

Mythical Recreation of Home in Satendra Nandan's Select Short Stories



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Abstract: The paper aims to unravel the mystics and dynamics of emotional and psychological rehabilitation of Fiji-Indian diaspora on a foreign land. Delving deeper in the historical paradigm of dispersion, it locates the present existential predicament of this community which is the end result of its multiple displacements and dislocations. Fiji-Indian diaspora is the creation of British colonial empire but the distance of hyphen between the two words has broken off the barriers of the term and has become a global diaspora with several uprooting. Hence, the rehabilitation each time turns out to be a mythical recreation of 'home' replaced with the permanence of 'homelessness'.

Keywords: Diaspora, in-betweenness, exile, home, otherness, uprooting, displacement, dislocation.

Introduction: Slavery Abolition Act, 1833, abolishing slavery in British Empire gave an impetus to the indentured labour system, a system where labourers were supplied from one country to the other in order to meet the labour demands both in colonies as well as in colonizing countries. The contracts were prepared by the companies to export the labourers. From India alone, between 1833 and 1920, 3.5 million people were transported to various colonies to provide labour (especially for sugar cane plantation) under Indian Indenture System (*Wikipedia, encyclopedia*). According to *Wikipedia and Encyclopedia*, from 1879 to 1916, 42 ships made 47 voyages to carry Indian labourers to Fiji.

A total of 60,964 passengers left India for Fiji, while 60,553 (including births on the ship) could arrive in Fiji. After the expiry of the contract, the companies refused to pay for the return voyage as per the terms, and most of the labourers had to stay back as they could not pay the expenses of the return voyage. Hence, Fiji became the most inhabited country by the Indians. As per the 2007 census, Indians in Fiji constitute 40% per cent of the total population with 4,60,000 Indian population.

Since the establishment of Indian community in Fiji, four political coups have taken place. These coups uprooted the Indians from Fiji. Due to social insecurity, discrimination and life threat these uprooted people migrated to many other countries across the world. Australia, New Zealand, U.S.A., U.K. and India are the major countries that have witnessed the flux of these immigrants. Resultantly, the uprooted community suffers the state of homelessness and in-betweenness.

Revisiting and the Mythical Recreation of Home

Revisiting of the homeland is not only an account of first hand memory, but also of the mythical and the imaginary homelands in Satender Nandan's stories. Migrants are stuck between three worlds – present, past and the imaginary one. They escape the bitter reality of their present life by their revisiting of the past, their native homeland. Still, if they are not relieved or healed by the beautiful memories, they construct a third world (imaginary homeland) that is ideal enough to rehabilitate them between their past and present. It is a romantic imaginary construction of homeland, where one suspends one's faculty of judgement that the world of past is also bound to transform with the passage of time. To seek momentary pleasure by escaping from the mundane nature of life, the migrants relish their world with a lot of idealization and create their own nation and home that can re-root them between the two lands, host and homeland.

Rushdie remembers in his "Imaginary Homelands" that how his past had changed with the passage of time and how different it was from his imagination and the past that he had relished through his perceptions from the black and white photograph hung on the wall of his home. As he states, "It's my present that is foreign, and that the past is home, albeit a lost home in a lost city in the mists of lost time... The photograph had naturally been taken in black and white; and my memory, feeding on such images as this, had begun to see my childhood in the same way, monochromatically." (Rushdie 9)

The same imagination we see in the old man in "Mangoes" when he dreams about India, the ideal land on this planet and adds to its beauty through the imagination of heaven-like everlasting greenery and charm. He makes a metaphorical contrast between the two worlds through Indian and Fijian mangoes and cherishes as the glory of his nation with a bit of exaggeration and hyperbole. Where he finds Fiji a 'wasteland' and mangoes spoilt by bats, Indian mangoes are pure and juicy and mango trees evergreen saying, "The mango tree was abundantly fruitful and leafy. Fruits on it grew throughout the year. There are places in India which have no seasons, no bats." (68)

The construction of imaginary home is generally common to the people belonging to the same race or ethnicity who have shared almost a common past. They long for a nation and associate themselves with its people whom probably they do not know quite well. Benedict Anderson defines nations as "imagined communities" – "It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion." (Anderson 124)

Such an idea of imagined homeland and community, we see in “Ashes and Diamond”. Pratap and the Father who are the second generation of the girmityas and have never been to India, cherish its picture that is highly mythical and imagined, as they keep looking at the Indian people travelling by Air India and feel friendly even though they do not know anyone among them. It is just because these travelers belong to their own community on the other part of globe that shared its culture, past and land with the migrants. Although this culture has slipped away like sand from the hands of the migrants, still they have tried to preserve it.

In Nandan’s stories religious myths play a great role in the construction of home. Since, majority of the Indians in Fiji are Hindus, they share a common pattern of religious culture. Stories from *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata* and the teachings from *Gita* show a great significance in their lives. These Hindu epics and mythologies work as the guiding principles for the Hindus in Fiji, especially *Ramayana* and in it the figure of Hanuman is a favourite among them. The influence of these holy books is apparent in every walk of their life. Indian way of traditional and religious life that Fiji-Indians have upheld gracefully, works like a synergy that has kept Indian community united away from India in the form of a nation. The performance of Katha at every important ceremony, and getting together of all Hindus at such occasions keeps the sense of Indianness alive even outside India.

Every community that migrates from one place to the other takes along its culture and values. As the time flows, there is a process of acculturation and deculturation. What remains behind is a ‘Sandwich Culture’ and double identity. This idea has best been expressed by Abha Panday in her *Indian Diasporic literature*. She states:

Each community carries with it a socio-cultural baggage which consists among other things a predefined social identity, a set of religious beliefs and practices, a frame work of norms and values governing family and kinship organization, food habits and language...It brings about a shift in the morals and value system of the culture that exists with each other, resulting in the process of acculturation and deculturation. (Panday 34- 35)

Religious beliefs are the greatest of all the treasures that contribute to the nourishment of a particular culture. Religion is a way of life. A community sharing a particular religion distinguishes itself from the other communities.

The references from *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata* and *Gita* are recurrent. The images of Ram and Hanuman are a common sight in the stories. The stories from *Ramayana* have a profound impact on the psyche of the immigrants. Probably the greater reason is that they associate their sense of exile with that of Rama and derive inspiration out of it. The significance of these stories in the lives of immigrants in Fiji is depicted in “Nandi” – “But we lived by such stories—first our grandparents, then our mothers and fathers, now our political leaders. Our fate in Fiji had echoes of the *Ramayana*: exile, suffering, separation, battles but no return.” (199)

The culture has completely been dominated by the religious beliefs and rituals. The performance of Katha is a usual thing to witness at the celebration of every accomplishment. In “Guru”, the protagonist recalls how Katha is performed on every auspicious occasion like—on passing the examination, buying cycle, new taxi and tractor etc.

Similarly, Indian rituals are performed during the marriage ceremony that lasts for three days—*telwaan*, *bhatwaan* and *Shadi*. Marriage is solemnised in the typical Indian way. This

brings a dichotomy between the Indian and Fijian cultures. The cultural differences bring sentimental dissociation between them. These differences have been brought to the fore in 'Guddi', depicting how Fijians feel alienated at the wedding rituals of the Indians. Fijians feel strange when they come to attend Indian marriages. The same remains the case with the Indians. The cultural rituals, ceremonies and rites of one community to the other are nothing but the occasion of marry making and festivities. The Hindu rituals appear awkward to the natives. Quite often they are amazed by the way of Hindu life. The sight of Mahajan in "Nandi", standing on one leg in the river early in the morning and meditating with folded hands, is weird to the native Fijians.

Along with the rituals, superstition also reigns the lives of Indian-Fijians. There are comic episodes that exhibit the myths and the superstitions of the Hindus. At the inauguration of every special occasion certain rituals are performed. In "Bro's Funeral", we witness the preparations being carried out before the 'Coleman benzine iron' is to be lit. Kalpu, the village pujari chants mantras and ties the 'holy thread' on it. After the iron is lit, how it catches fire that burns a few tones of sugar cane. In "The Burial" we see the heights of religious superstition through Chinappa. He has been practising some strange mystic ceremonies on the mountain of the village to attain magical powers. When he thinks that he is done with it, he puts it into practice--he decides to walk on fire and gets burnt badly as he lays his bare back on it and blames the evil force for his own foolish deeds.

At times we see a cultural and religious shift in Nandan's stories pertaining to the later life. The culture and religion have changed for the descendants of the Girmityas. The faith has changed for the immigrants who moved out of Fiji and have become more and more westernized in their thinking and outlook, despite the fact that they have their motherland always in the womb of their memories. For example, there is a reference to the protagonist how he starts wearing a cross around his neck which symbolizes the change of faith with the passage of time. Miller makes it clear in his essay that cultural identities have a history and affect the future as much as the past and are open for the transformation.

Similarly, the Girmityas came from India and brought with them the cultural identity that has an Indian history. However, later on when their progeny moves out they carry along a mixed cultural identity and history. Indian-ness gets mixed with the Fijian-ness, later both mix up with the western cultural one.

Hindi film songs give an Indian flavour to the stories. There are perpetual references to Hindi film songs and actors. In "A Christmas Card", Raj and the narrator go to watch a Hindi religious film with much enthusiasm because Nirupa Roy, the actress, is Raj's favourite.

Likewise, Hindi film songs are common among the immigrants. The old man in "Mangoes" often sings in Bhojpuri: "*I'm an old man raging at the wind. A shipwrecked soul, waving at the waves...*" (66). Zhaman in "The Woman in the Orchard" keeps repeating the song: "*Dhumdhamadhumdhum, Dholbajai dhum, Dhamdhamadhumdhum!*" (89). Jaddu in "The judgement", walking at night sings: "*Dil deke dekho, Dil deke dekho!...*, *Ekgharbanaunga Teregharkesamne...*" (103-4). And in "Guddi", Bharat, a singer boy of the village is invited specially to entertain people with the Hindi songs. People have been waiting for him for a long time. Once there, he plays harmonium playing a film tune: "*Ankiamilake, jibharmake, chalenahinjana, Oh, oh, chalenahin jana...*" (139)

These cultural, religious and social constructs help immigrants rehabilitate in their new home on a strange island with the relics of the previous one that they have lost. This recreation takes a long time, in the meanwhile, the process of recreation also undergoes a lot many changes which results in the creation of a 'new home', a 'hybrid home'.

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