
SATENDRA NANDAN: TRAVERSING THE LITERARY WORLD OF A UNIQUE POET

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Abstract

Nandan can be portrayed as a unique poet, a class by himself. He may be called a modern poet with a true sense of his culture and roots. The visionary world of Satendra Nandan emerges out of the plight of the Indian segment in Fiji. It revolves around the instinctive clench of the Girit history and ideology. He often imitates the girit world and unfailingly represents it through his literary creations. Reading his works is like a journey back to the past. His works definitely enliven the imagination of the readers. The central figure in his works particularly fiction is Nandan himself. He modifies the regeneration of his memories through a series of polyphonous compositions. Nandan's literary Oeuvre is like a river, ever-flowing and vitalizing. Nandan's poetry displays a contemporaneous and diffusing theme of belonging and displacement, his growth in Fiji, Delhi, and Australia, his political life, and the impact of the coups. The evolution of his consciousness is agonizing. Nandan quite meticulously narrates his education at various places like Fiji, Delhi, and Canberra. Movements, afflictions, migrations, and exile are the recurring themes in his works.

Keywords: Fijian, oeuvre, growth, contemporary, coups, themes, cultural.

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Introduction

“He has lived through parliament, coups, migration, exile, and return. A variety of experiences is refracted through the individual voice of poet who was born in Fiji and has lived and studied in India, England, and Australia, countries of the mind which have shaped his writing and distinctive subjectivity”.

-Prof. Bruce Bennett

The impact of Fiji on the growth of Nandan as an individual, politician, and poet has been a powerful one. While the events related to the coups are engrossing, it is the narratives of the Indian community in Fiji and his growth in Fiji which find the main place in his works and gain our attention. His accounts are vivid and witty. He displays an aspect of life that probably reflects India with a slight Fijian nuance. The most noticeable feature of his works is that politics come on the scene inevitably and naturally. Nandan quite adroitly portrays both sides of the coin. Nandan suffered exceedingly during the coup of 1987. He couldn't isolate himself from the then prevalent political conditions in Fiji. But he practiced politics through poetry as he believed that the real presence of a community – what it conserves from the past, what it makes of its present, what visions shape its future is- expressed in its literature particularly in its poetry.

His journey, from being born as a post-indenture descendant of the Indo-Fijian to becoming a remarkable politician and eventually a prolific writer, has been full of heart-wrenching experiences, love, struggle, coups, and much more. Nandan asserts in *Nadi: Memories of a River*, “An extraordinary journey for me had begun from the front row of class IV to the front benches of the Fiji parliament”. (p. 61)

Nandan is quite different from other migrant writers as he has written a lot about his acceptance and rejection in Fiji as well as his emotional and cultural bond with his motherland. Being the third

generation of his family in Fiji, he unconditionally accepted the Fijian way of life and even its constitution. But the miserable event of the coup of 1987 changed his equation with Fiji. He completely rejected racism that tore apart the social-political fabric of Fiji, before and after the coup. He contends that the real feeling of nationality emerges from embracing every race.

Fiji is rich in picturesque landscapes the blue sea, sun-bathed beaches, hills, palm trees, rainbow leaden sky, all add to the beauty of this paradisaical land. Fiji has been an indispensable part of Nandan. The villages of his childhood and boyhood are like living organisms that give him a sense of completeness and grace. The landscapes and seascapes of Fiji enabled him to build a self-image and developed within him a sense of belonging. Every aspect of Fiji has played a specific and vital role in Nandan's growth. Without these features, Nandan would not have been what he is today. He is quite appreciative of the landscapes and seascapes which becomes obvious when we read his literary masterpieces. He is even thankful for whatever he has gained from them. Though designed on the description of a landscape or a piece of scenery, his poetry implicitly addresses a social or political issue or the meaning of home and country in the same way. The description of various elements in the landscape ultimately becomes a poetic vehicle through which Nandan delivers a personal interpretation. He becomes increasingly explicit about his personal political and social message using the language of the sublime. This feature of his creative art suggests that the natural scene corresponds with his political and personal ideology. He offers a new way of understanding the landscape's relationship with poetry and politics. Central to his poetry is the idea of self-reflection. He tries to draw a connection between himself and the place or situation where he stands. His sense of belonging and the overpowering feeling of nothingness is evident in his poetry. He has an excruciating sensitivity to his surroundings. The poetic landscape goes beyond the craft into the tenuous space where intellect and spirit direct the technique. Much of his poetic landscape is introspective. He even effortlessly captures the peacefulness of the river Nadi in a simple yet unique style. The river holds a symbolic significance as it depicts the emotional turmoil Nandan went through when in Fiji. It reflects his inner world. He uses a rich palette of words to paint the river in his works and he does so in a realistic manner.

Through his works he wants people to understand the pain and persecution he had endured in his own country. The silent cries, bleeding realities, untold stories are made audible and visible via the literary sojourn of Nandan. The narratives presented in his prose and poetry are embedded in the experiences of loss, grief, and deception. A concrete image of Fiji and its history is skilfully created by Nandan to make it accessible to the Fijians as well as the rest of the world. He gives an autobiographical account of his experiences as well as narrates the tales of those whose lives are physically and spiritually tied to Fiji. The circumstances of Nandan's life offer the best framework for comprehending his works. Nandan writes in *Fiji: Paradise in Pieces*:

An occasional thought, a remembered touch, an imagined memory all fall into the sentences, paragraphs, structures that we build with the bricks – words. It might, if you're lucky, give you a sense of being ... In one's writing, of course, one can be truthful – profoundly personal but not necessarily autobiographical. For a writer's life contains many lives. Lives loved, lived, imagined, read, created, even forgotten lives of friends and foes. Dead lives live in lines of poetry. (pp. 174-175)

Nandan weaves together the fragments of the indenture era. His literary creations are a veritable voice of the landless, nationless, and exilic Indian diaspora of Fiji. His girmitya background becomes a dynamic text and an important fount of his writings. The themes of colonialism, religious conflicts, identity crisis, politics, cultural shift, nostalgia, feelings of homelessness, exile, loss, and the colossal role of mythical consciousness merging past and present form the essence of

his poetic style and pattern. Nandan consciously displays his love for his motherland and his efforts to adjust and articulate himself in a multicultural land. His diasporic consciousness can be considered as the genesis of his language, literature, and vision. His past remains a part of his poetic process. He gave expression to his joys and griefs in his writings. This art of writing empowered him to get through the bitter experiences of migration, dislocation, coups, exiles, and feeling of homelessness. He resolved to find a significant space and individual identity in the adopted country. Nandan grew up in a diasporic Indian community in Fiji. Owing to this fact he could poignantly reveal the brutality, injustice, and racial practices against the Fiji Indians in the colonial world of Fiji. He attempts to analyse the deep-rooted Indian consciousness, irony of betrayal, and nostalgia. Syd Harrex rightly stated:

Nandan's fiction, poetry, and essay are like members of one family, having common themes of exile, trauma, ethics, nostalgia, and search for space. Nandan's works reconstruct the colonial and post-colonial conditions of Fiji and present violent upheavals and his personal nightmarish experiences from the point of view of the expatriate living there.

A sign of change in Nandan's recent works can be noticed in the lyrical severance with history and in his greater recognition of the major philosophical concerns regarding poetry's role in understanding moments of crisis. He openly displays his confrontation with human misery and suffering. He makes clear that suffering for the Indo-Fijians can be viewed in the form of unending oppression that is not abominable. Unceasing agony leads to a never-ending inscription of racial divides that consequently distorts the soul. By portraying the painful truth of the girit experience of displacement, cultural loss, and brutal exploitation in Fiji, he takes us to an insightful understanding of art's role in thrashing out the crisis. In the ebb and flow of the tide of girit existence, Nandan's poetic craft gives voice to an earnest adoration of whatever is lost. Like his contemporary Salman Rushdie, Nandan too believes that it is possible to love a broken mirror all the more because it is broken. Nandan's creative weaving of western and Indian tradition through the girit voice reaches an unmatched level of universality which is a welcome change to the provincial alienation of Indo-Fijian writing. Nandan uses a melodramatic and alluring narrative in his writings to draw sympathy for the post-indenture community's plight.

Nandan's writings depict both attachment and rejection to a place where he was born and grew up. Being a Fijian citizen, he accepted the culture, traditions, and people but the sudden stroke of the coup of 1987 deepened his dilemma. It is the tragedy of the coup and racial discrimination in Fiji, which played a crucial and decisive role in shaping his sense of diaspora. The bitter experience of the coup seems to have produced an everlasting psychological scar on his mind, heart, and soul. The coup left him with a sense of betrayal and he was completely shattered. Through his writings, Nandan displays with utmost honesty, what life was for him as he grew up in the country of his birth but which brutally disowned him due to the coup. Racism was not the cause of the coups rather it was the power-hunger of a few politicians which resulted in the bloodless coups. The entire socio-political setup of Fiji changed post-coup. The first coup in 1987 was almost like a heart attack for Fiji. The second coup in September 1987 was like a stroke. Fiji got politically paralysed. The entire cabinet along with Nandan was put behind the bars without being guilty of any crime. Their inner self and soul were mutilated. It was heart-wrenching as before the coups, Fiji didn't have a single political prisoner. But things changed when on May 14, 1987, the whole government was imprisoned. The very thought of that phase of coups makes Nandan numb even today. Nandan writes in FPP:

The coups in Fiji have changed much: the developing post-colonial narratives and the political ambiance have been brutalised: the artist's vision bloodied; force and fraud stalk the land; a culture

of corruption, indeed the banality of corruption, is in the making. The colonel hijacked more than a government. They have compared these betrayals with the heart attacks that a seemingly healthy individual suffers – it affects every nerve, every sinew, every cell of your being, and your attitude towards life changes overnight. There's nothing like a bloodless coup. (p. 90)

Post-coup, Nandan was dying from within and his tormented soul looked for veritable expression in his writings. The pain and plight of leaving the country and friends autobiographically mirrors in his writings. According to Nandan shock and betrayal could be seen even on the faces of the soldiers who raised the coup of 1987. The poet was not the only victim of the coup rather the entire race of Indians in Fiji was victimised and penalised. The loss of motherland and then the betrayal in an adopted land broke Nandan completely.

Written in a realistic manner, Nandan's works provide a vision that explores his experiences as an Indo-Fijian writer and politician. His political career was never a smooth one. From the day he accidentally entered the world of politics to becoming a parliamentarian and holding a prominent position in the cabinet, Nandan had witnessed all the shades of politics. To him, the sense of politics came through literature and the writings of great writers like Shakespeare, Milton, Gandhi, Nehru, Lincoln, White, and Naipaul. Through his words, he tried to bring about some changes in the social politics of Fiji. He even wrote speeches for leaders and held meetings with different organizations. This in turn became a part of the process of education for him. During his political career, he gave views on various aspects like parliament, parliamentary system, constitution, the role of speaker, political ethics, and many more. Dr. Timoci Bavadra and Dr. Jairam Reddy played an influential role in his political career. As an educated politician, he could look at problems from both personal and national point of view. While playing his role as an honest and active politician, he evolved as a writer too. In his works, we find views on social, judicial, political, and current events. He has recently written a few articles for the Big Story segment of *FijiSun* newspaper on COVID-19 titled 'Reading and Remembering COVID-19 on Father's Day: 2021' and 'Homeless: Stay Home, Stay Home!'.

His political feelings often run high in his poetry. It is self-consciously written within the political history of Fiji. The brutality of the coups and political upheavals wounded his soul and he penned down his sentiments in the form of political response in poetry. Particularly his autobiographical works and poems can be described as true testimonial to his political sensibility. His poetry emerges from his need to identify his relationship to atrocities and injustice, the sources of his pain, fear, and anger, the meaning of his resistance. With the power to engage readers on an emotional and logical plane, his poetry can be considered an invaluable tool to bring about political change.

In the changed scenario of the post-coup life, the realization of being the descendants of the girmityas was the permanent aspect of the collective self-identification for the Fiji-Indians. They felt the anxiety of losing the basic defining aspect of their self-identification. Nandan was not an exception. He needed to trace the right mental status to accept the changed reality, embrace it and view it with less apprehension. The community's collective mental mapping was different in times of acute adversity. For many Indo-Fijian writers rootedness in Fiji was voiced through the traumas of indenture. The traumas of gimit that haunt writings of the period do so as post-memories. The works of Nandan reveal that the indentured life in Fiji was physically and emotionally demanding. The testimonials from the surviving girmityas present a consistent story of degradation. The founding narratives of the Indo-Fijian identity crisis and the haunting memories of the gimit past find a significant place in the works of Nandan. For his contemporary Vijay Mishra, gimit came to represent an entire ethos, a legend, a tyranny, and finally a history and an ideology.

Indo-Fijians remained deeply troubled by the apparent weakness of their rights. They couldn't sever their bond with India. They lived in Fiji but their hearts were in India. Even Nandan had India as a part of his imagination and he always felt the essence of India through its mythology epics, tales of indenture, and many more sources. Nandan acknowledges in his essay "A City in the Heart" from the collection *India-Fiji: Experiences to Remember*, "The whole of India, for me, so soon after its independence, was a university. A great civilization like a great book reads you: it demanded the deepest resources of empathy and understanding and enlightenment and occasionally you come across remarkable men and women". (p. 38)

Nandan's poetry and its themes are rich in Indian sensibility. In his consciousness, India always remains in the background. Though he lived as a Fijian in Fiji but had a desire to exist as a diaspora person so he marked his difference as an Indian. He makes use of images and symbols to depict life in India. His longing and isolation find expression in his poems. His diasporic consciousness is evident in his writings particularly poetry. His love for motherland or the adopted country, and his ties with India are distinctly juxtaposed in his writings. His incomplete process of assimilation and acceptance in an adopted land keep tickling under the skin of collective girit history, memories of mother land, personal history and personal memories. His poems are majorly based on his faith in Fijian culture and tradition along with the feeling of shock and betrayal which he received after establishing his home in Fiji. Nandan's diasporic consciousness gives us novel ethics of living in Fiji's multiracial world where almost all the Indians are migrants to some extent. He strictly opposed the political demarcation and negligence of the Indians in Fiji.

Nandan uses many Indian words and phrases in his works which undoubtedly gives a feel and fervour of Indian identity to his verse and prose. These words and phrases have Indian rhythms and patterns. Their use in his writing reveals Indian sensibility and antiquity which creates a unique image of India. He even makes use of popular Hindi movie songs which depicts the influence of Hindi Cinema on Fiji Indians. Nandan admits in his book *Gandhianjali*, "But more than anything, writing has deepened my inner world, enlarged my empathy, healed my wounded sea, has given me a chance to see into myself, my history, love, loss, life, and the loneliness and the loveliness of being alive". (p.100)

With the sheer talent of narrating stories with realism, Nandan has become a pioneer writer and a major voice in the world of South Pacific Literature. His creative interlacing of western and Indian culture through the contemporary pacific girit voice attains an unmatched level of universality. This is indeed a welcome change to the regional alienation of Indo-Fijian writing. This expertise in making use of metrical rhythms, and traditional forms justly establish Fiji poetry in the western world and brings considerable recognition to the pacific in the mainstream. Nandan's Poetic voice becomes the medium by which he binds together the diverse threads of an irrevocable identity and an equally shattered narrative. Though not much has been said about the imagery and poetic unity fostering the works, it is through this skill that Nandan gives not only a poetics of lamentation and trauma but also alternate poetics of cultural association and propinquity. Specifically, water imagery, symbolism, and metaphors play a major role as a unifying force.

His writings resulted in the evolution of a new cultural fusion having its own unique identity reflecting the homeland as well as the host land. His psyche is chiefly saturated with the elements of nostalgia as he attempts to discover himself in the backdrop of new cultures. He writes in the vicinity of the cultural attributes of his land of origin and at the same time tries to fit himself into the cultural space of the host land. His works act as a bridge across various cultures, paving way for better understanding between different cultures, countries and also give momentum for globalization. Many voices occupy Nandan's text in the form of reflections of his grandparents,

parents, wife, kids, teachers, colleagues, political figures, Indian legends, Indian epics. They all played an influential role in his journey not only as an individual but also as a writer.

Nandan's imaginative world holds an important place for critical interpretation. As far as the fundamental question of race in Fiji is concerned, Nandan holds a problematic position as he is not immune from the flaws of the fragmented world order. He emerges as a brilliant writer from the exiled and diasporic Indian community in Fiji. He reached the Zenith of success through his scintillating verse, pragmatic essays, and autobiographical fiction. In the galaxy of great writers, Nandan is the brightest star because of the truthful account of his life, political experiences, coups, the predicament of girmityas, and much more. He tried to bring about awareness amongst the people through his speeches and articles.

By deploying the various Hindu, Christian, and Fijian mythical characters, symbols, and metaphors Nandan not only explored but also expanded the scope of diasporic poetry. His life is an example for those who have the desire to think beyond the boundaries of culture, race, ethnicity, and race. He writes in his book *LIFE Journeys: Love and Grief*:

I've been travelling for the past sixty years. For someone born in an obscure village on a small island in the largest ocean, for me this has been miraculous; someone who hadn't walked beyond six miles from the place of his birth until the age of eighteen; someone who hadn't read an English book until the age of sixteen... The beginning of literacy and the world of books in English led me to many cities, countries, continents, universities, conferences, parliaments, writers, friends, scholars, in so many parts of the world full of natural wonders and generous humanity. And the discovery of true love. I entered a larger reality both of self-knowledge and joy. (pp. 61-62)

Most of Nandan's writings are strongly personal, even autobiographical but he has tried to universalize his experiences to reinterpret his concepts of history, identity, culture, and consciousness. His works offer a double scene of the past scenes remembered and the diminished vision of the present. The gap between his past and present gives the emotional touch and impetus to his works. In his poems, prose, and fiction loss, deception, modernity, and division are closely knitted. His entire body of work meditates on the pain, betrayal, and trauma of the indentured Fiji Indians. All these concepts are a part and parcel of the modern Pacific culture. He seeks to describe and evoke experience. The suffering of Nandan's persona concerns the non-correspondence of an interior metaphysical remembered world with the modern flattened out reality. He views the old shreds of evidence with fresh eyes and asks new questions which yield new revelations and encourage new and further research.

It is Nandan's experiences of childhood, politics, academic services, and journalistic writing that form his persona as a writer. For Nandan, there are multiple memories, infinite and intimate ones. And writing the future is just like filling up the blank spaces of the heart and breathing words on the blank pages of one's notebook. His writings pave way for future writers. His writings prove a path-making outcome for the many emerging writers. Subramani, the famous Indo-Fijian writer, remarks, "Satendra Nandan showed that writing had a future in our country and through his effort prepared the way for the writers' engagement in civil society".

Through his literary masterpieces, Nandan creates a colourful tapestry of the pre-colonial, colonial and postcolonial experiences, including the coups and the girmitya history. He takes us through the roads he had travelled, the places where he had lived and loved. His is a journey through the mindscape of a country, with its grief and gaiety. His writings have structured his world in the most protean way. While reading his works we constantly enter new worlds. He gives us a sense of the past and reflects the present to light up the possibilities of the future. He is critical and creative at the same time. He has represented the Fijian experiences, through the mist of memories

and fog of coups. His is a poetry like the rainbow- a kaleidoscope and covenant between a 'was' and an 'is' and a projectile into *infinitum*. He is still growing through his writings, and realising himself through them. Not yet a Buddha, he is rather a Boddhisatva on his way to self-realisation.

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