

Stolen Worlds: Fijiindian Fragments, edited by Kavita Ivy Nandan. Canberra: Ivy Press International. 2005. ISBN 0-9757223-0-1; 353 pages, maps. Paper, AUS \$29.95.

The release of *Stolen Worlds: Fijiindian Fragments* marks the latest in the exciting development of Fiji(-)Indian/Indo-Fijian literature in the trans-Pacific context. This newest anthology offers 'real-life' insight into the problem of formulating (im)migrant identity out of the trauma of colonial history and the contemporary crises that erupt as issues regarding 'Pacific' sovereignty come to the forefront. These narratives demonstrate the unresolved tension that exists between globalized multicultural visions and aboriginal/indigenous nationalisms. Spanning several generations, religions, regions of origin (in both South Asia, Fiji, and elsewhere), this collection of writers offer an honest and unmitigated look at the ongoing legacy of the *girit* experience. The nineteen entries--starting with a poignant piece by former Bavadra Coalition cabinet minister Satendra Nandan and ending with an 'essay' by Anglo-Australian Anthony Mason that touches upon, among others, the political ramifications of linguistic markers for a people all too often considered 'foreign' - trace the lives and movement of Fijiindians within Fiji as well as across the Pacific Ocean, from Australia to North America. As Kavita Nandan further notes on the reasoning behind the title, the Indians of Fiji not only had to contend with the loss of the homeland and the brutality of plantation life, but also the series of coups that left the political landscape reverberating to this day with lingering discrimination and racism (xi).

Personally, I feel that very few books elicit such emotion as *Stolen Worlds*. I admit I am no 'insider' to the diasporic South Asian experience. As an individual of East Asian and South East Asian decent living on a different set of Islands, I am a 'cousin', perhaps neighbour at best. For me, these stories of loss, grief, and anger reveal the universal truths espoused in them in that colonization, spanning Fiji to the Caribbean to Hawai'i, created worlds based on exploitation and disenfranchisement. In fact, the reference to the Pacific as the *kala pani*, or the dark waters, evokes a comparison to the Middle Passage and to the inhuman Atlantic traffic of bodies for labour. As Satendra Nandan's piece *Ancestors* reminds readers, the experience of the first generation involved some 87 ships that left Calcutta and Madras with more than 60,000 bodies headed to a 'new world' of dispossession and displacement (8). Bhim Singh's piece, *Koronobu: Across the Bridge*, further relates the hardships these immigrants faced:

Life on the plantation was characterized by 12-hour days of backbreaking labour, over-tasking by the supervisors/overseers, corporal punishment for incomplete tasks, and flagrant abuses of human rights with no recourse to legal aid--fertile ground for sickness, disease, crime, and suicide. To crown it all, the recommended ratio of at least four women to ten men was as callously flouted as human rights. The result: a

chronic shortage of women leading to rape, adultery, and murders. In short, *girit* became synonymous with *narak* (hell). In reality, it was almost impossible to save enough money for the return passage after five years in spite of working 12-hour days under harsh conditions and regardless of the degree of frugality practiced. (82)

This moving account is not unlike the experienced by the Japanese of Hawai'i. In fact, a comparison can be made to the conditions outlined by Ronald Takaki in *Pau Hana: Plantation Life and Labor in Hawaii* (1983): 'Generally, plantation labourers lived in crowded and unsanitary camps. According to the editor of a Japanese newspaper published in Honolulu, workers were housed in dwellings resembling 'pig sties [rather than] human habitations'. Several hundred labourers "swarmed together" in one-storied, white washed "tenements"' (94). Takaki also goes on to speak of brutal floggings (75), child labour (80), incompetent health care (99), and alcohol and opium addiction (134) -- such was the life that accompanied the brutal monotony of 10-12 hour work days. This was the world that greeted my ancestors. One set of my maternal great grandparents left Niigata, Japan for the Hawaiian Islands to cut sugarcane in the 1910s. Life was so harsh, they buried their first two children in the scorched red dust of Maui. So even though I am Hilo-born of the Big Island, I can easily identify with Divakar Rao's *Vitidays: An Indian Passage*, which recalls the materialization of a nationalism 'directed at the "Indianness" of the Indians'. Rao's story offers a nuanced critique of destructive political rhetoric that can be applied to my own home. After all, anti-Asian sentiment was one reason used to justify American annexation of Hawai'i in the late 1800s and the banishment of certain local Japanese Americans to internment camps on the U.S. mainland during World War II.

According to editor Kavita Nandan, one of the reasons spurring this publication is the contemporary lack of integration of Fiji Indian writing within larger Pacific literary endeavours. This 'condition of being unaccommodated' is also a part of the larger Fiji national imaginary that churns out carefully chosen images for the tourist gaze. This point was made well by a colleague of the University of the South Pacific; only after much prompting.

As one would imagine, intense pain and sorrow emerges from these stories of stolen lives and histories. Sulochana Chand's self introduction cites the coups as 'the rape of democracy' and a 'slippery slide toward apartheid, when the rest of the world was actively demolishing barriers' (42). Divakar Rao goes one step further in enunciating what Fiji blindly ignored and what it still stands to lose:

It would be a sad commentary on Fiji society if it did not evolve into something more homogeneous and wholesome. If Fijians, Indians, Chinese and Europeans had gone to school together for the past century, we would have witnessed a lot more inter-racial marriages between people of Fijian, Indian, European and Chinese origins. Under these circumstances there would have been less likelihood of racial

polarization that we now witness. (125)

Rao's narrative ends with a terse acknowledgement of the 1987 coup, of the 'Black Friday' that brought an end to his 'dreams and aspirations' (135). Here, a comparison demands attention. For scholars familiar with Hawai'i's own local literature, the arguments made against Asian American writers for their 'Asian-ness' and their falsification of history and culture make for an interesting parallel with Fijian political rhetoric.

At the same time, love, joy and hope also permeate these tales of past and present experiences. Satendra Nandan's *Ancestors* entreats writers to remember that '[w]hatever our sadness may be, today we are the envy of many. It is on that legacy of the girmit people that we must continue to build: not only to honour them but to open doors of hope and windows of opportunity to those less fortunate than us. [. . .] Our acts are a memorial to our ancestors: their service and visionary generosity is our inheritance' (8). Mohit Prasad's childhood memories serve well in demonstrating the reverence for that legacy. *Lines: In the Mist* weaves together humorous and wistful recollections of elders, including a great grandfather rumoured to have been a British spy and a trained assassin; the sophisticated reader will clearly understand the profoundly political nature of a montage that seemingly avoids all references to actual politics. Other stories explore the jubilant visions of life in Fiji, a life full of food, festivals, sports meets, music, English and Latin classes, and the ever present family. These more celebratory images certainly counter expectations of a Fiji-Indian presence in perpetual decline, instead suggesting a reliance similar to the one that prompted Derek Walcott's observation of the *Ramleela* in the Caribbean: 'this shipwreck of fragments, these echoes, these shards of a huge tribal vocabulary, these partially remembered customs [. . .] they are not decayed but strong'.

Inevitably, the very act of *écriture* itself becomes the focus of this text and an exploration of literature as a transformative medium. Serving as more than simply a stop-gap measure to resist the exclusion of the Indo-Fijian experience, writing, Kavita Nandan argues, 'can be a way to make meaning out of the rupture of the past. Writing allows us to give some structure or recuperate wholeness' (301). For this reason, *Stolen Worlds* will make an invaluable teaching tool in understanding the larger movement by colonized peoples to recover and recuperate their right to speak for themselves. With specific regards to the Pacific, *Stolen Worlds* makes an excellent companion to such anthologies as *Southern Exposure: Modern Japanese Literature from Okinawa* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i P, 2000) and *Whetu Moana* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2003).

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