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Dialogue

Home, Migration and New Identities: Some Reflections

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Abstract

Migration has been taking place for centuries. People migrate for a number of reasons ranging from being forced out of a country to being attracted to 'greener' pastures. For migrants, home and residence may not have the same meanings. What is home for the migrants? Is it the land which they left behind or is it the host country? Do they consider both as their homes – a home away from home? While the indentured labourers brought to Fiji may not all have gone through a similar ordeal, the notion of a home acquires significance for subsequent generations. In this paper the authors reflect on some of the issues related to the notion of 'home' in the context of migration and creation of new 'identities'.

Introduction

Prior studies have examined the relationship of home, migration and a new identity in fictional narratives of Indian diaspora that has led to the realization of a new way of searching for an identity (Moudouma, 2013:1). Findings and critiques from narratives and actual account of Indian indentureship of Indian diaspora suggest that through a powerful voice of subjects, characters, use of time and space as created by postcolonial writers, we are able to remap their *matrabhumi* (motherland) from their *karambhumi* (host nation). Even though prior studies have examined the affiliation between internal dynamics of the Eastern Indian agricultural society and that of overseas migration, this issue needs further investigation focusing on the girmit experience of Indian migration through indentureship in Fiji.

There are numerous debates, discourses and research on this topic

and its significance in relation to 'home and global mobility in contemporary diasporic fiction written internationally including in Australia, India, Trinidad, Guyana, New Zealand, Mauritius and South Africa. Through analysis of central diasporic and migrant writers in the United Kingdom and the United States, writers have exposed the importance of home and its reconstruction in diasporic literature in the era of globalization and increasing transnational mobility' (Chandran, 2005: 247). Nathan states: 'Authors such as Gayatri Spivak, Brij Lal, Vijay Mishra, Satendra Nandan, Caryl Phillips, Jamal Mahjoub, Satish Rai, Mike Phillips, Frank Birbalasingh, Kamila Shamsie, Ana Castillo and Diana Abu-Jaber have extensively written on themes of home, mobility and diaspora' (Nathan, 2007:4).

Similarly, West Indian novelist, George Lamming (2005) expressed an enduring issue setting up the theoretical direction for postcolonial intellectuals by stating how a Britain without its Empire can still maintain cultural influence in postcolonial societies and the ways in which Eurocentric philosophy about race, nationality and literature return time abound to haunt ones identity. Thus, through writing, in particular literary texts, postcolonial intellectuals have been grappling with the articulation of their own modes of cultural production. The rationale of the paper is to investigate cases of writing about indenture in geopolitical contexts to ascertain the relationship between home and migration and forming a new identity. The paper will focus on indenture in Fiji as there is a need to 'reproduce' literature in this area to allow history to be still valued by a generation for whom indenture may not mean much.

This paper will examine the relationship between homes, migration and the formation of new identities after people leave their homeland and settle elsewhere. This paper argues that Indian migration to Fiji due to the indenture system meant lost homes for many apart from parting the families. The existing studies suggest that it is possible for diasporants to remap their *matrabhumi* (motherland) from their *karambhumi* (host nation). Such remapping occurs in fictional narratives through narrative voicing of different subjects and characters, and through the use of time and space. This paper will make use of existing studies of the affiliation between the internal dynamics of the Eastern Indian agricultural society and that of overseas migration. The paper will also highlight some lifetime changes in people leaving their *matrabhumi*, which gave them a new identity. With reference to some literature, this paper will also discuss the life of girmitiyas in Fiji.

Indisputably, home and mobility bring about a material change in the places and locations through which notions of identity, individual

lexis and belonging are transformed' (Mishra, 2007: 2). Diasporic writers like Jogindar Singh Kanwal and Arnold Itwaru have highlighted in their writings that cities, homes and localities become re-narrated through migrants' stories, photographs that they have of their motherland, music and artwork. Hence, for any diasporant descendant, it is indispensable to fathom and recognize the multiple definitions of 'otherness', and the pain and privation that their forefathers have gone through giving them a new identity and a sense of belonging to the host nation, which has become home for migrants second, third and fourth generation still living in this new homeland. The same can be said for the indentured labourers who made their way to Fiji.

Home – History, Girmit and Post-memory

The concept of 'place' demonstrates a composite interface of history, language and milieu in the experience of colonised peoples and the importance of space and location in the course of identity construction. However, in various instances, the conception of 'home' is not an issue in a society's cultural exposition until colonial intervention radically disrupts the key approaches of its representation by separating 'space' from 'place' (Ashcroft, et.al 2000: 161).

Additionally, for any human being, place denotes a sense of belonging; it is deeply embedded in cultural history, in legend and language. Consequently, for a migrant, 'place' has become exigent after discursive interference of colonialism. Colonialism has disrupted a sense of place or home in several ways, for example, by imposing a strong feeling of dislocation in those who have moved to the colonies; by physically alienating large populations of colonised peoples through obligatory migration, practise of slavery or indenture; and by disturbing the representation of place in the colony by imposing a colonial language (Ashcroft, et.al 2000: 161).

On the onset, the concept of 'home' is viewed as a residential space, broadening the description to embrace articulations of one's nation as home. Satish Rai states that every community in the world, either small or large needs a home and an identity (2015: 4). Be it the Jewish community who have for centuries struggled to establish a home for itself, thus providing them with a sense of identity, or the indentured labourers who came under indentureship with the desire to call a place their own, has been a dream etched in their minds ever since they left behind their motherland.

However, today there is a changing nature of viewing the concept of home and living away. Three homes that migrants have to deal with are *janambhumi* (birth land), *matrabhumi* (motherland) and *karambhumi* (host nation). There emerge numerous challenges that one has to deal with in establishing a new home. Where movement away from one home to another is involuntary or when returning to home is made unworkable after planned migration, due to, for example, political instabilities, or sheer resource or other technical impracticalities, the concept of home acquires a new definition.

For indentured labourers arriving in Fiji, the idea of fully understanding home was a constant battle. Home for Indians arriving to Fiji through indentureship conjured painful memories of separation from motherland, to being uprooted and a feeling of nostalgia for India – their home away from home. Ahmed Ali documents painful experiences and stories of twenty-four girmitiyas who arrived in Fiji between 1879 and 1916 (2004: 3). Lakhpat, a girmitiya stated that 'for him the trip began with weeping as they embarked on their ship since they knew they were leaving their families and their homes behind' (2004: 4). The motif running through the twenty-four interviews centre around accounts of suffering, the longing to return to India and pain and deprivation that the girmitiyas experienced at the hands of their overseers.

However, for a long time, the notion of home has been interpreted in myriad ways by academics. In doing so, the very essence of home is over-embodied in this progression. Appadurai (1991:191) problematizes the dangers of restricting the definition of 'home' only as a secure, unified space of belonging. Similarly, Sabra (2008:3) argues that for a casual who is now re-defined as a diaspora, articulations of home are generally based on collective memory or reminiscences that the migrant relentlessly struggles to absorb; it is generally maintained as one's former abode, present abode, and approaching abode of homecoming. In other words, home for some would not be one place only, but their birth land and the host nation both.

Thus, for a diaspora, the notion of home would mean multiple things. It means one's place of birth and also the new place, which is the host nation, which they have after migration and which they come to accept as their second home. This is no different for Indian indentured labourers in Fiji. The collective memories of the indentured labourers having to sail crossing the *kala pani,* dark waters, before arriving in Fiji, is something they shared along their journey. The amalgamation of caste system that took place on board the ships to Fiji, mellowed many indentured labourers; by the time Fiji was sighted, a new wave of identity was

already constructed. When people move from one place to another, the conditions along the way begin to construct the notion of intended home for the migrant.

Theano Terkenli defines home 'as a physical and psychically shielding domestic residence'; he argues that as one sets sail from their place of origin, the region thought of as home begins to grow, and the term becomes more symbolically based (1995: 323). According to Terkenli, a migrant's construction of home vary on the establishment of collective or individual memory of homeland structured by the purpose of leaving the homeland, searching for home in a new setting and constantly feeling being cut off from her roots (1995: 324). He further explores the intellectual, chronological, and geological prospects that construct a specific region or nation as 'home' after the migrant has settled elsewhere, and argues that 'home is created through social and habitual conditions associated with it because the essence of home lies in the recurrent, meaning in a context with which people personalize and identify through some measure of control (1995: 325). Terkenli suggests that time plays a significant role in defining home since certain customary, cultural or social conditions are time-specific, occurring at particular locations in space and time. This is applicable to the migrant, as for the migrant, time plays a fundamental role in the idea of reconstructing ones home.

Aamir Mufti and Ella Shohat argue that home is often constructed as a place of protection, belonging and comfort; it is where one originates or where one is raised (1997: 7). They emphasize the complexity associated with the notion of home. For them, 'home' is both 'an allegory of belonging and the name of a state that criticism cannot evade wanting to inhabit' (1997: 8).

In *The World and the Home*, Homi Bhabha argues that a migrant feels unhomely especially in the host nation. He introduced the term 'unhomely' since it denotes the alienating sense of the relocation of home to another place or nation where one fails to connect and constantly feels nostalgic about their homeland (1992: 141). Bhabha asserts that being deprived of a sense of belonging is an astounding identification of being unhomely in the new place of residence. Indeed, for him, 'the unhomely moment relates the traumatic ambivalences of a personal, psychic history to the wider disjuncture of political existence' (1992: 144). The very notion of home of a migrant means different things. For the first generation migrant, the acceptance of the host nation as the new home is difficult, considering that the memories of homeland are still fresh in their minds, in comparison to the third and fourth generation offsprings of migrants,

for whom this new place of birth is their new defined homeland.

As diasporic individuals in a transnational society like Fiji, one may ask: Where are you from? Where is one's home? Is it, as some have stated, 'where one's heart is?' Or perchance it is located at the place where one resides?

Caryl recognizes relentlessly throughout in his narrative *The Atlantic Sound,* that 'home' is a profound sense and that there is this tangible and attainable space which individuals view as home (2001: 5). As narratives of 'identity,' home is often formed within the framework of a given space, the difficulties of finding it often reflect in the search for identity – discursively moving from one place back to the other identity, and back again to home; and for some, like the Indian indentureship making its way to Fiji, echoing in many ways the ghostly path of the indenture ship steering to the Pacific Ocean (Mishra: 2007, 2).

Thus, the ideology of homeland, meaning *desh* in Hindi, is opposite to all the other lands which are distant, or *videsh*. Adorno and Horkheimer affirm that this thought of the other land is the source of nostalgia, which gives rise to the adventures through which subjectivity escapes from the prehistoric world (1997: 78).

Those who have never felt bereft of a home will not understand this void (Nandan, 2001: 5). Hence, place and displacement are crucial elements of postcolonial studies. Home does not only mean physical landscape. The impression of 'landscape' is asserted upon a particular theoretical tradition in which the objective world is separated from the viewing subject (Ashcroft, et.al: 2006:11). 'Home' in postcolonial studies is a circuitous alternation of history, accent and environment. Kavita Nandan (2005: 3) describes home as one which does not only belong to those who live at a particular place physically but also to those who have migrated and are being buried there. Often many migrants set for a journey in suitcases, parcels and in their imaginations, to new homes or other shores and cities; they often recall their place of growing up, their place of birth – in the psychological and spiritual sense of belonging to a place - other than in a physical sense of owning a plot of land and a house.

Thus, the notion of home conjures countless images for the migrant who sets sail leaving her motherland for the unknown, where nostalgia, recollections and stories of the migrant resonates as the migrant builds a new home away from her place of origin. For indentured labourers in Fiji, the tale is no different. Their struggles for acceptance, for creating an identity in their new homes have been real challenges. They had to face the brunt of the new home slowly accepting them for who they are, after decades of struggles, having to live in squalid conditions under indenture-

ship, to today calling Fiji their home.

History

The rudiments of narration for postcolonial studies lies in the present origins of chronological study itself, and the conditions by which history took upon itself the mantle of a discipline (Desai and Vahed, 2007). Particularly, the term *Indian diaspora* originated from journeys manifold, dating back to migration from India to all over the globe, leaving behind their *matrabhumi* (motherland). The colonial archives reveal that approximately over one million people being taken out of India in the 19th century alone, 'most of them to work in the Kenya-Uganda railways, and Mauritius, Guyana, Trinidad, South Africa, Fiji and East Africa' (Chakraborty, 2014: 2). Indian labourers, referred to as 'coolies', were indentured in a system of slavery that had started with Mauritius in 1834. Imperial recruiters recruited large numbers of these labourers mainly from the west coast of India to work in British colonies.

Vassanji, the Commonwealth Prize winning writer, focuses in his first novel, *The Gunny Sack*, how the migrants remember the events that transform their own lives (Chakraborty, 2014: 2). He points out that these populations who were but pinpricks in the grand narrative of colonial history had their own lives, legends and legacies, as important and significant as the ones privileged by the imperial masters. In the grand sweep of history, the *girmitiyas* or indentured labourers cannot be washed away, nor can they forget their own complicity in the game of Empire. Similarly, 'the saga of Indian indentureship goes back to the time when the colonial slave trade and then slavery itself were abolished early in the nineteenth century, the British Empire blatantly set up a new system of trade using Indian labourers' (Younger, 2010). The new system of 'indentured' labour began as a written agreement for work for an initial period of five years and involved preset earnings and some stated conditions of work. The places to which the indentured workers were taken were corners of the British Empire that had been acquired by the British and for which there may not have been obvious plans (Lal, 2004).

Under indentureship, workers were recruited from the heavily populated agricultural areas of North and South India, and transported by ships from the ports of Calcutta and Madras (Tinker, 1974). At the outset, most workers arrived without their families. Workers signed an obligatory contract for five years, and were assigned by the colonial authorities to an agricultural estate or other employers where barracks were constructed as

temporary dwellings; workers were not free to change their masters (Kelly, et.al, 2001). Some workers were able to form enduring friendships, nostalgically referred to as *jahaji bhai* or ship brother, during the long sea voyages (Birbalsingh, 1988). 'Ship brotherhood' assisted in the formation of simple communities with those who spoke the same language or shared food, joys and pains. By the end of the initial five years, most Indian labourers chose to stay in the land to which they had been taken. That land 'became the place in which the Indian labourers joined with others to build a new homeland' (Younger, 2010).

Fiji was the last of the sugar lands to be developed with Indian indentured labourers. Fiji is made up of a large number of volcanic islands that were partially populated over the centuries by small groups of Melanesians from the West and Polynesians from the East. In 1879, the recruitment of Indian labourers for the sugar plantations of Fiji began. The indenture system in Fiji was not different from those in other British colonies. The 'lines' or plantation housing ambiance came to be reviled by the labourers. The colonial authorities honoured their agreement with the Fijian chiefs by not employing Fijians on the plantations (Naidu, 1979). When the girmitiyas came to Fiji, the acceptance of the host nation as their new homeland could have been difficult. The physical conditions, the distance of the actual place, and the idea of feeling banished from their motherland, were acute. For many migrants the whole situation was agonising, one of feeling separated, of being banished, being uprooted, carrying a feeling of emptiness.

Girmit and the Life of 'Girmitiyas' in Fiji with Post-memory

Marianne Hirsch defines *Girmitiyas* as the burden of postmemory where their 'collective trauma acts as a sole point of "origin" for postmemory' thus exercising sentimental attachment on second and succeeding generations (2008: 105). Amitav Ghosh calls the *Girmitiyas* as the diaspora of epic memory in the form of mythological stories, songs, anecdotes, and recipes, fragments of family history and community consciousness of the homeland (Singh, 2012: 47). The word *girmit* is derived from the word 'Agreement' under which more than one million Indian indentured labourers went on to work on the plantations of the 'King Sugar' colonies around the globe in the 19th and 20th centuries (Lal, 2015: 7). The agreement specified terms and conditions of service the indentured labourers were bound with. The terms and conditions varied in small details between the colonies, but they all stated the nature and condition of work and payment for it and the provision of accommodation,

medical and other facilities on the plantation. The agreement further stipulated that the indenture would be for an initial term of five years after which the immigrants could return to India at their own accord or at government expense after a ten year period of industrial residence in the colonies they were initially signed and sent to.

The word *girmit* is closely associated with the indenture experience in Fiji. The word came to be regarded as synonymous with shame (Lal, 2004: 3). Girmit was a period of brutality, violence and debauchery, of poverty and degradation, cultural and social chaos and a dark period left unexplored finally becoming a part of a faded history, Lal writes.

In Fiji, after serving their terms, most indentured labourers stayed on. The girmit experience was not only that of work and hardship. The renditions of the girmitiya experiences of separation of lovers and lands, through the *bidesiya* (songs), and the acquisition of centrality of religious texts like the *Ramayana*, encapsulate the pleasure of remembrance and formation of memories. Sudesh Mishra (2006) argues that along with the Hindu recitations of the Ramayana that *girmitiyas* carried with them across the *kala pani*, they also carried the popular songs of the rural hinterland, where folk genres were the means of carrying information and messages from place to place and generation to generation.

With indentured labourers arriving to Fiji, the word *coolie* was replaced by an equally pejorative term, that of *girmitiya,* a word which signified losing one's status and being bound to the contract, which to many of the labourers seemed to be indissoluble. It also got associated with fraudulence and treachery. The social composition of the emigrants, the inappropriate gender balance, the new man-woman relationships and the changing perceptions of marriage and family were intricately connected to the story of migration.

To counter the sense of alienation and isolation which migrants face, they endeavour to be a part of the majority culture. The girmitiya, however, finds him/her marginalized.

Many migrant writers voice their encounters with racial discrimination. Itwaru and Ksonzek (1994:14) argue that on arrival a feeling of shame, anger, neglect and desperation take over. It is the pensive longing for the past which gives rise to the feelings of pain, betrayal and distress. A mood of melancholy and mourning finds its way into the migrant's life in the new setting. This is because there is nothing that can substitute the loss of the home. Replacing the original would be tainting its purity and originality. Similarly, Nathan (2007:11) notes that the mourning and melancholy, and its traumatic moments, go on to hearten the migratory

movements. Nostalgia or reminiscing the past is yet something that a migrant is engrossed in. He asserts that being far away from homeland, the migrant still continues to romanticize homeland. This aspect however poses a barrier between the past and the present. The past lingers in the subconscious of the migrant and frequently surfaces through memory.

Kolekar (2012:2) defines migration as a process of dispersion as it is the movement or scattering of people from their original homelands. The migratory movement occurs either out of force or one's own will. The products of forced resettlement are those who are running away from economic adversities, social and political maltreatment and religious discrimination. However, there are those who voluntarily move out to other countries in search of a fortune and better prospects (Mohana, 2009: 162). In the case of Fiji, the push factors behind migration from India were a diverse range of livelihood issues ranging from caste system, famine, railway construction and destruction of rural handicraft, poverty to inequality and upsurge of violence. Ali (2004: 23) writes 'in assessing indenture it is important to realize that it was a journey undertaken to find security in this life, an ingredient missing in village India'.

But whatever the form, in a new setting, the notion of home essentially brings the images of journey, displacement, seeking roots and finally seeking anchor in alternative homes.

In the case of indentured labourers to Fiji, the later generation of immigrants tried to construct a home in the host nation since there was a sense of disconnection with the motherland. The physical distance, psychological barriers and the not too frequent journeys back home is responsible for this break. Paranjape states that 'because a physical return was virtually impossible, an emotional or spiritual renewal was an ongoing necessity' (2001: 9). Thus, the migrant is commissioned with a challenge to keep alive the traditions as it is an important source for establishing their identity now that they have moved on to a new setting.

The role of the migrant writer becomes critical in this process. Literature being a medium of expression from time immemorial, the migrant writer brings home enormous passion and feeling to the reader. Postcolonial writers such as Itwaru and Kanwal have attempted through their narratives to revise the history of homeland and recreate its ambience. The migrant writers aim to authentically portray the aftermath of migration.

A New Identity – Home, Nation and Diaspora

Vijay Mishra (2007: 2) foregrounds the term diaspora referring to uprooted and displaced people who are recuperating from the torments of

indenture, trying to ascertain a proper language because their own was like an anti-language, a demotic created to survive and known only to those who had been part of Fiji's Indian agricultural narration. Mathew Arnold had written in the 1850's of 'wandering between two worlds: one dead and the other powerless to be born' (1855: 527). This was more like the life of a migrant; hovering between two worlds, one their own, which even then seemed dead, and another of the diaspora, not quite capable of being born in a world where the cultural logic of assimilation was the norm.

The girmitiyas tried to adapt to the new land without completely losing their culture. 'Though the indenture system had undermined family ties no sooner was a man free than efforts were made to re-establish a strong family unit, which once consolidated, proved invaluable in bringing about success and prosperity for some' (Ali, 2004: 22).

Vijay Mishra further writes that diaspora people do not feel happy with their non-hyphenated identities as indicated on their passports (2007: 2). The passports hold them as Fijian; the hyphenated identity is Indo-Fijian. The appropriate 'new identity' has been a long standing battle for the Fiji Indian upwardly mobile and middle and upper classes. The 2013 constitution gave equal citizenry to all Fijians. Today, anyone born in Fiji carries the nationality of 'Fijian'; ethnic identities are no longer captured in their nationality.

For Fijians of Indian decent, this new homeland has not only given them a new identity as Fijians, but also the birth of Fiji-Hindi. The distinctiveness of Fiji-Indians is their rich Fiji-Hindi language which has developed organically since the *Jahaji-bhai's* travelled to the host nation. With the arrival of indentured labourers in Fiji, a sense of novelty evolved through Fiji-Hindi, which was an amalgamation of all the tongues in which the migrants spoke before and after their journeys. Fiji Hindi has become a unifier of identity and acts as a common language between the Indian settlers and the indigenous/i-Taukei people. Today Fijian identity is unimaginable without this common vernacular. Thus, Indo-Fijian identity is no longer defined solely by its relationship to the homeland but has a new confidence and communication in its adopted home.

Diaspora communities do not survive only by reliance on the part of the homeland; rather they create new communities that pave the path for the future. In this, a multitude of new identifiers emerge – new 'language', food, fashion, music and beliefs. But for a diaspora, there remains always a ceaseless challenge and struggle to find its footing in multiple homes.

Summary

Home, migration and a new identity are significant elements defining a diasporic population. In the case of Indian indentured labourers sent to work on sugar plantations in Fiji, the notion of home for more than a century was a contested one. While today the entire world has become a global village, the notion of identity still occupies a central position in defining a people. In the era of transnationalism with travelling and movement being at the forefront, 'diasporic people' continue to struggle to define themselves in terms of their affiliation to their motherland, to that of the new homes they have come to construct as their homes, and to what the future may hold.

While the struggles and the plight shared by many indentured labourers in Fiji is heart wrenching, the ramifications of making Fiji their home away from home for all those labourers who did not wish to return to India or who could not return, is evident today in the progress and advancement made by them in Fiji and beyond as subsequent waves of migration took them to countries like the UK, Canada, USA, Australia and New Zealand. The indentured made new identities and new homes; the girmitiyas made yet newer identities and newer homes. Thus, 'home' today has become a widely contested term – conjuring multiple meanings for the diaspora.

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