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Unmoored Identities: Navigating Diasporic Consciousness in Satendra Nandan's Poetic Landscape

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Abstract

This paper explores the articulation of diasporic consciousness, trauma, and cultural memory in the poetry of Satendra Nandan, an important voice of the Indo-Fijian diaspora. While focusing on major works from his landmark collection *Poems 1975–2025: Waves in the Wounded Sea*, specifically the poems “Lines Across Black Waters,” “My Father's Son,” and “The Old Man and the Scholar,” this study examines how postcolonial displacement and the legacy of indentured labour (*girit*) are navigated across generations. To understand diasporic theory better, this paper draws upon the theoretical frameworks by Stuart Hall, Avtar Brah, Robin Cohen, and Homi Bhabha to demonstrate the transformation of historical trauma of crossing the *kalapani* (black waters) and surviving plantation subjugation to an intergenerational archive. The paper also assesses Nandan's critique of sanitized colonial and institutional histories that are ill-equipped to understand the vernacular Fiji-Hindi oral traditions of aging *giritiyas*. Therefore, the paper showcases how Nandan's poetry re-anchors the unmoored Indo-Fijian subject by positing cultural memory not as a static artifact of a lost homeland, but as an active, unquenchable flame that yields dignity, ethical resilience, and identity amidst continuous physical and political exile.

Keywords - Diasporic Consciousness, *Giritiya* History, Satendra Nandan, Cultural Memory, Indo-Fijian Literature

INTRODUCTION

The scope of 'diaspora' originally constituted the historical dispersion and forced displacement of the Jewish people from their ancestral homeland that caused both physical and emotional dislocation characterized by precariousness and adaptive challenges. Lexicographical records reflect this evolving early usage as Webster's *Revised Unabridged Dictionary of English Language* (1913) notes that the term was applied collectively to “those Jews who, after the Exile, were scattered through the Old World... [and] By extension to Christians isolated from their own communion,” whereas the 1929 *Larousse du XXe siècle* strictly constrained its definition to “The dispersion of the Jews driven from their country by the vicissitudes of their history through the ancient world” (17). However, as Robin Cohen highlights:

From 1960s and 1970s the classical meaning of diaspora was description of dispersion of Africans, Armenians and Irish. 1980s onwards the term diaspora was deployed as expatriates, expels, political

refugees, alien residents, immigrants and racial minorities. From mid 1990s diaspora stands for the people who live outside their national territories. (9)

In a similar vein, postcolonial theorists Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin define diaspora as the movement, whether voluntary or coerced, of individuals from their birthplaces into unfamiliar geographical spaces. William Safran also delineates six defining features that characterize a diaspora: first, a historical dispersal of ancestors from an original center across at least two foreign regions; second, the retention of a shared collective memory regarding the homeland; third, a persistent sense of alienation or belief that complete acceptance by the host society is impossible; fourth, the idealization of the ancestral home as a locus of potential return; fifth, a collective commitment to the restoration, security, or support of the native country; and sixth, the continuous maintenance of active relations with the homeland.

Displacement emerges from three distinct socio-historical catalysts: coerced movement, semi-coerced migration, and voluntary emigration. While the Jewish exile and transatlantic slave trade were forced, the semi-coerced migration occurred notably during the colonial era, when indentured labourers were relocated across the British Empire to serve imperial economic interests. Conversely, the voluntary dimension reflects contemporary migrants from developing nations who intentionally relocate to developed countries in pursuit of socio-economic mobility.

Diaspora inhabit a space of perpetual non-belonging. The displaced communities are unable to sever emotional, linguistic, and cultural connections to their points of origin through which they cultivate complex relationships with it. The persistent yearning for the homeland gives rise to diasporic literature. Such writing captures the tension experienced by migrants who, while attempting to establish a presence in a host nation, remain bound by memory and heritage to their origin. As Avtar Brah notes, "The diaspora communities are forged out of multiple imaginative journeys between the old country and the new. These spaces are both physical and emotional, yet at the heart of the diasporic experience there is always the image of journey, a movement away and dispersal from, a dislocation to" (183). This ongoing negotiation between the past and present shapes a distinct diasporic consciousness that moves beyond rigid notions of ethnic purity. As Stuart Hall conceptualizes in his seminal essay "Cultural Identity and Diaspora":

I use this term metaphorically not literally: Diaspora does not refer us to those scattered tribes whose identity can only be secured in relation to some sacred homeland to which they must all costs return, even if it means pushing other people into the sea. This is the old, imperializing, hegemonizing form of 'ethnicity'. ... The Diaspora experience as I intend it here is defined not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of 'identity' which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by hybridity. (12)

Their situation of always being in a flux is reminiscent of the Trishanku state of belonging fully to neither space. Frederick Monika refers to diasporic people as Trishanku, which is a word taken from Indian mythology. She equates the uneasy straddling and in-betweenness of these people between two cultures to Trishanku's curse:

Trishanku wanted to reach heaven in his mortal state. He enlisted the aid of sage Viswamitra who propelled him skyward with his yogic powers. But Heaven refused him to enter, saying that only those who have left their body can enter heaven. He was sent back, but earth refuses to accept him now, saying she would grant entry to no-one once they left the earth. Viswamitra, meanwhile seeing this as a challenge to his own yogic powers, kept Trishanku in motion... (14)

Thus, diasporic fiction explores this existential rootlessness, alienation, nostalgic longing, generational conflict, and the delicate negotiation of multicultural identities. Hence, the diasporic identity is not a static artifact that is preserved and kept unchanged from the origin, but is dynamic, fluid, and continuously reconstructed at the intersection of history, memory, and cultural adaptation. This duality demands that the displaced subject exist as an active cultural translator, renegotiating their presence within unfamiliar contexts while reshaping both themselves and their host environments, due to which the native land survives as an imaginary homeland or a landscape constructed through partial memories, nostalgic longing, and creative invention. Finally, they find belonging not through singular ancestral roots, but through transnational routes that embrace ongoing negotiation across borders.

Satendra Nandan stands as one of the most distinguished literary figures in South Pacific and Commonwealth post-colonial literature. He was born in Fiji as a third-generation descendant of Indian indentured labourers (*girmityas*), and he navigates this complex terrain of colonial indenture, post-colonial displacement, political turbulence, and exilic consciousness through his writings. Nandan completed his higher education at Delhi University, the University of Leeds, and the Australian National University, which helped him to bridge Indian, British, and Australasian intellectual worlds. After returning to Fiji, he made history as an academic and politician by becoming the first Labour Member of Parliament. He also served as the Minister for Health and Social Welfare in Dr. Timoci Bavadra's government. In his autobiography, Nandan points out, "Politics I had not seen as a power game. I'd visualised it as an act of faith to change society and care for those less fortunate" (4).

However, the military coup of May 14, 1987, radically disrupted his life when he was imprisoned alongside cabinet colleagues and was subsequently forced into exile in Australia. Thus, Bruce Bennett characterizes Nandan as a poet who "has lived through parliament, coups, migration, exile, and return" and whose writing is shaped by multiple "countries of the mind." Throughout his extensive body of poetry, fiction, and non-fiction, Nandan's creative vision is anchored in what he terms the "instinctive clench of the Girit history and ideology," reconstructing the trauma of dislocation into a poetics of memory, ethical resilience, and human dignity.

The anthology of poems titled *Poems 1975–2025: Waves in the Wounded Sea* gathers over five decades of Nandan's poetic output as it contains more than 200 poems across 600 pages. Scholars have described this work as a crowning achievement that establishes him as the "Poet Laureate of the Indian-Fijian diaspora." The collection traces Nandan's journey from his early poetic meditations in *Faces in a Village* (1975) to his mature reflections on global exile, political betrayal, and aging. In the foreword to the volume, Harish Trivedi notes:

Satendra as a person is all of a piece, though his cultural inheritance is fragmented and kaleidoscopic, ranging over Fiji, India, England and Australia. Likewise, his literary versatility comes from the same integrated sensibility. All his books in various genres are cut from the same experiential and imaginative cloth. (xi)

The collection fuses personal grief with collective history, using recurring motifs of rivers, oceans, trees, and wounds to explore the double-consciousness of the migrant. As Nandan reflects in the introduction how writing served as a vital medium to cope with dislocations, coups, and homelessness:

But more than anything, writing has deepened my inner world, enlarged my empathies, 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. It has taken me to every country and city I've ever wanted to visit and given me lasting and loving friendships. (xviii)

Nandan's poetry offers a nuanced articulation of diasporic consciousness: a state of being characterized by physical dislocation, ancestral memory, spatial alienation, and the continuous effort to construct an identity across fractured geographies. The poem "Lines Across Black Waters" explores the psychological, historical, and cultural elements linked with this diasporic consciousness. The poem opens with two thematically appropriate epigraphs from Aristophanes and Salman Rushdie, which set up the central theme of diasporic survival through cultural memory. Rushdie's words consolidate the *girit* condition: "Landless, nationless, the people buried their fathers in themselves, / because the self was the only ground they had to stand upon" (279). This signifies that as the indentured laborers were forcibly severed from the physical soil of India, they transformed their own bodies and minds into living tombs and archives, internalizing their ancestors' history within their own consciousness to endure exile.

The oceanic passage through the *kalapani* (black waters) was not a simple journey; it was a traumatic crossing marked by grief, betrayal, and the profound anguish of leaving a homeland:

Small wounds, slowly weeping
 To the cruel rhythm of a whip
 Those blows resound still
 Healed by the sun and salt water
 While the wind howled in the welts
 A language of its own intensity.
 In the shadows across the moon
 My father saw his lonely country.
 Kalapani, black waters, a cross across the seven seas
 With blood, betrayal, griefs that never cease
 A fragment, a shard, lay buried
 In the heart: a bone, a stone or a mirror?
 Sharpen your cane knives
 We, too, have ancestors in our lives. (279)

Nandan constructs a haunting landscape to introduce the trials and tribulations of the *girmitiyas*. The historical trauma caused by grief, betrayal, and colonial deception continues to weep profusely in the psychological wounds of their modern descendants. The cruelty inflicted through physical whipping remains palpably felt across generations. Nandan also utilizes a complex irony: while sun and saltwater are traditionally regarded as natural, purifying healers, applying salt water to open, whip-torn welts paradoxically cause unbearable stinging and causes the pain to fester. Thus, nature offers no easy solace; rather, the environmental elements become complicit in the agony of indenture. The howling winds and lunar shadows paint an overwhelmingly harrowing picture of exile. Yet, amidst this profound suffering, Nandan asserts an imperative of ancestral reclamation: the displaced Indo-Fijians must remember that they carry powerful ancestral legacies capable of offering wisdom, resilience, and guidance for both present and future struggles.

He chronicles the journey that his own grandparents undertook, emphasizing how survival necessitated the development of the *jahajibhai* (ship-brotherhood) spirit:

They sailed the ocean
 Stitched like blank pages in a book,
 The ships couldn't read the waves,
 Leonidas, Syria, Danube, Poonah
 Elbe, Ganges, Sutlej, Jamuna
 Fultala, Chenab, Indus, Sangola ...
 Guided by the darkness between stars,...
 From a little village to the dark lines
 Twelve thousand miles, sixty thousand lives. (279-80)

As the indentured laborers were ripped away from their biological families, fellow passengers became their surrogate kinship network. Nandan also catalogues the names of the historical vessels, Leonidas, Syria, Danube, to immortalize how sixty thousand individuals were forcibly transported, huddled together like livestock across twelve thousand miles of ocean, to serve an empire on a distant archipelago. He also reflects on the ontological nature of this displacement, he writes:

Migration is reincarnation.
 Call them coolies: in the chosen Shakespearean tongue,
 Rama's children, the Emperor's banar sena,
 Or simply my grandparents, God's grandeur:
 Truth is what you know and do not know. (280)

The *girmityas* derived spiritual strength and endurance from sacred Hindu epics like the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. However, their ordeal surpassed even Lord Rama's exile (*vanvaas*); whereas Rama's banishment was strictly bounded to fourteen years, the indenture of the *girmityas* became a perpetual, unceasing exile. He further invokes Shakespearean perspective on naming ("what's in a name") and illustrates that regardless of the labels imposed upon them, whether the derogatory colonial epithet "coolies," or the mythic designation "Emperor's *banar sena*," no single nomenclature can fully capture or diminish the sheer magnitude of suffering borne in their hearts. For Nandan, beyond all historical and literary labels, they remain fundamentally his ancestors and grandparents. While describing their labor on the Fijian plantations, he notes:

Plantation by plantation, they build a new world

Sugar sweet the slave crop grew

Elsewhere it had depopulated half the universe

Here my father's fathers,

Sleeping on our mothers' 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 dread. (280-81)

The *girmityas* breathed life into an unfamiliar landscape, rendering the soil fertile through their arduous labor, hymns, and cultural traditions. Nandan frames plantation indenture as a brutal and updated iteration of slavery. Though the crop they cultivated was "sweet," it was nurtured through bitter exploitation. As they were stripped of human agency, their existence was a double tragedy. They lived under the constant threat of the colonial whip, and they died caught between the desperate hope of returning to India and the haunting dread of being permanently excommunicated by their home villages for having crossed the *kalapani*. In the closing lines, the poet bridges the historical plantation era with contemporary destruction and political upheaval:

Then I saw trees engulfed by fire

Surreal, burning like sati princesses on a desert pyre,

Houses of overseers razed

With a radiant terror

In the heart of so much beauty

Such a terrible beast.

The burnt trees stood

Like rows of coolies with a black dignity. (280)

Here, the pristine and paradisiacal setting of Fiji is contrasted with the dark, monstrous reality of colonial and post-coup destruction. The image of trees burning like a sati princesses and standing charred in the landscape reflects the "black dignity" of the indentured laborers who quietly endured the flames of historical violence. The funeral pyre on Wailoaloa beach becomes a site of ritual purging where the trauma of the ships, the sand, and the "coolie burden" are finally committed to "ashes into ashes." The poem concludes on an empowering philosophical note: "the self was the heart of fire." Which means that even when their physical world is reduced to ashes, the indomitable spirit and cultural consciousness of the *girmitya* remain an unquenchable and living flame.

The next poem, “My Father’s Son,” lays bare the intergenerational tension and postmemory that inform diasporic subjectivity. Nandan contrasts the comfort of an exiled speaker seated in a modern, air-conditioned office with the father’s traumatic oceanic voyage and forced colonial quarantine:

Now in this conditioned office
On a swivel chair and farted air
I batten on
Defined, secure in a sinecure.
I see the island in the sea
Where my father was quarantined. (24)

He equates the island where many *girmityas* were quarantined to a living *narak* (hell), as it lacked the basic necessities required for human survival and sustenance. He also recalls the day his father passed away, noting how the funerary rituals mirrored those traditionally performed in India so closely that an Indian reader would never feel they were encountering a narrative set thousands of miles away. Upon meeting his village elders, the speaker recognizes that although their hair has grown grey and their hearts have aged, they have transformed into living repositories of historical narrative and collective memory: “A hundred years scribbled / In a hundred wrinkles” (25). Then, he observes the funeral proceedings with a blend of reverence and sharp irony:

The pundit gave a speech
Blessed us all with the dead.
Read a few mantras from a red book
Which neither the living nor the dead understood;
They poured ‘pure Australian ghee’
From a Fiji Bitter bottle.
My brother lit the pyre,
Aum shantih, shantih, shantih... (25–26)

This confluence of traditional Indian rituals, the local Fijian environment, and the pouring of “pure Australian ghee” from a recycled Fiji Bitter beer bottle is a deliberate strategy on Nandan’s part. It illustrates how, in the diaspora, these three distinct geographic and cultural spaces, India, Fiji, and Australia, intersect to shape the hybrid identity of the deceased and bid them a final farewell. Thus, the poem depicts diasporic consciousness as an inherited, intergenerational wound. Despite achieving material comfort and professional security within a Western metropolis, the modern diasporic subject remains perpetually haunted by the ancestral crossing of the “landless sea” and the enduring displacement from the homeland.

He resonates similar emotions in another poem, “The Old Man and the Scholar” where he critiques the inadequacy of formal academic frameworks to fully capture the lived reality of diasporic trauma. He brings to light how a Western-trained scholar attempts to interview an aging *girmitya* in his home using a tape recorder to organize facts neatly for a university thesis. However, the old man’s repetitive response resists and refuses the documentation of his life in a sanitized format that minimizes the brutalities unleashed on him across various levels as the scholar was recording only what colonial institutions expect him to write. When the scholar fails to elicit the structured response he desires from this man, he resorts to compiling a narrative about him derived from existing books and archival fragments. This demonstrates that although the *girmitya*’s authentic voice remains indecipherable to rigid academicians, they refrain from attempting to read between the lines to accurately record his lived experience. So, they opt for an easy shortcut of copy-pasting perspectives from colonial records. He states:

The scholar's questions are relevant

And always to the point

About the man's life, his journey

His women, children, if any

But all the man breathes:

'Bhaiya, rowat-gawat / Heelat-dolat / Adat-padat /

Hum sub aain.' (115)

The old man's rhythmic response in Fiji-Hindi summarises a lifetime of surviving through weeping, singing, stumbling, and pressing forward which evade the scholar's dry, institutional categories. Nandan concludes with biting irony: "Authentic history cannot be written / With words from living mouths" (116), revealing that the true essence of diasporic identity resides in vernacular, indecipherable, and lived memories rather than archived institutional histories.

To conclude, Satendra Nandan's poetic landscape stands as a monumental testament to the enduring power of cultural memory in the face of multi-generational displacement. By traversing the traumatic oceanic crossings of the *kalapani*, the oppressive confines of the plantation lines, and the disorienting spaces of post-coup exile, Nandan articulates a diasporic consciousness that is neither statically tethered to a lost past nor completely dissolved within the host nation. Through his rich synthesis of Hindu myth, colonial history, and vernacular Fiji-Hindi, he shows that the true archive of the girmitiya experience resides not in the records of sanitized academic institutions, but within the living memories of the community itself. In a world where physical homelands are repeatedly fractured and unmoored, Nandan's poetry re-anchors the Indo-Fijian subject and proves that even when histories are reduced to ashes, cultural memory functions as a living flame that continues to give voice, dignity, and a resilient framework for survival to future generations.

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