

The Artist as A Healer: A Glimpse of Satendra Nandan's writing as a Healer

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Abstract

This research paper aims to study the odyssey of the Fiji Indian writer in the Pacific: Satendra Nandan, who transforms his memoirs into artistic reconstructions through a strategy of writings heightened by exilic experience. Nandan's writings dig deep into the experiences of the Fiji Indians. For the authors of this paper, Nandan's works of art are expressions of a remarkable genius with a quest for writing the unwritten, untold tales of the people who suffered for many years. As a Fiji Indian, his mind and soul sensitively capture the remnants of the indenture, and are nurtured further by the Fijian coup culture, the education in Fiji, tertiary education in England, India and Australia, including the English language. His background represents the gimit experience, for he shows a willingness to confront the unimagined, the unrecognized and the unseen.

However, Nandan's works show an insightful grasp and deep understanding of the problems and ignorance of Fiji, a place which itself is a text to be deciphered, his mounting confidence in the capacity of human reasoning to interpret man and nature. His works bring to the fore the opposing myths that are related to any kind of diasporic condition, and in particular with the entire ethos, plight and history of the Gimit people.

Yet, many Indians in Fiji feel that they are a fragment that had been harshly expelled from their place of birth. Nandan, then, attempts to explore through his works of art, which appear both personal and political, comic and tragic, fictive and autobiographical, a portion of the anguish the Indians faced in Fiji ever since the beginning of the saga of the indenture. The researchers believe the historical experiences have taken root in the mind of this Fiji Indian writer. Thus, the centre of his fiction is also the self; the beginning of all his narratives is the writer himself. The multiplicity of voices in his writings is marked by the very people in his personal and professional life that shaped the man Nandan is at present.

The greatness of Nandan's work is possible largely because of the works of great writers like Patrick White, V.S. Naipaul, M.K. Gandhi and Salman Rushdie. Hence, Nandan's work provides an adequate base for a study of the colonial policy of separate ethnic

development and the threat of eviction by some ethnic leaders. He brings the discourse of the colonized to the fore by abrogating the language and using bilingual writing itself. This research paper is an attempt to analyse Nandan's works and explore the multiple themes of politics in literature, exile and identity and what it is to be a Fiji Indian.

The political world of Nandan grows out of the special predicament of the Fiji Indians in Fiji. It is built around an intuitive grasp of the Girit ideology, which Nandan occasionally blasts open, often parodies, but invariably enters into through a process of self-dialogue. Nandan extensively writes and laments the Fijian rebellion of May 14, 1987. Exactly 108 years after the arrival of the Leonidas in Fijian waters, the Fijian coup confounded the Fiji Indians at the very moment when, through political power, one kind of millenarian fulfillment was within their grasp. The repressed returned to haunt them and the Fiji Indians were left in a state of shock. Out of this conjunction emerged Nandan's fictional autobiographical pieces which represent the essentially tragic world of the Fiji Indians.

Keywords: Fiji Indian writer, girit, Satendra Nandan, Pacific, Fiji Indians.

Introduction

The exploration, the coming of the missionaries and the colonization of Fiji, have forever changed the history of our island nation. Today, Fiji and countries of the South Pacific are trying to come to terms with these foreign impacts. The 19th-century Europeans felt that there was little to be said for 'savages' of any kind. The insidious idea was that the white men deserved to rule. That idea of eternal salvation made the West strong and they began teaching the foreign tongue. Bible came along in the South Seas. The nineteenth century was the great missionary era in the Pacific, as elsewhere.

Thus, during the early days of exploration and settlement in the Pacific, writing was only the art of the missionaries. Explorers such as Antoine de Bougainville, Joseph Banks and Samuel Wallis began to write books about the South Pacific. However, many of their writings were distorted and fabricated, e.g. *fruits fell from trees, the women are sexually unrestrained and the men are powerful yet they followed the white men like slaves* (Donnelly. et.al, 1994:7). However, it was Captain Bligh who wrote more accurately about Fiji and the South Pacific. Later, the missionaries produced religious texts to spread Christianity (1994:12). Other forms of literary art remained only in oral traditions, songs, folklore, myths and legends.

However, meager are the possessions that immigrants bring to a new land, their mother tongue, folktales and myths are an inevitable and crucial part of their non-material baggage. Less certain is what may happen to these inseparable entities of one's identity once they have embarked upon new lives in a new land.

T.S. Eliot wrote long ago that no poet, no artist of any art has his complete meaning alone (Soaba: 1994, 86). It is true that no individual is entirely free of the society that he lives and works in, nor the society entirely free of that individual. Both exist and function as separate entities, through their sentiments of contemporaneity for the benefit of the sense of survival and continuity of each individual.

The colonization of Fiji is one important factor that has motivated past and contemporary writers. The coming of the Lapita people, who were a mixture of Melanesians and Polynesians, marked the beginning of Fiji's colonization. Then came the Fijians, followed by the explorers, the missionaries and the Fiji Indians. It became a wave of colonizers and others being colonized. Each group came with their own ideas, intentions and belief systems. Also, the indentured labourers were brought to Fiji through greed and deception.

Defining the Impact of Nandan's Writing

The world has known greatness in many forms – some fought wars and celebrated military victories, those that deepened our knowledge of the physical universe, those that have helped us understand the workings of the human mind and those who by their

inventions in science, technology and medicine, have transformed the way we live. Of all greatness, only the artist provides the final healing of the burning heart. The word counters the sword. Word by word, without yielding, without violence one is able to look into the depth of their children's eyes.

Writing had meant the practice of an art by a polished mind in civilized surrounding, because it is a great effort to create completely unsullied forms out of the rocks and sticks of words. Thus, 'nothing is more penetrating than the cold impeccable print staring back at one with the detachment of a judge who not long ago was one's intimate friend' (2009:173). The interior calls for the lost hope. Writing holds firm one's cold, sullen, wounded memories. The history of Fiji is one of tragedies. A nation, from the time of its discovery to the present day with much social difficulties, feudal hierarchy, to the 130 years ruling by the British throne, anxiety, the saga of indenture to three crippling coups is far beyond a mere human's capacity to bear.

Against this backdrop of brutalities and injustices, we have a writer as the Indian diasporic writers whose works signify a cognizant departure from such 'reflective' treatment of ideology to a much more 'transformed' treatment of indenture consciousness. As Vijay Mishra (1979) suggests, "*between the two poles – art as 'reflection' and art as 'transmutation' – lay the creative possibilities for the growth of Indo-Fijian writing to maturity*". The answers to uncertainties and a thick cloud of crimson forming torrential rain are no doubt forthcoming by the arrival of words like waves always lying between us.

Significance of the Land of Birth

More so, an artist belonging to a nation which has cultural homogeneity and is sufficiently organized has a significant degree of spiritual and psychological freedom. But for an Indo-Fijian artist, he enjoys no such freedom and his very art is an expression of his precarious existence and profound sense of social and cultural displacement. In this midst, imaginative art takes its form. Critics such as Mishra (1979:50) believe that imaginative art cannot adequately comply with a universal definition relevant at all times to all places or communities. But the Fiji-Indian artist has so organized himself after the initial shock of transplantation into servitude in an alien land and now questions through writing their position in a society they have helped mould. Referring to the girit ideology, Nandan says (1985:51) 'the indentured labourers underwent a psychic disintegration in this bitter cruel promised land. The Fiji-Indian consciousness was sharpened after the virtual loss of the migrant labourers cultural identity following the journey across the *kala pani*'.

Thus, the much more tortured outlook to life generally written by Nandan in the beginning is in contrast to his vision in the latter as a much more sensitive consciousness with its redeeming qualities of love and humanity. When he finally returned to Fiji after the horrific 1987 coup; his poetic verse was charged with urgency. He believed firmly despite the agonies of displacement and numerous ill consequences of acceptance on the part of a race, that Fiji is where he belongs. In the poem 'Two Waves' (2007:181), Nandan presents

a powerful voice of a child who yearns for his place of birth, with which his identity is associated:

This little village is my second womb
This little island will be my only tomb;
That formed – deformed my father's breath
This is the country of my life and death!

The reference is to Fiji, which defines people in ways that no other word does or can. Nandan, like his ancestors know only one land, where they and he was born. He responds imaginatively far more to his place of birth, than to the glory of living in the country. The poet confronts the reader with the relatively strong hold for the place of birth. The feeling of identification is only with Fiji. In the end, a commitment to the 'place' is expressed. Fiji conjures up at least a million images in the poet's mind. The place offers a kind of universal value and validity to the poet. The little village on a little Island gives a historical construction and a geographical entity, challenging and haunting the poet for self-definition. He for a second forgets and forgives those who caused him pain. The poet urges to be cremated on the land which the ancestors toiled and his ashes to be scattered only on this land. The land, whatever the root and routes – surpasses the poet's dreams and nightmares, coolies and coups with that of the habits of his heart. He belongs to Fiji, before it belongs to him.

Artisticism in Writings

Nandan's art of writing forms the medium by which the advance coherence of a fundamentally irreconcilable experience may be discovered to be meaningful. Surprisingly, despite the fundamental political, social and racial problems within Fiji, what remains in the forefront of his imagination is art –healing the artist. What cannot be resolved in life must find resolution in art, even if it is a transient solution. In *'The Aunt's Story'*, the third of Patrick White's novels published, is the first which fully reveals him as an artist of powerful and original vision.

As Australia's most experimental novelist, White owes nothing to local literary tradition. His affinity is with those who have tried to extend the frontiers of the novel in the direction of grappling themes, issues, and the basic human problems in which readers could engage into a deeper level of transcendence. In *'Happy Valley'* and *'The Aunt's Story'*, he shows that sensitive human beings can hope for happiness only in rare moments of illumination: through art. White did not like the treatment of the Australians on the Aborigines. He began finding consolation in art. The illuminati's in his writings spoke. He gave voice to the submissive and those viewed as different from the rest of the people — the sanest of all.

White's protagonist for *'The Aunt's Story'*, Theodora Goodman is denied the joys of a creative artist, her intelligence and sensibility are a source of anguish to her except in 'moments of insight' shared chiefly with her father. However, after her father's death, which is described with a moving brevity and restraint, is the beginning of the

protagonist's alienation from the world. Similarly, Nandan's writings reveal his acts of separateness from Fiji, his parent's, especially the aging father and his mother, who was dying a slow death. Theodora Goodman later enriches her mental experience by entering in imagination into the lives of the amusing as well as pathetic eccentrics at the Riviera Hotel, in Europe. Comparatively, Nandan began practicing the creative art. Hence, a mechanism of survival for an artist is to strip oneself of inessentials (a necessary preliminary for illumination).

Moreover, the characters in fiction or the persona in poems are free from the social conventions of the society one lives in. If the reality rejects a race, individuals find solace in writing. When an individual is hurt beyond healing, words give voice to the inner-self. It then unfastens all emotions, anxiety and fears on the lines, beneath another and the other filling in the page.

The inner-landscape is however, deprived of illusion. Colonial reality for the Indian writer is like a shadow never leaving the journey of the making. Indo-Fijian writer truthfully includes images from within.

In Sudesh Mishra's attempt to study Subramani's prose fiction, he refers to reality as problematic because it houses a Pandora's Box of unenunciated sub-realities originating from the experiences of colonialism (1992: 103). In relation to a writer's way of responding to reality, all Fiji-Indian writers' style differs. Similarly, in Nandan's poetry the reader is able to see the problematic aspects of Indo-Fijian life and history. If he could not make his presence felt physically on a foreign soil, through writing, particularly poetry, he uses the recurrent motif of ageing men, the girmitiya dying a slow death on an alien landscape and his imagery to create peace with the unmerciful, trouble makers in Fiji. The solitary art then is symbolic to death itself, that final grace of epiphany realization.

However, in the altercation between ideology and art of a writer shaped out of the girmit past and its correlation to the imaginative awareness and consciousness of the poet, Nandan unlike Raymond. C. Pillay outwardly searches for meaning and order. To look for the Indian experience, Nandan in his poem *'The House'* demonstrates through art an indispensable remoteness of the Indian in an alien land:

I push open the broken creaking door
On the world so old, but why so poor?
The table is bare save the burning grinning lamb
Casting dancing shadows on walls dung-damp.

There is no fondness for objects like Patrick White's use of 'tables and chairs'. Nandan however, laments for the dilapidating of the house. More so, even the light amongst the four corners does not illuminate the place – home. The antithesis in this poem is applicable to Fiji, where Indians brought about agricultural prosperity but to no avail. There is still a tortured outlook to reality. The poet here is initially engaged in with a reality of historically fragmented world. The wound of history that is the colonial past

provides the life-blood that flows into the work of art. Eventually, the artistic spirit push opens the broken creaking door, like the song of Keats' nightingale, escapes the bonds of time.

Portraying True Images of Fiji: Past and Present

Writers now must move away from distorting images of Fiji. Their inability to respond to the natural environment of Fiji or to their culture and the feelings of the natives would mean a deliberate attempt to remain aloof from each other. Nandan's work over the years has moved away from geographical and political issues to a true nature of Fiji's environment. Nandan has phrased it as follows (2007:221)

'We may be drinking yagona and ruining our skins but our insight into the psychology of the Fijian ethos remains skin deep. The time has come when we ought to study, learn and teach more about the nature of native civilization, its origins, its history, its people, its hills. I think it is fair to say at present we lack an indigenous knowledge of our country.'

Nandan is right; not only is an indigenous knowledge lacking but the attitude of the mind which would enable to help forge a true Fiji-Indian bond. If the artist can heal, s/he has to move away from distorting images of Fiji by continuously and purposefully including horrific historical past in Indo-Fijian writing. As readers, the researchers of this paper strongly oppose even Nandan's view on the drinking of yagona and its detrimental effect on the skin. Many Fiji-Indian writers work tend to portray Fiji as decadence and oppressive: dryness, dusty, muddy, savage, flies and rotting vegetation are the predominant imagery. Here in Fiji, both Indians and i-Taukei (Fijians) base their livelihood on land and many Indian farmers have flourished from farming itself. However, artists at times exaggerate land in Fiji with political thorn. In Nandan's Poem: *My Father's Son* (103) he presents the extensive imagery of the village as dark and dumb;

'The village dark and dumb
so sullen in the sun
a muddy lost track
hobbles to a hut on the hill'

The truth is that the environment and its natives are not totally harsh and oppressive. According to Kacimaiwai (1985: 61), the Indo-Fijian artists must attempt to fathom the nature of Indian life and civilization in Fiji in relation to the Indigenous perspective. She believes many Indians are not in favor of the natives due to their gimit state of mind and a point of reference only to the historical past. Thus, the Indo-Fijian artists' work must present Fiji in new light rather than brooding over the past and gimit ideology which in the opinion of the researchers has limited validity in this day and age. In order to move forward, like Nandan who has forgiven the coup leader, Sitiveni Rabuka and the other perpetrators, Post-Gimit Indo-Fijians should not delude with images of failed millennial quests. As Mishra writes (1978:62), 'artists should be urged to search for a vitality and spirit in their writings so readers are capable of generating a liberated state of

mind and inspire a literature which is an authentic expression of the Fijian facet of the Pacific's greatest cultures'. Since the hybrid nature of Fiji's history does not belong to the Indo-Fijians alone, the composite of people and cultures must become an optimistic future of artistic experiences.

In addition, art takes its form from history. Even the traditions of artist fiction in European Literature could be traced back to Goethe's novels (1978: 17), and reaching its culmination in the works of James Joyce. These novels have a special fascination for they both explore the nature of genius and help readers to understand the creative process itself. Also, where mortality is one fatal fact of existence, the artist attempts to transcend it through creative effort. Upon reading Nandan's *'The Wounded Sea'* (1977), there is an unusual logic of the Indian psychology and even the inexorableness of Fijian revolt of 14 May 1987, prophetically implicit in his fiction. Since tragedy has always been around the corner, against such shadows, a writer reasserts the value of the life of imagination. This phrase, Patrick White too made his own. Hence, the human imagination itself becomes a protean force.

Comparatively, White's world is rooted in actuality – colonial, physical and social – but, he like Nandan, attempts to grasp issues beyond these. Colonial reality is just one layer of a multi-faceted structure of the 'native and phenomenal world' (1978:21). In the fatal impact of one civilization on another, writers have found a revealing image through which to comprehend and communicate the ever-expanding core of creative fragmentation.

Use of Humour in Nandan's Work

At times writers also inculcate comedy to triumph over (even if momentarily) the immense rootlessness of the fragment world. In the fourth part of *'The Wounded Sea'* for instance, Nandan presents Mr. Krishna Dutt, one of the Labour Minister's in the Bavadra Government, who snores heavily during those terrible days of political incarceration in Borron House. Behind the immense laughter of those captivated by Rabuka, lie the tattered fates of Indians in Fiji.

However, through Nandan's *'The Wounded Sea'*, the generic conventions and discursive domain of comedy mediates between the irreconcilable yearnings of the rootless fragment for its past, and its desire to adapt to the new land. Humour is one way of bypassing censure and self-criticism. Comic dimensions in writing are significant since it finally prevents the writer from lapsing into madness. Truly so, through the act of creative renewal, the imaginative reality glows at the artistic heart of a writer like the Indian diasporic writers here in Fiji – in an attempt to illuminate the barbarities of the past. Mahatma Gandhi said long ago; 'the purer the suffering, the greater is the progress' (Herring: 1990, 71). This is applicable to Nandan, who over the years moved out of personal tragedy into something larger and elemental. The artist is moving towards a revolutionary commitment tempered by artistic ambivalence.

Reflective Experiences

The mirror is one of the most ancient and persistent metaphors for literature: writers from Plato's time to the present day have often described literature as a mirror of reflecting life (Steven: 1987, 53). The literary works of Indian diasporic writer as Nandan is at least to some extent a mirror offering the reader images of human beings as societies past, present and time immemorial. Not only is Nandan's work a reflection of and a part of the human universe, his writings provide insight into human life and human itself providing insights into literature.

Thus, writing – a solitary art has radicalized our imagination. Sometimes we question how do we think the thoughts we have come to think? Literature is profoundly ideological discourse of certain issues in our real life. Ultimately, we as readers may discover meaning in literary writings by looking at what the author says and how he or she says it. Fiji just being a dot on the world map has a vast, rich, oral and written literature. Many of Fiji's great writers are the natives of Fiji, the Indian descendents and other great imaginative people. Nandan is one such writer whose writings offer an artistic quality to the works of art. His work is important for children of Indian descendent.

Though Fiji is a plural society comprised of differing identifiable social, cultural and religious groups, the political and social tensions are such that the individual is aware of his position in the community. This is true of the artist. The trauma of indenture on the mind of the Fiji-Indian is emphasized by the recurring images of indenture, alienation, rejection in the Indo-Fijian writing and the coup culture in Fiji. However, Nandan's work renders a vision, an imaginative realization of what once was and was not the world of the Indians here in Fiji, his poetry covers extensively the world of the Indentured labourer to his childhood, the journey of reading and writing, and the re-definition of old values with a consciousness of the visionary reality. The authors of this paper view Nandan conforming to the poetic process of creating a vision through the master and mythological metaphors to a mirror of culture's vision- simultaneously voicing his poetic verses the disparateness of the visionary and the factual and historical realities of the Fiji-Indians.

Synopsis

Nandan's works attempt to enhance the security of his social group by consciously drawing on the girit ideology to provide a glimpse of an alternate world that not only negates the Indo-Fijians precarious social situation but also commissions a new direction.

Irrespective, the psyche of the modern Fiji Indian is inevitably influenced still by the girit reality of the not-so-distant past. But the writer must be aware of the main current of thought of the present, of the mind of his country, which is changing continually while abandoning nothing. The writer must then have concern for the integrity of literature itself because of the crucial role it plays in relation to society. Literature then must be "the

mirror and the lamp, the reflection and illumination of human experience” (Howe, 1979:58).

Thus, a close appraisal of Nandan’s writings helps to deepen and organize one’s response to facets of culture within the society. As a writer, he is an articulate part of the life of society and his writings value ridden structure of Fijian and Indian community with a complex psychic life of an individual in Fiji. A writer then in Fiji has to find a space, that empty space which should surround one when he/she writes. Into that space which is like a form of listening, of attention, flow words that the characters will speak, provide ideas and inspire. If a writer cannot find this space, his/her writings may be stillborn.

Nevertheless, we are a jaded lot, in our threatened third world. Rather than only being good for irony and cynicism, we the budding readers and writers must restore that treasure-house of literature that has lost its potency. In Fiji, we are blessed with a legacy of languages, poetic art, and histories, bequest of stories, and myths and legends. The tales in Fiji go back to the first landing in Vuda, to chiefly systems and then the stories and plight of the *jihaji-bhais*, the cultural dance and songs, for our heritage of stories began in Islands, supernatural and the spirit world to Indian mythology.

A story teller is deep inside every one of us. More blessed is the story-maker who is with the person, the self; for it is our imaginations which shape us, keep us, create us – for good and for ill.

Summation

In retrospect, it is our writings that will recreate us when we are torn, hurt, even destroyed. As Doris Lessing (1997: 789) said on winning the 1997 Nobel Prize for literature: “it is the storyteller, the dream maker, the myth maker, that is our phoenix that represents us at our best, and at our most creative. The paper has analyzed Satendra Nandan’s writing as a healing process, both for the writer and those who suffered at numerous occasions due to the injustices done by the colonizers and our own natives with a segment of elite Indians greed for power. History and art is the core of this paper. Nandan’s power lies in the fact that he has been able to look into the void of the human heart inflicted with pain, and use art as a consolation for all miseries. Nandan's tales explore a fragment society searching for concordance and a centre.

Note from the authors: Satendra Nandan is an acclaimed Fijian writer of an Indian Descent now residing in Australia. He has published poems, life writing and numerous scholarly papers. His work resonates the pains, suffering of having to leave ones homeland to experiencing life away from home.

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