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GIRMITIYA DIARIES: INTERGENERATIONAL TRAUMA, MEMORY AND BELONGING IN BRIJ LAL'S 'THE TAMARIND TREE'

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Abstract

The remarkable *girmitya* work 'The Tamarind Tree: vignettes from a plantation frontier in Fiji' by Brij V. Lal is included in the Fijian collection of stories *We Mark Your Memory: Writings from the Descendants of Indenture* (2018). Through Brij Lal's metaphor of the Tamarind tree, this paper will shed light on the yearning for homeland and the trauma of displacement migrants face. Only a few historical archives and research focus on indentured labourers that became prevalent after the abolition of slavery in 1833. The British colonies were targeted as they would sell hollow promises of a better future, dignity and livelihood to the indentured labourers. Between 1879 and 1916, as India was a British colony, many Indians were sent to Fiji as coolie labourers to work on sugarcane fields controlled by several companies, the largest of which was the Australian-owned CSR firm. The paper will discuss the idea of the polluted self, community and witnessing by tracing the lives of Lal's characters from the text. Taking Marianne Hirsch's idea of 'postmemory', the study would elaborate on *girmitya's* intergenerational trauma, collective memory and the presence of endowed gendered violence over the generations of women of migrants. Lal tackles the question of home and belonging through the symbol of the Tamarind tree. This essay will analyse the politics of the crossing, the lost identity and the mental and physical wounds on the generations of the labourers. Reading the text through a postcolonial lens, the paper will study memory as a traumatic heirloom and a tool of emancipation simultaneously.

Keywords: Memory, Trauma, Home, Belonging, Community

Introduction

Between 1879 and 1916, as India was a British colony, many Indians were sent to Fiji as coolie labourers to work on sugarcane fields controlled by several companies, the largest of which was the Australian-owned CSR firm. It was a large-scale migration across the *Kala Pani* (Black

Waters, 'forbidden sea' between India and America) where willingly or unwillingly, thousands of Indians donned the identity of a *girmitya*. As the word '*girmitya*' came from the corruption of the English word, agreement, the reality of the under-quality migration was disguised with false hopes, better opportunities, employment and a misguiding three

to a five-year contract that promised them a glorious return. Brij V. Lal's piece 'The Tamarind Tree: vignettes from a plantation frontier in Fiji' is an exceptional *girmitya* piece from the Fijian group of narratives, *We Mark Your Memory: Writings from the Descendants of Indenture*(2018). It stands out because of its reference to lines from poetry by Ghalib in which the metaphor of ash conjures up feelings of loss felt by the indentured labourers and inspires curiosity about what is consumed by fire:

*Jala hai jism Jahan dil bhi jal Gaya hoga
Kuraidtey ho jo ab raakh justju kya hai*
("If the body is burnt, so must have been the heart
Why rake the ashes now, what is the search for?")

Brij Lal is a distinguished historian specializing in the Indian diaspora and *Girmit* (Indian indentured migration) studies. Born in Tabia, he came from a humble background—his parents were indentured labourers from India. Arriving in Fiji around the end of the indenture period (1879–1916), his grandpa completed his five years of servitude, got married, and rented land to start his farm. Lal made sense of the contemporary setting by using history as a tool. He brought a moral viewpoint to his work and always supported liberal democratic values. The narrative centres around the Tamarind Tree which was a symbol of memories, resistance, community, trauma and hope of the *girmityas*. The Tamarind tree is used by Lal to symbolically address the issue of home and belonging, and further highlights the presence of a void created by crossing the *Kala Pani* (Black waters). The existence of *Kala Pani* is explored through the idea of crossing over, of the polluted self. *Kala Pani* becomes a symbol of the break from an orderly system, a rupture creating a space for transgression

Exile, Guilt and Mimicking Homeland

Due to the shortage of labour caused by the abolition of slavery in the British Empire in 1833, indentured emigration started in the 19th century. "Upon entering the archive of slavery, the unimaginable assumes the guise of everyday practice", and similar is observed in the system of indentured labour, from the horrible working

conditions, and power struggle to their effect on the descendants of the labourers (Hartman 6). Similarly, the women faced sexual assault and were considered prostitutes by the higher officials and this prevailing assumption is still faced by the future generation of women. In the text, the case of Janakia and others being harassed by Sukkha, the sirdar, represents the power dynamics and how women are always the target of it. The idea of a split subject reflects upon the spectrum translocation of the *girmityas* as their migration was physical as well as imaginary to a land of prosperity. The split subjects face hardships in hopes of an imaginary better future. The effects of this tussle lead them to question their identity and agency. There is no home and no sense of origin or belongingness towards Fiji or India and they barely resonate with either of the cultures, perpetuating a feeling of an outsider in both. Through a few objects passed down generations, faint memory and mimicking of homeland (in terms of food and festivals like in Tua Tua), the *girmityas* try to analyse trauma.

The difference between Fijians and Indians and discrimination continued to prevail, leaving the labourers with no connection with either of the communities. Because of the sense of polluted self, intermixing, the possibility of a heroic return to the homeland became impossible. The idea of exile and redemption becomes significant in this case. Considered to be from the homeland, the Tamarind Tree was seen as a Mulki tree and reflected upon *girmityas'* retrospective pride, the guilt of leaving and a hanging question over their patriotism. The guilt of choosing self over the nation becomes a part of the traumatic history which is passed down to generations. Brij Lal makes the Tamarind Tree a symbol of routes and roots, a visible reminder of ancestral roots, culinary roots and the difficult routes taken to embark on this journey.

Idea of Community and Collective Memory

As the term 'postcolonial' means the troubling continuity of colonialism, not its end, Hirsch describes 'postmemory' as belated memory, "a structure of inter- and trans-generational transmission of traumatic knowledge and experience", defining the present's connection to

the troubled past as a consequence of trauma (Hirsch 106). The Tamarind Tree becomes the site of memory as it has witnessed the celebration, rituals, struggles and communion of various generations of *girmitiyas*. The Tree was *terra sacra* for the narrator's father as it let him and others connect to their ancestors and functioned as a place of non-material special memory for all the future generations of *girmitiya* until its demise in 1962 by lightning. The idea of retrospective witness through adoption becomes important for *girmitiyas* as it links the experiences of the first generation to the future generations who inherit the intergenerational trauma.

Sudesh Mishra discusses the idea of 'rememory' referring to memory existing in some disguise or form outside the subject in who it is invested in and how the constant returning to it changes the subject's comprehension of the present. This is what happens with the recipients of intergenerational trauma as they inherit overwhelming memories that deny narrative reconstruction and dominate their consciousness. Indirect witnessing becomes a major part of the memories of the future generation as their personal experience becomes secondary while their forefather's stories become primary, suppressing their individuality and trauma. The descendants are given the huge responsibility of preserving the culture and history passed down through trauma to claim their identity.

Collective memory links itself to the idea of community which inhibits the sense of shared beginning and the yearning to go home. The ship was an essential site of community formation for the Jahaji community. The annual festivals, a celebration of Phagwa, Moharram, wrestling matches, meetings, reading of scriptures by the priests and other activities centred around the Tamarind Tree as the community would practice collective servitude in an attempt to keep the world of their origins alive. Faith was one of the few things that helped avert identity crisis as religious dislocation was also very traumatic. Coolie identity had its ground in the assumption of a peaceful inter religious and casteless society, but the example of Hirwa and Madho in the text and its repercussions hint otherwise. The

religious tensions of Tua Tua were a failed attempt at mimicking the colonial tension of their homeland, India. Personal memory was tied to the political and social community. Home had evolved into a phrase for the labourers to which no specific meaning could be attached. Perhaps even that image is a dream image, a complex term altered by each succeeding generation that has dreamt it. As they have no direct linkage to India or a particular community, finding refuge and solace in stories, kept artefacts, and memories is just their way back home.

Conclusion

The indentured system was abolished in 1921, yet many labourers could not return because of the low wages, hence making the descendants live through the traumatic memory of the place repeatedly. And the future generation that left the place for better prospects or to evade the daunting place like the narrator, could not physically hold onto the past. For, like the Tamarind Tree, the idea of home and the past they wanted to clutch onto did not exist. But just like the Tamarind Tree was gone, not forgotten, the memories and trauma passed down through the generations will continue to exist and shape the future generations, marking the historical presence of the *girmitiyas*.

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