

Fourth World Literature and Subramani's Stories: A Study of Two Short Stories, *Tell me Where the Train Goes* and *Sautu*

Hetal S. Patel

Abstract

This paper examines two selected short stories of Subramani as representative texts from the category of fourth world literature depicting the condition of the marginalized Fiji-Indians. Literature written by Fiji-Indians constitutes an integral part of fourth world literature, characterised by the language of dis-possession, dispossession, disenfranchisement and displacement.

Introduction: The Setting

While discussing the stories of Subramani as specimen of fourth world literature, it is important to reconstruct in brief the history of the Fiji-Indian community as belonging to the marginalized category. Most of the ancestors of Fiji Indians were recruited by agents of colonial government in the 19th and early 20th centuries to work as labourers on plantations, predominantly sugar plantations. It is important to remember that sugar was one of the most profitable commodities for the European colonizers as it was addictive and they earned handsome profits by exporting it throughout the world. But unfortunately sugar needed hot and humid climate to grow which was not available in Europe whereas the climate of Fiji, Suriname, West-Indies and India were amply suited for the crop. The colonial sugar companies needed manual labourers who could do the break-neck work on sugar plantations. For this, the huge British Empire, with its impoverished populations belonging to the lower and marginal castes provided enough opportunities. Commencing 1833,

land-less labourers and manual workers belonging to the peripheral communities were hired as indentured labourers to work in sugar cane plantations of West Indies, South Africa and later Fiji. All of them had to sign agreements stating that they would compulsorily stay there for five years before they could go back to India. This agreement was mispronounced by the illiterate labourers as 'girmit'; the labourers came to be known as 'girmitiyas'.

Most of the recruits were then transported to the Calcutta port from where they were taken to different parts of the British Empire to work as coolies. Right through their journey, they had to pass through harrowing experiences. Many died during the course of the journey. Once they reached their destinations, they were made to reside in coolie-barracks which were narrow and low hovels in which a number of persons stayed without much privacy. Moreover, most of the coolies were males with a few females. Co-habitation and rape by overseers was not an uncommon phenomenon. As the noted historian Brij V. Lal has mentioned in his book *Girmitiya*:

The Indian public had for a long time been aware of the sorry plight of the Indian labourers overseas, but it was the news of the molestation and abuse of Indian women on the plantations that outraged them most. The campaigns in India to stop the degradation of Indian women in the colonies 'received wider public support than any other movement in Indian history, more even than the movement for independence (2004: 129).

Sometimes, a woman would give birth to children about whose paternity they themselves were not sure. It is somewhat like what happened in countries like Argentina and Chile where the Spanish colonizers killed off the male population and took the women as their mistresses as a result of which the whole continent lost its mother tongue and now speaks Spanish. Even many native women of South America were not sure about the paternity of their children.

Another important aspect is that most of these Girmit labourers belonged to the lower ladder of the society, with only a sprinkling from the middle and upper castes. But because of a level field for the virtual slave kinds of work, castes and hierarchies mattered not at all. The seeds of loss of castes were planted in the ships. The colonial machinery had, under its ruthless and unyielding wheels, grinded their identities to multiple pieces. Probably no other fourth world community suffers from this complete breakdown of identity and its own inability to retrieve its identity for the sake of consolation.

Subramani himself belongs to a group of writers like Satendra Nandan and the historian Brij V. Lal who were products of this fragmentation of identity brought about by the colonial enterprise. Subramani's ancestors had migrated as indentured labourers from India, which he suspects is the southern part of India. But he himself is not sure about the part of India from which his ancestors migrated. This is in contrast to, say V. S. Naipaul, who knows for certain that his ancestors were village Brahmins, his original surname was Dubey and his ancestors migrated from a small village in Bihar to Trinidad. The intense tragedy with writers like Nandan and Subramani is that despite their and the Government of India's efforts, they could not identify their family roots, hence still remain incomplete in terms of their family roots and the associated identities.¹

Most of the indentured labourers had been promised lucrative wages by the recruiters. But when they actually landed in the respective countries of their work, they found the conditions to be inferior. They had to work for at least ten hours a day and if found as not doing their duties properly, they were subjected to wage deductions as well as corporal punishment like whipping by the overseers. The conditions of these indentured labourers were so severe that after completion of the stipulated five year period, they could not return home as the crossing of the sea (*Kala Pani*) was considered a taboo by all the traditional communities of India. Even if they returned, they would find themselves completely ostracized by their communities so much so that living in India would become worse than living in Fiji. Neither were they accepted by their own countrymen nor were they acceptable to the people of Fiji. They had become a stateless, casteless, community-less people who existed as shadows of their former selves. Since they would be without any income and without any identity in India, a majority chose to stay back and struggle for their rightful place in Fiji.

The Stories

In the two stories that have been selected for a close study, Subramani shows in stark detail the predicament of the fourth world people

¹ Such displacement is very common among the aboriginals as well as the *Adivasis* of India who have become victims of industrialization and urbanization. Most of the *Dalits* and *Adivasis* in contemporary India are giving up their thousands of years old art and craft skills and selling their lands to join the race of so called modernization. With the disappearance of their knowledge and craft, India is losing much of its traditional knowledge. This is how the first world encroaches upon and swallows the tradition, culture and identity of the fourth world.

who are considered aliens in the country where they were born and brought up. They are physically and emotionally exploited by their employers and co-workers. Such incidents happened so frequently that Indian newspapers began highlighting these, particularly the gross exploitation of women. As Brij Lal points out,

The stories of the treatment of two Fiji Indian women, Kunti and Naraini, attracted special attention,..... Kunti, a 20 year old woman from Lakhuapur village in Gorakhpur, had emigrated to Fiji with her husband in 1908. Her first four years on the plantation were unexceptional until 10 April 1912, when the overseer allocated Kunti an isolated patch in a banana field, away from all the other workers, apparently with the intention of molesting her sexually. Kunti resisted his demands until, nearly overtaken, she jumped into the river in desperation. She was, however, rescued by a boy, Jaidev (Lal, 2004: 129).

Tell me Where the Train Goes

It seems that the genesis of this story - *Tell me Where the Train Goes* - lies in the historical narratives which Subramani might have read. In this, Subramani shows the condition of an exploited marginal poor widow and her teenage son Manu. Kunti, the poverty stricken widow, living in the barracks meant for poor workers, earns her livelihood with great difficulty. The poverty is so abysmal that insects and ants crawl all over the floor of their hovel and her son Manu is compelled to sleep in the kitchen. The story begins with a narrative of how Manu's weak and sickly father dies one day and Kunti passes through the horrendous rituals of widowhood including the breaking of bangles and taking off the *bindi*. The heart wrenching lamentation of Kunti is shown in detail.

In the morning, his father's body was discovered in the cane-field. The women came out of their barracks, huddled together around Kunti, and wept. Kunti clenched her teeth and tore her hair, beating her forehead and breaking her jewellery: it was the final display of frenzied emotions (Subramani, 1988: 12).

The writer does not leave it to our imagination that Kunti's husband had died because of the hardships of life in the barrack as the writer, time and again, points out how emaciated he had become. In a way, Kunti is doubly marginalized: on one hand, she is considered the wife of an alien

in her own country and on the other hand, she becomes a symbol of bad omen for her own community women and an object of sexual gaze, including by Fiji Indian men.

Manu had observed that whenever Kunti passed there were catcalls from Nekram and Khelawan, and the women wrinkled up their noses insolently or gave disdainful sidelong glances (Subramani, 1988: 14).

To remain at work becomes a great challenge for Kunti that too in a society dominated by men of other ethnicities and race (native Fijians and white men). Historically, it is now accepted that Girit women were frequently exploited sexually by the white men as well as the workers in the upper hierarchy of the plantation. No wonder that Kunti becomes an object of sexual desire for members of each group. For Kunti, it was a question of survival to keep herself and her son alive by any means so she surrenders to the sexual overtures of the Sahib or the overseer of the plantation. Kunti also becomes an object of sexual gratification as she is much more beautiful than all other women in the barrack.

How the imperial exploitative system wreaks havoc on the relationship of the mother and the son in a web of suspicion and disbelief is shown in glaring detail by Subramani. Manu, after seeing his mother come out of the Sahib's bungalow, preceded by the Sahib semi-nude, follows his mother after he becomes sure that his mother had a sexual liaison with the Sahib. Now Manu understands why his mother gets mysteriously placed expensive gifts. In a shattering episode of tragic discovery, Manu finds out that sexual business was conducted under compulsion not only by his mother but by almost all the women of the barracks who wanted to remain on job and earn for their families.

Through this story, Subramani is obliquely and sometimes directly commenting on the destruction of familial and communal life of the fourth world people because of the maladaptive and malevolent nature of the colonial venture which can only spread poisonous fumes for the dispossessed and the marginalized.

Sautu

The second story, *Sautu*, is a narrative which in a microcosm gives the historical ideas that shaped the world of the Fiji Indians including indenture, discrimination and displacement. The story narrates the predicament of Dhanpat, a first generation indentured labourer who now lives alone as his wife Ratni is dead and his sons have left his home to live in

different places. Dhanpat frequently remembers his old times, 'They talked of indenture, but the period was no longer clearly defined; it seemed like a labyrinth full of shadows and memories' (Subramani, 1988: 1).

Dhanpat is on friendly terms with local Fijian friends but at the same time he also has his eccentricities which mark him out to be different. The western colonial life had impinged on Dhanpat's life to such an extent that his younger son after studying in a missionary school most probably ran off to Australia or Canada. Dhanpat hopelessly waits for his son to come and take him away to Canada or Australia.

Somu was planning to come back. "Only for a visit. At Christmas," Dhanpat told his friends with a nonchalance which wasn't real (Subramani, 1988: 5).

This was a common practice among the offsprings of indentured labourers to migrate to Australia or Canada as they were attracted by the affluent life-style of Western civilization. Dhanpat himself had worked hard in order to build a house and provide for his family.

Long years in the fields had bent his posture. His long and bony arms and legs were cracked and creased like the earth outside. He reminded of Kanga - his withered and shrunken husk - and the mask of death on his face (Subramani, 1988: 3).

The author also tells us how the site on which the Fiji Indians had built their village was a bad patch of land not wanted by the Fijians.

The site was badly chosen. There were no rivers and the sea was thirty miles away. The village was hemmed in by an irregular stretch of unprosperous sugar cane fields in the south, and, in the north, by partly barren soapstone hills bearing occasional guava bushes and stunted rain trees and reeds (Subramani, 1988: 2).

Through these three interesting events, the writer shows how the Fiji Indians were completely looked down upon by the colonial regime and the sugar company officials, who are not even ready to give them a habitable piece of land to live. The Fiji-Indian who have lived on this land for years together, and whose children are born in the country are denied the basic right of living in a decent spot of the country. This speaks volumes about the Fiji-Indians who were de-housed, displaced and disempowered. Dhanpat's children who were born in Fiji could not even dream of buying

a better place in the country as the discriminating laws of that land did not allow them to do so. Probably, this could be the only instance of a country where one group of its citizens constituting almost 40% of its population cannot buy a land of their own.

The second point the writer raises through Dhanpat's predicament is how, because of cultural collision, Dhanpat and his wife suffer from the empty nest syndrome, as their sons, instead of living with them have left them to their fate under the influence of the Western construct of a nuclear family.

Another interesting point the writer obliquely points out is the strange and mysterious ways by which the native Fijians would grab the villages and towns established by the Fiji Indians after much hard-work.

That night there was more looting and stone-throwing in the neighbouring village. More sugar cane was burned (Subramani, 1988: 8).

One of the commonest methods was to burn down the huts that already existed. The Fiji Indians could not do much in the way of legal recourse. Unfortunately, in one such fire, Dhanpat's hut is set on fire.

The dry and brittle thatch and bamboo crackled, wilted, then flared into flames, and were soon reduced to cinders. The rafters and poles also came down with an explosion, and burned on the ground, giving off a pale glow (Subramani, 1988: 8).

Interestingly after the burning of the hut, many people, suspiciously talked about Dhanpat behaving in a strange manner like molesting a child, peeping at a woman etc. From the description given by the author about Dhanpat in the earlier paragraphs, it becomes clear that Dhanpat is highly religious and morally firm man who strictly follows some of the teachings of the *Bhagavad Gita* in his real life. The writer is indirectly questioning the authenticity of the witnesses who spread rumours about Dhanpat's morality. By the end of the story, the Fijian chief calls up the doctors who take away Dhanpat to a mental hospital and the land is grabbed by the Fijian chief.

This is one of the most tragic stories of Subramani where a man who is grief-struck by the death of his wife and the burning of his house, is treated as a mad man through dubious witnesses, just like the tragic final scene in *A Streetcar Named Desire* where the heroine, instead of getting justice for rape, is sent to a mental asylum. The writer points out the most heinous and repulsive way in which the dominant section of the society, which is in power represented by the Fijian chief, completely destroys the marginal man's right to life, property and dignity.

Conclusion

Subramani points to a fourth world literature; a literature of a different kind where the subalterns are doubly displaced and dispossessed. They are dispossessed and displaced in their home country, and they are dispossessed in their host-country. Whereas the United Nations clearly states that no human being in the world can be stateless, the Fiji Indians are neither citizens of India nor do they have full rights of a citizen in their adopted country. More specifically, a vast majority do not have a right to own a plot of land to make their own house. The maximum of right that is permitted legally is to lease a plot of land. Leases expire, and leases may, and on occasions does, come with ruthless, often bordering on oppressive, conditions particularly in what is called tenancy-at-will. This traumatic existence on the part of the Fiji Indians has remained from generation to generation, despite the very concerted attempt by the present administration and writers in their support, like Satendra Nandan, of trying to project the present political environment as bestowing full and equal rights to all. Dispossession, disenfranchisement and displacement would remain the language of the Fiji Indian subaltern, until the core of these are eliminated.

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Author:

Hetal S. Patel, is Assistant Professor, Department of English, Hemchandracharya North Gujarat University, Patan, India. Email: hsp1706@gmail.com