

## **Bleakness and Angst in Subramani's *Marigolds***

**Dr. G. Priya**

Assistant Professor  
Fatima College

**Dr. L. Monica Lilly**

Assistant Professor  
Manickam Ramasamy Arts and Science

### **Abstract**

This paper explores the diasporic experiences of Indo-Fijians who express the emotions of nostalgia and marginalization while being at exile. The paper throws light on the lifestyle of Chetram in the host society as he resides balancing the cultural beliefs of both the home and the adopted country. This short story proves to be an excellent literary work that sensitizes people on the rebellious spirit, suffering, and above all feeling of exile and nostalgia in migration. The paper showcases the social experiment undertaken by Subramani to bring in the cultural diversity that is intrinsic to society. This study critiques the immigrant's psyche articulating the post-colonial modernity.

**Keywords:** Diaspora, Migration, Psyche, Exile, Nostalgia, Fiji Islands, Immigration, Dislocation, Displacement.

*It has no future but itself,  
Its infinite realms contain  
Its past, enlightened to perceive  
New periods of pain.*

- (*Mystery of Pain*-Emily Dickinson; Lines 5-8)

The Fiji islands are situated in the Southwest Pacific Ocean. The indentured migration from India to many distant plantations and colonies was introduced due to the abolition of African slave trade when Fiji became a British Crown colony, Indenture Indian workers arrived in Fiji. Many of them stayed after their expiration of agreement, some of them

leased plot of land from local Fijians and started their own farms, sugar cane fields, or small business. The Indo-Fijian literature is around forty years old, which mainly constitute poetry, fiction, essays, and short stories.

Dislocation and displacement has forced these writers to emphasize a sense of fragmentation and nostalgia in their writings. In this sense, Indians have enriched the literature of the South Pacific region by their pen and pathos. The third generation or descendents of these indentured workers ( Girmitiyas) have written the records and chronicles of their anguished ancestors, emphasizing their different 'origins'. Their literary masterpieces gave rise to their rebellious spirit, their suffering, and above all feeling of exile and nostalgia. They not only remember their motherland after a span of years but also express their feeling through words.

The great writers who expressed the deaths and lives of their forgotten fathers are Totaram Sanadhya, Subramani, Sudesh Mishra, Raymond Pillai, Dr. Vijay Mishra, Dr. Satendra Nandan, Ahmed Ali, Brij Lal, Prof.Vijay Naidu. Indo-Fijian writers, using English or Fiji Hindi as their medium expressed the tragedies of their ancestors, making it as the central narrative of their works. Exile, nostalgia, and twice-banishment are the general themes of the writers. All the Indo-Fijian writers make their narratives on their past grimy history. Their ancestors' horrible experiences force them to make haunting expressions in which we confronts heart-tormenting episodes of exile, displacement, gullible tricks and temptations of recruiting agents, pangs of separation through crossing *kala pani*, savage life in dark lines/*bhut* lane and the barbarity and cruelties of the Overseers etc.

Subramani, a prominent writer of Fiji, wrote his masterpiece, *Dauka Puran* in Fiji Hindi. His contribution includes novel, short stories, drama and essays. His proficiency and skill lies in the fact that he has written works both in English and in Fiji Hindi. In 1978, he won an international prize for his short story collection, *Marigolds*. It established him as a prominent and acclaimed writer. *The Fantasy Eaters* published in 1988, is his marvellous collection of short stories. *Dauka Puran*, published in 2001 is an epic novel and magnum opus of Subramani. The novel written in Fiji Hindi, is a sheer achievement, established him as an innovator and

intellectual writer of Fiji. The novel is divided into *Purans* (ancient legends) which can be read at several levels. His critical works, essays and addresses are published under the title, *Altering Imagination* (1997). He also edited two volumes; *Shifting Locations* (2009) and *The Indo-Fijian Experience* (1979).

Subramani is professor of literature at the University of the South Pacific in Fiji. His book, *South Pacific Literature: From Myth to Fabulation* is the first critical study of the origins and growth of literature in the Pacific Islands. In 1978, his story "Marigolds" won the South Pacific Association of Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies' short fiction competition.

The Diasporic people carry with them cultural linkages that connect them with countries of their origin. Chetram's wife Dharma is a sun-worshipper and she usually performs her Sunday ritual, pouring cold tap water on a Tulsi plant as the sun rises, chanting some Sanskrit mantra. She doesn't know the meaning of the mantras yet she follows her rituals regularly. Chetram feels ripped apart, "She pulls the orhini over her head when she discovers I am watching"( 676).

Family today, is a place for renegotiation and primary socialization, where people can relate to each other not just on ties of blood but also on the basis of love-"finding solace from the hardships and pressures of work". The concept of family and home represents for the immigrants: "one's inner spiritual self, one's true identity" in a strange world. Family and home are crucial to any immigrant, as it provides them anchoring--roots for socializing, teaching children inherited cultural values, structuring roles, and domestic divisions. An analysis of the family with its ethnic, cultural, and social diversity brings the nature of some of the conflicts and changes that have occurred in new homes in the Diaspora.

Chetram feels at loss of home, whenever he hears a scrunch of wheels, he expects to be rescued from his home which he calls as 'self-made prison'. Once when he goes to the kitchen for some salt with a knife as he was slicing cucumber ,Dharma trembles in fear and hid

behind a hedge .At that time he felt a ‘trapped, threatening air in the house’. The fear and the insecurity he feels at his own home reflects his longing for his ancestral homeland.

Chetram believes that he is not fully accepted by their host society and therefore feels partly alienated and insulted. In the school most of them ignore him and behave as if he doesn’t exist. No one ever asked him for Friday night drinking parties .The students in the classroom also ridicule his blustering ways, his posture and chuckle in his back. Self-centered Immigrant Psyche persons are caught between the two worlds--the one they have forsaken and the "other" into which they could not get integrated. Their inability to find happiness in the chosen land and their inability to discard the old world lands them in frustration.

His tremors of brotherly love for Cecil never get acknowledged and he suppresses his desire as his brother has always been the quite one. All he know about his own brother is he is a dentist in Sydney, has two houses, and his wife is a nurse. His brother’s child wriggles out crying, ‘you smell like an old man’(677). He is devoid of love from his brother and his children which force him to make loud shuffling noise like trapped animal.

Migration does not involve a single act but an on-going process of negotiation between the individual, the family, the community, and the adopted country. An immigrant family therefore first has to come to terms with the immediate environment of the home that one is leaving behind. At one point of time, the lies Chetram maintained, the humiliation he accepted, his suppressed aggression proves to be catastrophic. He drinks with a taxi driver and returns home, seeing his wife sobbing quietly he releases his inner turmoil by brutally abusing his wife.

In the writings of Diaspora, the creative imagination has been accompanied by traumatized and haunted souls, characters who are deemed victims of melancholy, delusions, self-destruction, and what is generally called "mad" behavior. Chetram’s concealed anger for his wife manifests in the way he broke the neck of the doll, which like his wife, watches all his thoughts from some secret vantage point.

On the idea of integration, Talcott Parsons, the famous American sociologist, has proposed that "the essential dynamic structure of the family rests upon the parents' ability to form

a coalition, maintain boundaries between the generations. Chetram is further pushed into the desolation by his mother who leaves the house and returns to humiliate him and accuse him of ingratitude and threatens him.

The fact is that a Diasporic family is constantly subjected to stress, through increasingly rapid social change and radical transformation of social structures, which requires considerable capacity for adaptation. Chetram occasionally finds rescue from these distressing anxieties of his repressed inner life through dreams “Abruptly, without much effort, without losing breath, I’m flung upward like a billowing parachute. I propel myself higher with my elbows – it’s one skill I’m sure of – into a vast, open field of heavy-blowing marigolds. Acres of succulent plants, the size of sunflowers, blazing maddeningly in the sun, still straining for growth”(678). The only solace he gets in his gloomy life is from his friend Eroni, the Physical Director, the only person who considers him a human being and calls him as ‘Mr.Chetram’ politely. His neighbour Rangaswamy serves as a communicative element and listens to his speech about various issues.

The reference to pleasant chirping of birds in the tree when they had just built the house represent the happiness he once had ,but ‘now the bush is gone ‘shows the depletion of exhilaration in his life. The numerous references to toilet activities in the story sarcastically point at the mislaid release of psychological repressions through instinctive functions of the body. The precise time his wife enters the bedroom, dusting the sheets and pillows, pulling down the mosquito net, switching off the lights shows the monotony in his life. The children of his brother from Australia seems to him the most secretive and unpleasant children, to him” they aren’t like real children, soft and innocent but unhealthy looking and adult-like in their demeanor”(677). He feels that he is both an insider and outsider in this land- both native and foreign and occupies the between-world position.

The garden represents the homeland for the family. “We don’t have a garden yet .Except the dried-up flower bed in front which carries Dharma’s Tulsi plant. Dharma has kept some marigold seeds in a bottle” (678), shows her affection and lack of communication leads to the breakdown of relationship. ‘Marigold’ symbolizes the love he has for his wife. Marigolds

with their bright yellow colour stand as a telling contrast to Chetram's colourless, tired, squalid existence and his crisis of identity and existentialism.

Subramani has sketched Chetram succumb to lethargy, as social sedimentation and the oppressive nature of racial identity forces him to accept and embrace melancholia. Towards the end, when Chetram wants to start a new road, he becomes a prey to his delusion. Chetram's life is characterized by silence and the absence of significant relationships. The mock "serenity" has finally gone from their days, leading to the ominous realization that "There is no alternate life: a hundred years of history on these islands has resulted in wilderness and distress"(681).

'Marigolds' shows the love-hate association that exists between the land and the immigrants. Chetram realizes how different he has grown, feels estranged and exiled in the adopted land. His quest for home in the native land is an exercise in futility, viewed as a lost and lonely person in the midst of his new environment especially among his own family members.

Violently captured and transported, dispersed throughout the New World, placed in plantations with speakers of different languages, deprived of a common tongue, common history and birthplace, Diasporic writer Subramani succeeds in articulating his own post-colonial modernity.

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