www.TLHjournal.com Literary Herald ISSN: 2454-3365
An International Refereed/Peer-reviewed English e-Journal
Impact Factor: 6.292 (SJIF)

Decoding the Echoes of Indenture: The Intersection of Biopower and Diaspora in Satendera Nandan's Poetry

Narinder K. Sharma, PhD[1]

Abstract

The Diaspora in the late modern capitalist epoch has acquired ambivalent textual responses owing to its acquisition of spaces that disregard the logic of monovalency. It refers to transformed knowledge about people, ethnicities, races, and nation-states, disrupting the logocentric linear view of nationality and homeland narratives and demonstrating their incongruity. It forces us to think about the subjects and subjectivities that are re-designed by the (hyper)mobility factor of capitalism today. In this paper, I seek to assess one of the most discontenting probables of diaspora, apart from the optimistic ones (such as crossovers, hybridity, acculturation, or the myths of fiscal prosperity and mercantile gains), which is state racism, violence, and even genocide in its holocaustic extremist mode. The analysis aims to highlight that the politics of inequitable state dispensation are not historically unique in diasporic spaces, and they take on agitating proportions when they integrate into polity and policy. Controlling the nerves of its subjects is the sovereign's main strategy. This is kept up by eliminating the incompatible and inferior through localized violence, institutionalized racism, coups, and genocide.

Keywords: Diaspora, Ambivalence, Subjectivities, Spaces, Strategy.

The Diaspora in the late modern capitalist epoch has acquired ambivalent textual responses owing to its acquisition of spaces that disregard the logic of monovalency. Therefore, the term has resulted in the formation of new historical epistemes. Speaking postmodernistically, it refers to transformed knowledge about people, ethnicities, races, and nation-states, disrupting the logocentric linear view of nationality and homeland narratives and demonstrating their incongruity. Previously, the term was disdainfully associated with the Jews in the 7th century,

[1] Narinder K. Sharma is an Assistant Professor of English at the Central University of Punjab, Bathinda. He has authored numerous research papers published in prestigious national and international journals, including *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture of Purdue University Press, Sahatiya Akademi's Indian Literature, Literary Voice, IUP Journal of English Studies, IUP Journal of American Studies, Literary Voice, Panjab Journal of English Studies, Re-markings, Atlantic Critical Review, Pragati's English Journal*, and others. He earned his PhD from Guru Nanak Dev University, located in Punjab, India. E-mail: narinderksharma.elt@gmail.com.

whose dispersal into lands other than their own initiated the polemics therein. However, over time, the term became universal (loosely globalized), identifying with any race, community, or ethnicity that left its native abode for a foreign land, leaving it to sustain and fend for itself. The definition of being so easy for consumption is that it semantically hides in its wake the complexes of identity, dominance, territoriality, and acculturation. So, Diaspora, as a dialogic eruption, creates a psychosomatic space that is both real and imagined. It forces us to think about the subjects and subjectivities that are re-designed by the (hyper)mobility factor of capitalism today.

In this paper, I seek to assess one of the most discontenting probables of diaspora, apart from the optimistic ones (such as crossovers, hybridity, acculturation, or the myths of fiscal prosperity and mercantile gains), which is state racism, violence, and even genocide in its holocaustic extremist mode. The politics of inequitable state dispensation are not historically unique in diasporic spaces, and they take on agitating proportions when they integrate into polity and policy. Controlling the nerves of its subjects is the sovereign's main strategy. This is kept up by eliminating the incompatible and inferior through localized violence, institutionalized racism, coups, and genocide. This has made some sovereigns more likely to be hostile toward diasporas around the world. Tamils in Sri Lanka, Armenians in Turkey, Indians in Fiji, Australia, and Uganda, etc. are the latest vivid tropes of this proprietary imagination of the host nation-states. Hate crimes against diasporas are made easier because politicians are too proud to admit they don't have any power over people who have similar traits and histories while focusing on the unique aspects of race and regionalism.

Foucault identifies this kind of government policy as biopower legislation. This type of legislation controls people's health, life, and death (for supposedly good reasons) by controlling their life and biological processes, which is seen as a "…polyvalent political, biological, and power's problem" (Foucault, 246). But because of recent political events, biopower has been seen going backwards into legitimizing the removal of the unfit and homogeneity-threatening through institutionalized state racism. This can happen directly (as seen in coups) or indirectly (by remaining silent or helpless in the face of civil society's protests to use a eugenic or discretionary process of ruling). Due to their counter-narrative traits, the diaspora serves as easy targets for the theorization and execution of such policies.

Satendra Nandan, the Indo-Fijian poet, deals with the physical and psychological scars of the state's violent and demeaning misadventures against the Indian diaspora in Fijian geo-political spaces. His work thematizes the narratives of national identity and double exile experienced by Indians in the context of indentured and modern migrancy. Nandan's different types of writing all come together to try to balance out the violent diasporic epistemologies that play out in the imaginations of literary artists and show how the government is helping to make things worse for

people in diaspora. Pandey discusses the comprehensible imagination of Indian diasporic writers in Fiji: "Fiji-Indian writers such as Nandan, Subramani, and Sudesh Mishra, with their indentured consciousness, have witnessed their entwinement with the plight of dispossessed people. Their awareness gives an edge of grief to their fragile national existence, and that is why their sense of belongingness returns in fragments" (150).

Foucault's study of power genealogy frames issues like state aggression and autochthonous pressure as political and geopolitical in nature. He argues that since the 20th century, the state has adopted a new regime of biopower, in which life, death, health, and other matters of biology—a given and pre-political—are being regulated by the state as objects of knowledge (like economic and political). Under this regime, foregrounding a statistical distribution and technology to monitor the population stands as a euphemism for the panopticonal design of surveillance, promoting 'the art of government'. Foucault identifies the concept of biopower, which validates racism as "…a way of introducing a break into the domain of life that is under power's control: the break between what we must let live and what must die. […] It is a way of separating out the groups that exist within a population" (255). The modern states inscribe racist and exclusionary praxis as their basic mechanism of power, ironically for the purpose of preserving life and survival. "If genocide is indeed the dream of modern powers, this is not because of a recent return to the ancient right to kill; it is because power is situated and exercised at the level of life, the species, the race, and the large-scale phenomenon of population" (Foucault, 137).

Satendra Nandan, the doubly exiled subject—first owing to his Indian indentured labor ancestry in Fiji, followed by the state-orchestrated deracination from Fiji to Australia—tries to forge an ethical imagination of his national identity in the face of an institutionalized political vendetta aimed at decapitating his ethnicity. The string of political coups in Fiji, viz., the Rabuka coup of 1987 (twice in the same year) and the George Speight coup of 2000, to oust the Indian diaspora despite their fat numerics, evokes the Foucauldian notions of systemized cleansing of the race by the sovereign, which, in this case, are the Fijian foundational narratives, the locals or the natives. After the two military coups, the consequences of state racism and biopolitical practices in Fiji led many Indo-Fijians to quit the country, and this banishment has become the seminal facet of the writers of the adversarial space of the diaspora, like Satendra Nandan. The writings of Nandan are the manifestation of this betrayal and inhuman political misadventure of the host nation, which precipitates an existential psychology in the diasporic subject and a feeling of fragile national existence, or, just say, being nationless. Nandan writes:

> The first coup on May 14, 1987, had affected Fiji like a heart attack. The second, on September 25, was like a stroke. Together, they led to a fearful political paralysis, and the internal hemorrhage continued. More than 77,000 Fiji citizens, who had known no other country, left for other lands with feelings of disgust, betrayal, shame, and the hurt of history. You

> cannot judge the size of the internal injury by superficial scars. (Nandan, *Fiji*, p. 8)

Foucault bases his claims of initiating private warfare in nation-states like Fiji on Slavoj Zizek's concept of the "Nation Thing" and its citizens' imagined identification with it. The irrational fear from the ethnic enclaves within the nation, like the diaspora, says Zizek, arises from a proprietary sense of enjoyment of the "Nation Thing" by the foundational narratives or the natives, which, ironically, had never envisaged any idea of enjoyment unless shaken out by the diaspora having a share of their rightful pie. It is thus the Indian diaspora in Fiji that made Fijians construct their own national imaginary as a "thing" to be enjoyed, which, under the state's quasi-Nazi agenda, was later understood to have been held hostage by the "Other", the Indo-Fijians. The Foucauldian discourse of power or Althusserian 'interpellation'—which forces the polity to perceive what those in control desire—appears to have shaped the natives' perception of the Indian diaspora as a Gesellschaft, an alienated society devoid of any organic laws against their own Gemeinschaft or "…traditional, organically linked community" (Zizek, 211). Hence, "…it is the diasporic enjoyment of the Nation Thing absent among the proprietors of the nation that gives rise to a range of responses, chief among them racist exclusion and cultural denigration" (Mishra, 6), which the writings of Satendra Nandan seem to encapsulate. The political violence and its elimination from the national discourse of Fiji is trauma, which becomes the framework of Indo-Fijian writers like Nandan, who write about their own envisioning of their space and their own memories as a necessary ethical condition of survival.

Almost the entirety of Nandan's work reflects the political and psychological repercussions of state-fomented violence on the 'already exilic' Indian community. He writes about the consequences of such a diabolic political calamity over the Indo-Fijian gentry, including his own girmitya people:

Plantation by plantation, they build a new world
Sugar Sweet, the slave crop grew
Elsewhere it has depopulated half the universe
Here my father's fathers,
Sleeping on our mother's breasts
Gave breath and bread to an island
And like islands in the ocean
Shipwrecked, trapped in history,
Without the grammar of grandmothers
They died in hope and dead. (Nandan, *Lines Across Black Waters* 10)

The poem here reflects the turbulent diasporic experience in the wake of state-generated violence, leading to disruption in the Indian diaspora's paradisiacal imagination. There is an allusion to the earlier world, built brick by brick by Nandan's ancestors, which got violated in the

whirlwind of hostility and vitriolic political crosshairs. The death of the grandfather and other kin becomes the iconography of the death of a legacy, a people, a community, and a culture that had sought to imagine a nation away from the nation. However, it soon gave way to the dominant narratives of politically charged actions, aggressive claims made by the authority, and dominance-saturated narratives that aim to decimate the 'Other', the dialectical adversary known as the diaspora. Nandan writes about this power operation in Fiji that subjugates bodies, directs gestures, and regulates the forms of behavior of his diasporic clan; in short, it debars the nation's imagination:

> The Indian Fijian's exile is like death without death's final grace. Its poignancy is heightened by its unexpectedness, and he became one before he could belong, homeless in a familiar world. To belong is to be aware of the loss that is inherent in belongingness. The Indian Fijian hadn't achieved that, for he, more than most, didn't know other worlds. His attempts to belong—to be part of the national political body—led to the coups of 1987. Suddenly, he became homeless at home. You wake up to the harrowing fact that you were excluded from the imagination of the nation. (Nandan, *Fiji* 104)

The situation of Nandan and his *girmitya* folks in Fiji is, as evident, the outcome of the phobia arising out of biopower strategies that alienate the diaspora from its mainstream on the pretext of the former heterogenizing the culture and their imaginary. Foucault summarizes the application of Machiavellian strategies as follows: "The elimination of abnormal individuals leads to a reduction in the number of degenerates within the species, and the more I—as a species, not an individual—can survive, the stronger and more vigorous I will become. I will be able to proliferate" (Foucault 255). Nandan believes that the insistence on 'I' and its subjectivising overtones, imposed on others, have led him and his fellow Indo-Fijians to a critical juncture. The violence-prone statehood of Fiji, along with militarily sponsored racism, have disrupted his growth. According to Foucault, "…these factors not only preclude the right to kill but also increase the risk of death, rejection, exclusion, and similar outcomes" (Foucault 256). Nandan writes that the impact of such a strategy bruised the girmit consciousness and psyche:

"From a little village the dark lines
Twelve thousand miles, sixty thousand lives.
On that unforgettable, *Pathar Panchali…*
The best was thrown into the sea,
Crushed the juice of murderous cave.
The journeys were made:
Migration is reincarnation." (Nandan, *Lines Across Black Waters* 10)

Nandan's recurrent trope of death in the poetry is reflective of his anguish at the sight and experience of the violence that jolted his notions of individuals as citizens of their own created

worlds, whereby plurality and polyphony are admissible conditions of survival. The cynical tones of the poems show that he seemed to have imagined a life where racial intolerance never came up in the discussion of nation and culture. Instead, the Fijian government betrayed the ideals of assimilation and acculturation, making life very hard for many people. Vijay Mishra, the Fijian literary critic, elaborates on this abruptly erupted cultural inertia of Fijian statehood, which twisted even the bourgeoisie's inflections of conciliatory practices towards the diasporic Indians because they rallied behind the state's racial harangue. The impact of the coups in Fiji thus produced not only bodypolitic slides in the country but also generated a new sociological precedent for the common citizenry too, whereby the multi-racial and pluralistic idea of nationhood was to be displaced by a more parochial and regional discourse. Mishra writes:

> After the 1987 coup, when Fiji Indian identity was not deemed to be self-evidently connected to Fiji, the indigenous Fijian shadowed the question (*o vaka tikotoko mai vei/*where you are coming from) with the idea of the *vulagi*, the foreigner, whenever the addressee happened to be an Indian. The Fijian historian Asesela Ravavu is quite explicit: if a *vulagi* (here the Fiji Indian) "does not comply to the host's (the *taykei's*, the Indigenous Fijian's) expectations, then he may very well leave before he is thrown out of the house." (Ravavu 58-59) Ask the question too often in nation-states and with the latter-day Fijian connotation, and you begin to produce the schizophrenic social and psychological formations of diasporas. A diasporic double consciousness comes to the fore once you like this question, finally, to the presumed ultimate solution of diasporas: "What do we do with them now?" (16)

The latter-day Fijian connotation that Mishra refers to is the skewed socio-cultural torpor that Fiji has reached after the state displayed in its coups, the creation of racial enclaves as the manifesto of the political agenda of purism and ethnic cleansing. In this sense, Nandan's writings of national lament reveal a similar existential dilemma, where the question, "Where are you coming from?"—that once signified the beginning of inclusion into the continuum—has been eclipsed by the interrogative dominant question, "What do we do with them now?" Foucault argues that power is exercised over those who can choose, and it aims to influence their potential choices. The Fijian military power structure chose to eliminate the vitiating Indians, claiming a political and economic reason to preserve their own historic and cultural conditions of living. His poem "Ruins" sums up the angst-ridden minds of his people, ravaged by the divisive politics and cultural schizophrenia of the new Fijian biopower regime:

"I have felt in my heart
The pain of the dead
And understood their restless heart
Like a wave on the ocean's bosom
Longing to hug the shore.
Such love, such betrayal

In such ruins.
In my land there are no such ruins
Except in the arteries of the old
But in the country of the mind
They are fearless, eyeless." (Nandan, *Lines Across Black Waters* 60)

The ruthless cultural shock leaves the historically indentured like Nandan to grapple with the complexities of omission from the nation's imagination of the Fijian Indians. Remembrance and longings are the tools of the migrant, like Nandan, to lament the loss of a certain existence and stable identity disfigured in the skewed and reconfigured social relations after the betraying coups. The remark by Homi Bhabha corresponds to Nandan's muse's banking upon memories, which console as well as traumatize the subject: "...remembering is never a quiet act of introspection or retrospection. It is a painful remembering, a putting together of the dismembered past to make sense of the trauma of the present" (Bhabha, 63). The aftermaths of the racial violence in which the Fijian population was mobilized as a defense of racial norms against the framework of racial abnormality of the Indian rival population produced literature like that of Nandan's, which had to recourse to the memories in exile to play against the current experience of an inconsistent transplanted life.

"Yet homeless, nameless between earth-sky
A race without a place must forever die.
Uprooted, transplanted lives grow in pain,
To live, must their generations die again?
We aren't possessed of the understanding
The dispossessed beginning is our ending:
So, talk on madly of my people thy people
On graves build temples and church steeple!" (Nandan, *Lines Across Black Waters* 97)

The desire for a homeland stems from the trauma of multi-dislocation, and for Indo-Fijians like Nandan, it's the state-triggered antagonism that leaves them feeling dispossessed, nameless, and without a face. The fantasy of another space, another imagination, may follow one displacement, but in the case of the Indian indenture, it's the cyclic dispossession and a rupture of absence that become part of the fantasy as the earlier traumatic event resurfaces. The repeated martial dispensation aimed at the Indians in three coups is the trauma of Indo-Fijians, the unconscious, which, as Lacan states, is structured like language. So, every action and reaction (like literature) of the displaced subject, like Nandan, bears its imprint. Multiple displacements never went away from the Indo-Fijian psyche but got transformed into a desire called homeland as "…[a] fantasy structure, [a] scenario, through which society perceives itself as a homogeneous entity" (Salecl, 15).

The desire for a homeland stems from the trauma of multi-dislocation, and for Indo-Fijians like Nandan, it's the state-triggered antagonism that leaves them feeling dispossessed, nameless, and without a face. The fantasy of another space, another imagination, may follow one displacement, but in the case of the Indian indenture, it's the cyclic dispossession and a rupture of absence that become part of the fantasy as the earlier traumatic event resurfaces. The repeated martial dispensation aimed at the Indians in three coups is the trauma of Indo-Fijians, the unconscious, which, as Lacan states, is structured like language. So, every action and reaction (like literature) of the displaced subject, like Nandan, bears its imprint. The Indo-Fijian psyche never lost sight of multiple displacements but instead transformed them into a longing for a homeland, a "...fantasy structure, a scenario, through which society perceives itself as a homogeneous entity" (Salecl, 15).

Works Cited

Bhabha, Homi. (1994). *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge.

Foucault, Michel. (1997). *Society Must be Defended: lectures at the College de France*. Ed. Muaro Bertani and Alessandro Fontana. New York: Picador.

_____. (1990). "Right of Death and Power over Life" *An Introduction. Volume I. The History of Sexuality*. New York: Vintage Books.

Mishra, Vijay. (2005). "The Diasporic Imaginary and the Indian Diaspora". *Asian Studies Institute Occasional Lecture 2*, 2005. Weblink. https://researchportal.murdoch.edu.au/esploro/outputs/other/The-diasporic-imaginary-and-the-Indian/991005543889207891

Nandan, Satendra. (1997). *Lines Across Black Waters*. Adelaide: CRNLE, 1997.

_____ *Fiji: Paradise in Pieces*. (2000). Adelaide: CRNLE & PIP.

Pandey, M. S. (2006). "The Hymns of National Strife: The Enigma of nation in the Diasporic Writings of Satendra Nandan*". Migrant Voices in Literatures in English*. Ed. Sheobhushan Shukla and Anu Shukla. New Delhi: Sarup and Sons.

Ravavu, A. (1991). *The Façade of Democracy: Fijian Struggles for Political Control 1830-1987*. Suava: Reader Publishing House.

Salecl, Renata. (1994). *The Spoils of Freedom*. London: Routledge.

Zizek, Slavoj. (1993). *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel and the Critique of Ideology*. Durham: Duke University Press.