371). They brought with them in microcosm, their language, castes, provincial identities and, most importantly, religions. They spoke Hindi, Urdu, Tamil, Telgu, Gujrati and Punjabi. To this day, Hindi, based on Bhojpuri dialect, remains a written and spoken language, among Fiji Indians. When the Indenture system was abolished, the Indians settled down in Fiji as farmers and cane growers. They were barred from owning land because of the promise given by the British to the tribal chiefs of Fiji that the Fiji government would not allow the transfer of land belonging to the natives to the outsiders. The government systematically prevented fraternization between Fijians and Indians and prohibited Indian settlements close to Fijian villages. Thus, prohibited from owning land, many Indians had no choice but to embrace capitalism. They invested in education or used their earnings to start business enterprises. Most of the Sikh population from Punjab entered the trade and transport sectors of the economy. However, the Indo-Fijians concentrated mainly on socio-economic developments. By the 1950s, each sizable Indo-Fijian settlement had a primary school, often managed by social and cultural organizations. In 1946, there were 438 such schools having 36,000 students. A decade later, there were 479 schools having about 60,000 students. The Indo-Fijian community had its own newspapers and periodicals – Jagriti, Shanti Dut, The Fiji Samachar, Jai Fiji, Kisan Mitra and Sangam. Hindi films were screened in the theatres. In Fiji, the leading commercial houses – *Punjas*, *Motibhais*, and *Tappoos* – were owned by the Gujratis who had engaged themselves in business activities such as tailoring, jewellery, construction, transportation and merchandizing. Yeshu Persaud, a diasporic critic says, “*The Indians not only saved the sugar industry from utter ruin. Their contribution in every other field of human endeavour were exemplary and particularly outstanding.*” Mahatma Gandhi sent Manilal Maganlal Doctor to Fiji in 1912 to help the Indians in the community affairs. In 1968, the University of South Pacific was established in Suva where majority of students were Indo-Fijian who played a vital role in Fiji’s development. (Lal 2007 b: 377-379)

In the May 1999 elections, the Fiji Labour Party, headed by the trade unionist Mahendra Chaudhary, won the election and he became the first Indo-Fijian to become the prime minister of the country. The first few years of indenture were probably the most exciting period. But the excitement of reconstitution and the desire to create a dynamic self-aware society was overtaken by a sense of loss, insecurity, confusion and disorientation and thus the displaced Indians began to refer Fiji as ‘narak’, ‘hell’.

The military coups of 1987, 2000, 2002 and 2006 seriously affected the Fiji Indian’s perception of power and authority and their understanding of reality. The coups saw the massacre of hundreds of Indians in Guyana, with the worst episode occurring at Wismar where Afro-Guyanese went on a killing rampage that, within hours, left many Indians dead, raped or mutilated. Though the troops surrounded the parliament buildings, numerous instances of ethnic violence against Indo-Fijians went unpunished. In Suva city, riots ensued, mobs roamed the streets, and scores of Indian shops were looted. Arson, looting and the destruction of Indian schools and places of worship, both Hindu temples and mosques, occurred in rural towns such as Nausori in the Rewa River delta. Indo-Fijians fleeing the area were housed in displaced persons’s camps established in Lautoka on Viti Levu and in Labasa on Vanua Levu. (Fiji Live Network 2000).

Mahendra Chaudhari – the first Indo-Fijian prime minister of Fiji was removed and a ‘caretaker’ prime minister was appointed. After the events of 2000, thousands of displaced Indo-Fijians moved to urban centres to look for jobs and hence, to the Fijians, Indians remained *Kaisi* (slaves or coolies) and *vulagi* (outsiders), guests rather than co-owners of Fiji. The slogans such as “*Fiji for the Fijians*” and “*Mauritius to Mauritians*” relegated Indians to a state of alien, guests and second class citizens. On the other, Indians often referred to Fijians as *jungli*, people of little culture. The two groups viewed each-other ‘through a prism of prejudice, reinforced by contrasting life-styles, cultural attitudes and historical experiences which had bred mutual distrust and suspicion. (Lal 1992 : 304)

Living conditions on the sugarcane plantations, on which most of the girmits worked, were often squalid. Hovels known as “Coolie Lines” dotted the landscape. Low wages, poor living conditions, terrible oppression by the managers and overseers and no avenues of redress combined with unhappy future made the plantation a very bleak place. For these Indentured labourers, their life in Fiji was retrospectively seen as a deception played upon them by recruiting agents who had convinced them of future possibilities filled with millenarian expectations. A “*Promised land*” turned out to be a “*paradise in pieces*”.

Friends ! While discussing Indo-Fijian Diaspora, we are immediately reminded of Professor Satendra Prasad Nandan, one of the twice-banished Indian diasporic writer of Girmitiya origin, who, with the passage of time, was elevated to the Chair of the Foundation Professor and Dean of the School of Humanities and Arts of the university of Fiji.

Nandan’s book of poems entitled Lines Across Black Waters is caught in the hinges of indenture history and powerfully evokes its nightmare journey across the black waters. The book which consists of 36 poems filled with haunting, dreadful and submerged sufferings of a very sensitive man saturated with nostalgia, identity crisis, feelings of exile and alienation, characteristically charts out the diaspora history of the girmitiyas, the tragic consequences of 1987 coup and post-coup events. Determined to express the truth of his experience, the poet expresses the intensity of pain and anger of his ancestors. His grandparents had indentured themselves from India and had come to Fiji in the 1890. The poem My Father’s Son is a touching tribute to his late girmitiya-father’s sacred memory in which his father rues about his experience during the voyage across the seas:

“The dark Waters, the blind winds, / The landless sea forever raging. / It was narak, many died ; I survived. / What retribution for leaving a loving home. / And the cows grazing beside the mandir, / My friends playing gullidanda, / sleeping and eating we arrived !” (p.45)

Professor Nandan feels that nothing can capture the original pain in whatever he has written. In a nostalgic poem The Ghost, the poet encounters an old man who is wistfully lost in reminiscences : *Youth I lost here, and grace / I gave to this island place. / What more than a man’s age / can one give to history’s outrage? / With the faith I lived. / I fashioned a new world / with bits from the old. I have lived this exile / more gloriously than Rama / And built kingdoms, you may find, / Nobler than Ajodhya, / in my ancient, eternal mind. (p.73)*

The fictive and poetic world of Satendra Nandan grows out of the special predicament of the Indian fragment in Fiji. It is built around an intuitive grasp of the gimit ideology, which occasionally blasts open and often parodies. His fables confront with uncanny specular images which haunt his readers and rekindle a language and a cultural complex one has left behind so many years ago. In his novel The Wounded Sea Professor Satendra Nandan claims that “... indigenous racism, like local liquor, is worse than the imported kind”. For the twice-banished

‘race’ of the overseas Indian diaspora, generally Nandan’s writing is a cure for the return of the repressed.

In an apostrophic forgiveness from his forebears, Nandan in his poem The Ghost requests his children not to forget the experience of the passage itself:

*O my father’s fathers
 What forgiveness is there for me?
 O my children’s children
 Listen to the voices from Syria
 drowning the silence of the sea ! (54)*

The narrative of Rama’s banishment is an underlying structural of Fiji Indians culture and society. The last poem in Lines Across Block Waters entitled The Second Banishment is so metaphorically loaded that its special semiotics vividly explains the impact of two momentous events, the infamous May 14, 1987 military coup in Fiji and the demolition of Babri mosque where Rama Himself was puzzled to see the decline of dharma in his own motherland : “*Rama returned home / To Ayodhya, an exiled kingdom, / Burning the Lanka ; / He longed for the forest ... God from where have so many / Rakshasas came / Into my home? I thought I had killed them all / In that torn island. Is this my Janmabhoomi?*”

The moving accounts by the Indentured labourer, Totaram Sanadhya – a Brahmin by caste, who came from a small village in the district Agra, have been published in his autobiography called Bhutlen Ki Katha” [A Tale of the Haunted Line] (1994). Totaram, who was a Brahmin to his bones, spent 21 years in Fiji, first as bonded labourer and then as a farmer and priest. He returned to India in 1914. Upon his return, Totaram Sanadhya narrates pathetic conditions in Fiji in his manuscript:

About 1500 men and women were allotted room in Bhutlen. I was also allocated a room which was surrounded by thick grass – infested with mosquitoes and crickets. After an illness about eight of us died, the others simply ran away. The English overseer said, “This will be your home for the next five years, should you leave it you won’t get another, and at any rate it is a crime to abscond.” (26—8)

Once sick and hungry in this tenebrous and uninviting land, Sanadhya attempts to hang himself but is saved by some Fijian villagers whom he had befriended. Sanadhya, in his manuscript, laments upon seeing Indians in bondage on plantation and he cries for help from the motherland. Here is one woman’s confessional:

Seven years after our wedding my husband died leaving behind myself, my three-year old son and my mother-in-law. I left my son with my mother-in-law and went to Dwarka for a propitious tattoo. Then with a few villagers I went to the city of Mathura and got lost in the crowd. And then as fate would have it, here I am ... I feel like dying. (35)

Some of Sanadhya’s references to the persistence of oral tradition are echoed in a rain song in which this genre is harnessed towards a diasporic semantics. Sudesh Mishra remarks in his astute reading, “*by the actual severance from the desired temporality.*” (2002 b : 139)

*ghir ghir badra, Savanva ki hai rama
 kauni nagariya mem cahi re bidesiya
 gaiya behal more kothova pe bhuke roye
 amkhiyom se asuva bahaya re bidesiya
 amuva ki daliya mem kuhuke koyaliya
 manava mem agiya lagaye re bidesiya
 hari hari patiya pe likh likh hari hari*

kavni nagariya mem cahi re bidesiya.

The monsoon clouds are gathered, O Rama, / But in which place dwells the stranger? / My cattle are teethered and weep from hunger, / Tears abound in the eyes of stranger. / On a mango's branch the koel cries kuhuke, / He sets my heart on fire, the stranger. / Signing green leaves with the Lord's signature, / In what place abides the stranger? (Sudesh Mishra 2002b : 139-40)

On several occasions, Indians on plantations drank alcohol, ate meat, and showed much less of the self-piety that marks Sanadhya himself. Once Sanadhya accosts a decadent Indian Guru and asks him why he eats meat, drinks alcohol, and generally behaves 'like an animal'. The Guru replies :

Yes, it was because we were deemed animals in the first place that the recruiters sold us into indenture. We learned animal ways right from the start. We lost all self-respect and coming to Fiji made us even more like animals. At least animals work according to certain fixed ways, certain principles, but we have neither social norms nor any one to tell us what these should be. So here we are, children of the great wandering sages of India now recast as the foremost gentleman animal, 'Mr. Coolie Fiji.' (1994 : 76)

Noor Kumar Mahabir's (1985) collection of the 'girmit' experience also belongs to the indentured labourers who came to Trinidad between 1845 and 1917. These accounts are the next best thing to Sanadhya's Bhutlen Ki Katha. Narrated by five people – Fazal, Moolian, Maharani, Bharath and Sankar – the stories replicate each other to a large extent and in doing so reinforce the uniform nature of the 'girmit' experience. Here is a narrative by a woman collected by Mahabir. The young widow woman whose name is Maharani, a Brahmin by caste describes her pitiable existence in Trinidad—her work on the plantation, life in the barracks, sexual infidelities, alcohol dependency, murders and generally the struggle for survival. The stage that marks the beginnings of a post – indenture Indian society in Trinidad, is carried in the figure of 'Ma' in Harold Sonny Ladoo's uncompromisingly honest novel No Pain Like This Body. This is a novel which the popular Toronto based poet and novelist, Dionne Brand calls '*a Veda to the beginnings of Indian life in Trinidad*'. (Ladoo 2003 : Xii)

Set in the Tola District of the Carib island, the novel is an intensely painful study of violence internalized. As a family of six (alcoholic father, suffering mother, and four children) eke out a miserable existence in the wet paddy fields of the district, the only feature that remains unchanged is the capacity for cruelty. The father's irrational acts of violence towards his children and wife are presented without remorse. Even as his son is brought back from the hospital, there is no proper show of grief. Ma is forced to get drunk by village women. Upon the advice of Pa, all the male and female mourners use the occasion to get drunk on rum, while Ma's parents (Nanna and Nanny) try to maintain some sense of civility. Ma goes insane and probably drowns in the wet fields and pitiable post—indenture life can only be captured by the grandmother (Nanny) walking, beating a drum – a dholak, one presumes – with her three grandchildren in tow.

Nanny beat the drum with life ; with love ; she beat the drum with all her strength and the drum sounded loud as if a spirit was bawling in the forest. (126)

In Samuel Selvon's novel A Brighter Sun, consisting people of Indian plantation culture in Trinidad, the drunkard Sookdeo dies a terrible death soon after a modern road bisects his house and land and his beloved mango tree is destroyed in the process. But before sookdeo dies, he has a dream :

He dreamed in the night that a big 'dozer came up behind him while he was working in the rice field, and when he turned round, the 'dozer scooped him up and flung him far into the swamp, over the coconut trees and the mangroves. Then, after that, he dreamed how he was in the cane-fields when his parents had brought him from India to work in Trinidad. He was in the cane fields and An American came and said. " Hey, you're Sookdeo? And when he said yes, the American said, 'All right, we want you!' ... and he ran into a patch of canes to hide. (Selvon 1971 : 152)

Jit Narain, the Bhojpuri poet from Surinam expresses his anguish : *The recruiter makes me indenture. / The pain you suffered / Pain hidden behind the veil, / The body aches, the blood boils / This depot is alien / A stranger is recalled / The heart breaks. / And now in Dutch, an alien language / My mind roams. / What can I learn from your history? / I roll in white man's dirt / Holding my nose / Behind the same veil. / (1988 : 118 ; 1984 : 6)*

And again Jit Narain writes :

Let us endure the depot / Why does the boat sail across the sea? / Give me my grandfather / Their bread is stale / And you alone can bless me. / My feet plough the land / My hands plant seeds. / I remain inconsolable / But what else is there? / This depot is rotten / My mind begins to wander. (1984 : 38)

Sudesh Mishra's play Firangi (2001a) shows the realistic picture of the coup where the markets have been vandalized by rioters, and the fear of yet another likely departure recalled (Chal urdh ja re panchi / ke ab ye desh huwa begana, 'fly away yet again little bird for this land is once again alien') :

When they leave, the maarkit change; no colours, no forms, just subdued voices in a smoked-out world. Nothing to see, nothing to locate. Once a carnival, now a world the tint of fear and resignation. I go split after that. (Mishra 2001a : 345)

Sudesh Mishra, in a classic account, writes the moving story of his maternal grandmother: *My nani sold peanuts at Westend Theatre. She would light vesi logs at four in the afternoon and roast unshelled nuts in a wok filled with black sand. I'm seven and I see the sweat beading her forehead and each bead perishing in the fire, one by one, and her hordhini flaring in the heat and I, seven, begin to tell, as they fall one after another, that suffering has a history and that every story is a quest beyond suffering. Yes , I know why she sat on her box outside the derelict theatre and heard men and women detonate nuts like grenades between their teeth, scattering shrapnel at her feet when the show began, lost in their own celluloid dreams, while she trudged home under a sky blotched with stars, day after day after day, till one night they found her sitting on the box and the show had ended and it had rained." (377—8)*

In the novel In a Far Country (1993) authored by K.S. Manian, a third generation Indian Tamil diaspora in Malaysia, Zulkifli exhorts Rajan - the protagonist, to come out of his past and assimilate himself into the host society and embrace the alien culture. Zulkifli says : *We have to free ourselves from thoughts given to us by the past. Otherwise, we can't move forward ... Once we cross over, we change. (IFC : 95—6)*

Friends ! I will not be doing justice with my paper if I do not name here Jhumpa Lahiri's insightful and nostalgic work The Namesake in which she becomes philosophical and aptly concludes that finally Man is dislocated in this world. He may have a home in the native nation,

may build a home in any adopted land in the alien nation but ultimately, he has to leave all the homes as death takes him to the other world—the other home where nobody knows him.

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