

## **Diasporic Experiences in Subramani's *The Fantasy Eaters***

**Dr. Hetalben Rajput**

**Assistant Professor (Contractual)**

**Government Arts College, Maninagar**

**Ahmedabad**

**India**

### **Abstract**

*The Fantasy Eaters* deals with their life and experiences on plantation, struggle for preservation of social, moral, and cultural aspects of Indian way of life and unanticipated violation of it and existential dilemma. It also deals with the psychological effects of multiculturalism and colonialism. The book is a complex revelation of the complex fate of Indo-Fijians where their bleak existence finds an expression, often threatened by failures. The failure of communication is not only emphasized by the characters' existence but also by the natural elements like wind, sea, trees, birds, animals, sky, clouds, etc.

### **Diasporic Experiences in Subramani's *The Fantasy Eaters***

Subramani himself says,

"I grew up in a society in which people did not read books for pleasure. My interest in writing came from fortunate early encounters with books. We read some religious texts in Hindi, mainly Indian epics, and I tried some books in English through my Father's encouragement, though he himself couldn't read English. The books we read had been thrown away at the European bungalows where my father worked."<sup>1</sup>

'The Fantasy Eaters', published in 1988, is a collection of nine short stories and a novella. These stories are Sautu, Tell me where the Train Goes, Groundlings, Tropical Traumas, No Man's Land, Marigolds, Dear Primitive, Gamalian's Woman Kala, and Gone Bush (Novella). *The Fantasy Eaters* is set in the Indian community in Fiji. It deals with their life and experiences on plantation, struggle for preservation of social, moral, and cultural aspects of Indian way of life and unanticipated violation of it and existential dilemma. It also deals with the psychological effects of multiculturalism and colonialism. The book is a complex revelation of the complex fate of Indo-Fijians where their bleak existence finds an expression, often threatened by failures. The failure of communication is not only

emphasized by the characters' existence but also by the natural elements like wind, sea, trees, birds, animals, sky, clouds, etc.

'Sautu' is one of the interesting stories written by Subramani. The title of the story, 'Sautu', is given after the girmitya village in which the story is set. The title is pregnant with irony, because the village suggests grinding poverty, pressurized malevolence and deleterious ennui rather than "peace prosperity and abundance." Sudesh Mishra in one of his article says of Sautu as, "'Sautu' is therefore more than an ordinary village, it is a microcosm embodying the dehumanizing experiences of indenture or, more accurately, a psychic village peopled with withered peasants who cannot even begin to unscramble, for less interpret, the jumble history of their angst – crippled consciousness."<sup>2</sup>

The story revolves round the life of Dhanpat. Near the end of his life, when all his familial bonds severed with the death of his wife, Ratni, and the marriage or departure of his three children, Dhanpat experience a profound sense of existential cleavage bordering on mental collapse. Perhaps there is something tragically appropriate in the fact that Dhanpat's eventual rupture with the world of sanity is accelerated by his son's letters from New Zealand. Somu migrates from sautu in quest of an alternate existence but subsequently discovers that it is not possible. He carries the psychic village in him even as he withdraws from it. However his education has given him a language with which to pattern his anxieties; he fails to realize that the articulation of his dilemma is soul breaking for his father: "His world was becoming rapidly disoriented. Things didn't seem to regroup again. His days oscillated between past order and new anguish. At times he felt his life hovering at the edge of new perceptions. There was, however, a loneliness now which was intense and complete."<sup>3</sup>

The revelation comes much too late; the inviolate Dhanpat is violated; he realizes that his enclavistic existence is based on subconscious refusal to accommodate forces, ideas, cultures and histories which must forever impinge on it. Other characters have different means of circumventing reality. They fail to define reality: "Mangal's eldest son commits suicide; Bhairo's world is defined by Vedic scriptures; Bimla takes refuge in celluloid romance; Rambaran's son contracts oblivion in alcohol; while Somu simply opts out of 'Sautu'."<sup>4</sup>

*Tell Me Where the Train Goes* shows the powerlessness of indentured society. It shows the character of Kunti who was victim of imperial power and finally left for New Zealand. Even her son, namely Manu, suffers a lot. 'Marigolds' shows the children of indenture imprisoned in the same nihilistic as there ancestors. Even their successful

relocation in an educated, bourgeois world merely forms the pretext for temporary occlusion because the poltergeists of indenture break out, as they must, with fissuring vengeance. The resulting trauma, as Chetaram discovers in 'Marigolds,' is of seismic proportions: "The serenity has gone from the day. There is turmoil in the sky where heavy black clouds are lit up by wafts of red like blood. Our world is shrinking. There is a hopeless gulf between the lounge and the kitchen... A slow anguish grips my heart, the anguish of being unsupported. Everything, history and customs, had prepared me for this impasse. There is no alternative life; a hundred years of history on this island has resulted in wilderness and distress."<sup>5</sup>

The title of the story *Groundling* is suggestive of the social hierarchy prevailing in Fiji which had not yet evolved as a multicultural country. The story portrays the hopeless conditions of the Indo – Fijian people and their futile attempt to escape from reality. The word groundling suggests lower strata of the society to whom no one cared. Suffering is always there in its every character. Characters wanted to escape from the reality so they go for movie which makes their life happy temporarily. After watching movie they have to face cruel reality of their life.

Subramani's initial flirtation with the more paregoric application of fantasies is exquisitely developed in 'Gamalian Woman.' Mrs. Gamalian is a dynamic and original spinner of tall tales. Unlike many other girmitiya characters of "The Fantasy Eaters", Mrs. Gamalian creates and lives an imaginary life which challenges the vagaries of empirical reality. "After her hair was combed and pasted down with coconut oil, the old woman began her narrative: always a superb maker fiction, she brought out images that cluttered her dreams, and strung them like beads."<sup>6</sup>

Mrs. Gamalian, the grande dame of yarn-spinning, fiction maker extraordinaire, dies permanently into her dreams. It is important to note that Mrs. Gamalian realizes in her imagination the arkathi fables which drew her to the ship 'Elbe' but rarely loses the sight of terra firma. As such she lives a vibrant and articulate imaginary life which, by accounting for the otherness of empirical reality, ensures that she avoids the pitfalls of self-delusion.

Another important story 'Kala' begins with the eponymous heroine struggling to establish her individual freedom by determining the *raison d'être* for her existence which is, at first, in conflict with the affection she reserves for her husband, Sukhen. Kala's seeming dissatisfaction with her marriage and the need for independence is not the beginning of her self-deception; it starts from the moment she weds surrogate divinity in the figure of Sukhen. "But it was her mother who presented her with an appealing image, pointed to the aura about

Sukhen- isn't he a bit like Lord Krishna himself? She said. So when Sukhen asked Kala, she said yes she would marry him.”<sup>7</sup> Kala's excursions into the city, which begin auspiciously with the “unseasonal rain” breaking the drought, become an internal journey into the antechambers of her being. She encounters and purges those fabulous minotaurs which drive a wedge between fancy and reality.

*No Man's Land* tries to portray the deleterious effect of modern capitalism on the Fijian Society. The protagonist of the story Moses is a native Fijian who loves to live in his rural surrounding and read books. Because of the increasing urbanization taking place in Fiji, as a consequence of the expansion of the Colonial Sugar Refining Company, Moses is compelled to leave his idyllic rural background and migrate to the city on the advice of his friend, Kini. But upon his arrival in the city, he finds it difficult to adjust to the prevailing urban milieu. Everything in the city increases his sense of alienation and every face in the city appears to be hostile to him. Instead of brotherhood and fellow feeling, he feels enmity and hatred for the people who surrounded him in the city. Thus, he is always possessed by a sense of anger as he broods over his monotonous existence in the city. The story is a sad commentary on how capitalism and modernism has uprooted native traditions where people find it difficult to adapt themselves to their conditions.

*Fantasy Eaters* also deals with the *Gone Bush*, a novella. It is divided into three sections: Artist of the Sea, Karma in My Psyche and Beginning of the End. It narrates the physical and psychological journey of a character from India to Fiji. As Sudesh Mishra rightly puts it, “Gone Bush is one Man's struggle to re-orient his psychic map from the vast plains of northern India to the reefs and shores in Fiji.”<sup>8</sup> 41The first section, Artists of the Sea deals with the experiences of the narrator Anandi who undertakes journeys to various Pacific islands with his friend and therapist Dr. Bansant Mithara. Anandi's real treatment consists not of medicines but educative and therapeutic trips undertaken under the wise guidance of his friend Dr. Basant Mithara. The second section of *Gone Bush* entitled Karma in my Psyche gives us a glimpse of Anandi's childhood days in a village in India. It shows how Anandi was brought up in traditional set up in India. We are also told of his two unsuccessful marriages and its devastating effect on him. The third section deals with the power of rhetoric and manipulates Anandi's memories in order to deliver effective speeches thus becoming a successful politician.

“The Fantasy Eaters” establishes an intricate relationship between history and literature. Instead of dwelling in representing the historical events as they happened,

Subramani is rather interested in things that are the results of them in an ironical way. In Amitav Ghosh's 'Glass Palace' the history runs side by side with the main incidents. Such is not case with 'The Fantasy Eaters'. Subramani's stories revolve round the axes of articulation, non-articulation and misarticulation. The title of the book is very suggestive as it shows how the individuals in each of the story try to escape from the reality. *The Fantasy Eaters* effectively portrayed the dire condition of the Indo Fijian.

**References:**

1. Interview with Subramani, Fiji Sun, Girit Publication, 10<sup>th</sup> May 1979.
2. Subramani, (ed.), *South Pacific Literature: From Myth to Fabulation*. Suva: University of South Pacific, 1992, p. 163. Print
3. Ibid p.165
4. Patel, Hetal. *Subramani: A Writer at Work in Fiji*. Creative books, New Delhi, 2014, p. 53. Print
5. Subramani, *The Fantasy Eaters*. Washington: Three Continent Press, 1988, p. 45. Print
6. Ibid p.57
7. Ibid p. 176
8. Subramani, (ed.), *South Pacific Literature: From Myth to Fabulation*. Suva: University of South Pacific, 1992, p. 178. Print