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Existential Crisis in Select Stories of Subramani's *The Fantasy Eaters*

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Abstract:

'Migration': a simple word denoting movement of people from one place to another either forcefully or voluntarily. The word although sounds really simple, it is not as plain as it seems. Migration at surface level means leaving one's own land, property, people, culture and traditions but at deeper level it means forsaking your own identity and seeking or attempting to adapt with other. The pain is understood best by the 'Diasporas'; a term used to identify those people who undergoes through migration. The paper attempts to understand the hopelessness generated by this migration amongst the Diasporas portrayed by Subramani in his story 'Sautu' from *The Fantasy Eaters*. 'Sautu', an intriguing story revolving around Dhanpat that explores the dilemma of existence amongst the descendants of the Girmitiyas of Fiji. Dhanpat represents every Indo-Fijian who develops existential crisis after the period of indenture.

Keywords: Girmitiyas, Indenture, Indo-Fijian, Diaspora, Migration.

Subramani is a notable name in Indo-Fijian writings today. A renowned academician and seeker of rights of the Indo-Fijians in Fiji, Subramani unlike other writers is not interested in analyzing the history of migration of the Girmitiyas to Fiji, in fact, he attempts to note the aftermath of the migration upon the Girmitiyas and their descendant. *The Fantasy Eaters*, is a collection of nine short stories, revolving around the lives of Indo-Fijians, presenting the theme of existential crisis, quest for identity, broken familial construct, the struggle of preservation of ancestral customs and practices of the Girmitiyas and their descendants in a foreign land.

Subramani's work has a major theme of existential crisis through which he questions the identity of the Indo-Fijian community. Being transported to a foreign land, most of the Girmitiyas felt a sense of hopelessness and existential crisis. In the majority of stories, we see

Subramani highlighting the characters going through an identical crisis which results in familial destruction, societal pressure and mental background. These stories also deal with the struggle of the Indo- Fijian community to preserve their socio, cultural and moral values and its unintended violation because of the effect of multiculturalism and colonialism. The characters sacrifice their life in coping up with their situation, however at the end; they are left nothing but broken and empty. Subramani's excellence also lies in the fact that he succeeds in complementing the inner turmoil of the characters with the outer world. The monotonous existence of his characters is related with the barrenness of their environment. The land is non- productive, the trees are fruitless, the wind is violent and their life appears futile.

The bleak atmosphere and the horrific life of the indenture made the Indo-Fijian question their identity which we see in abundance amongst his characters. To understand the theme of existential crisis, Subramani most acknowledge story "Sautu" best embodies the theme. The title itself is an irony because 'Sautu' literally denotes 'peace and prosperity and abundance', however the reality is, and the village has offered nothing to its people except for poverty and barrenness. The village itself originated out of scratches created by certain Girmitiyas seeking a land for their survival. The village had "no rivers and the sea were thirty miles away" (Subramani, *The Fantasy* 1). It was surrounded by "irregular stretch of un prosperous sugar cane fields in the south, and, in the north by partly barren soapstone bearing occasional guava bushes and stunted rain trees and reeds" (2). Subramani through his work abides by the Girmit consciousness which is highlighted by Vijay Mishra in his concept of Girmit ideology. As stated by Mishra in his book *The Literature of Indian Diaspora: Theorizing the Diasporic Imaginary*, the Girmit undergoes through a pain of "failed millenarian quest" (22). Millions underwent a series of migration because they became prey to a 'promise', 'a promise about riches' and a promise about happiness which they could not have at their janambhumi. The escape from the degrading realities of Indian life only landed them into a more rigorous life where they had no land, no family, no rights and none to identify them with. This obscurity only created an upheaval in their lives that further resulted into an emptiness which couldn't be filled by any consolations. The characters of Subramani exemplify this emptiness. Although they have given their entire life in building familial relationships and attempting to develop a bond with their surroundings, yet at the end we see the emptiness hovering around their psyche and their attempt to escape through their environment. The lack of belonging, not only strain their relationship but

also results in their own mental breakdown. They no longer associate themselves to their culture, moral and social values. Subramani attempts to present this existential crisis situation by portraying characters from every status of life. Characters like Dhanpat and Manu are representative of the existential crisis of an indentured laborer struggling to live a life in barracks

Subramani and Satendra Nandan are flag bearers of Indo-Fijian writings. But what Nandan laments the history and the process accompanying the system of Indenture. Subramani on the other hand focuses on the aftermath of Indenture and the consequences on the lives of the Indo Fijians. “Sautu”, through which Subramani received immediate attention in the academia, is a story depicting all the crises a foreigner undergoes in a foreign land. At the primary reading we only understand the difficulties of Dhanpat in establishing himself in a new village with his pregnant wife, but at the deeper level, we see his existential dilemma that results in his failure of communication and finally causing his mental disorder. Sudesh Mishra comments on the ‘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. (Subramani, *South pacific writings* 168)

The fact that Dhanpat cannot remember the period of indenture denotes that it is a memory which has offered nothing but pain and suffering and therefore, the memory of it has slowly vanished because he has worked hard in dealing with his present. It thus appears only like a “labyrinth full of shadows and memories” (*The Fantasy* 1). The miserable existence of Dhanpat became more obvious after the death of his wife. Her death resulted in the breaking down of his relationship with his family and everyone left their small house in search of better life. The emptiness pertaining to his existence is reflected through the “dark and dismal” (3) hut. The long lives that he and his wife have lived have added nothing much to their worldly bliss.

The years had added nothing to their worldly possessions. A much-battered, tin suitcase under his string bed held his and Ratni’s old clothes ... His broken dholak, brought from India, stood on an empty wooden box in another corner. He

looked reflectively at his earthly belongings; a great emptiness seemed to unfold within him. (3)

The struggle and rigorous life at the plantation has “bent his posture” and his arms and feet now appears as if they were “cracked and creased like the earth outside” (3). Dhanpat began to see the monotony in his everyday existence and was haunted by his friend Kanga's statement “that a man's memory sharpens just before his death?”(1). Dhanpat's only hope lies in his son Somu, who has supposedly migrated to Canada. He hopes that Somu will one day take him to Canada, away from the barrenness of his present world. However, his dreams are shattered after receiving a letter from Somu, who himself is struggling to create his own existence. The barrier between the old and new, the city and the village is also reflected through Somu. Somu is hesitant about spending his life in a village, while on the other hand Dhanpat wishes that he would come back. “Life would change, it would become whole and fine again for both of them” (7)

The hopelessness has assimilated within him to the extent that Dhanpat found monotony in his everyday life. He has seen men and women following the same routine for years. Now, the only peace that he withdrew was from the prayers which he offered daily but now it seems useless and futile. The icons of Gods looked old and withered.

Now, sitting in front of the temple, he saw how the protective armor has gradually disintegrated. The tenuous bond that existed among the disparate items of his daily life was breaking. More than ever, he felt the pointlessness of the daily rituals of toil and rest, prayer and persistence. Once they were, however, the only affirmations of his existence. (8)

His identical crisis is also reflected from the fact that in spite of being a regular visitor of the Bhajan mandali for years, he now abstains himself from going there. He misquotes the lines from Holy Gita: “Desire nothing so that you will have everything” (2) which reveals his detachment from reality. At the end of his life, Dhanpat has nothing to appreciate. He has lost his wife and all his sons have moved away to different places leaving him alone and empty. The emptiness finally resulted in him being taken to a mental asylum.

Similar theme accompanies the story line of “Tell me Where the Train Goes”. The distinction that Subramani attempts to establish here is, he shifts his attention from village life to the miserable existence of the Indenture laborers in barracks. “It was strewn with dog dirt” (11), the room had no ventilations, just a barricade that protected the house. Manu, the protagonist of the story is seen suffocated by the odor of “kerosene and stale food” and he felt “terribly lonesome and afraid” (11). The enmity between the Fijians and the laborers is reflected through the story. Manu is scared more of the humans than of any spirits at twelve o’clock midnight. The danger of Indo Fijian life remains even during the day time. It only creates an atmosphere of fear, suffocation and anxiety in Manu resulting in his existential crisis.

The nights were fraught with danger. Even in the moonlit night there were threatening whispers in the rustle of coconut fronds and mango branches. Sometimes he experienced a sense of foreboding at noon on a hot day when there wasn’t a breath of fresh air, and the fields waited for some sort of eruption. (11)

Subramani, through the story also attempts to depict the frail existence of the Indo Fijians in barracks. Their life remains on the mercy of the Fijians. Manu’s concern about something bad was going to happen was the concern of every laborer in the barracks. They received continuous humiliation and life-threatening mistreatment from the indigenous people. Manu’s father becomes a victim of such humiliation and the result is his father’s body is found in the sugarcane field. Manu develops a fear that these people also “intended bringing harm among him and Kunti.” (13). the story is pregnant with hatred, violence, uncertainties and cruelties. The life in the barracks was “forever anarchic” which compels Manu to seek escape in the caves. Subramani through the story also hints on why the sense of hatred developed amongst the Indo Fijians.

These were the refugees from a depressed sub- continent, gnarled and weather-beaten, and brutalized by ghetto life. Some had accepted their half slave status, and a few seemed bored or secretly dreaming of self- annihilation. There were others like Dhanai who were filled with destructive rage. (14)

The hatred was not only amongst the Indo Fijians but also against the imperial power. The Indo Fijians considered their recruiters as the reason for their miseries and therefore they seek revenge themselves. Subramani in the story also presents a horrific incident where the Indo

Fijians murders Mr. Pepper just on the basis of doubt that he was responsible for crushing Dhanai's leg. Manu witnessed how men and women walked naked revenging their miserable situation on the Sahib by murdering and ultimately urinating at his face. The incident made Manu sick and a need to escape the anarchic life at the barracks. The story ends with Manu running after train No 3.

Manu gaped the ritual of death and dissolution with muted panic. For the first time, he noticed that the men were completely naked. Soon they were joined by a group of women who emerged from the bushes. They lifted their clothes and took their turn urinating on the wriggling figure who was pinned roughly on the ground by several pairs of rugged hands. A feeling of nausea was welling up; for a second, Manu thought he was going to be sick. (17)

The other character in the story undergoes a similar situation. Kunti, Manu's mother becomes emotionally barren after the death of his father resulting in a strained relationship between mother and son. She also becomes a victim of hatred amongst the Indo-Fijian community and later of imperial lust. Initially, she fails to give the comfort of a mother to Manu and hence, he develops a sense of alienation and non belongingness. However, at the end she realizes her responsibility of preserving her son from the chaos of the barracks and declares "we'll go away" (18). Manu is skeptical about his mothers answer because "they were shipwrecked in the barracks" (19) and had "nowhere to go" (19), but it develops a sense of hope which was much needed in his life. He noticed that the "old anguish had vanished from her face as if something has snapped free" (18). The story ends with a positive note, where the writer attempts to create a probable order from the chaotic existence of Manu. He senses "exhilarated and free". (18)

The dilemma of existence is not only a feature of people belonging from the village or the barracks; it also follows like a spirit amongst the people who have worked relentlessly hard to reach a specific position. Mr Chetaram, who is the head of school, undergoes this crisis. He feels psychic disorder and depression because he assumes that the life he has been living is totally to fulfill others expectations. He has a monotonous marriage where love has vanished and is

haunted by an element of safety. He wakes up in the morning with a dreadful sensation that “my hair had turned crimson, and flesh dissolved into a vegetable curd” (39).

Mr Chetaram and Dharma have intended to have a garden which remains unfulfilled. Instead the house which was initially surrounded by the chirruping of the birds now is levelled by squatters. The “dried up flower bed” (40) is symbolic of the loveless relationship that they share. The house offered no sense of “home” to Chetaram and he wishes to be rescued from this self made prison” (40). The story also reflects on how the descendants of the Girmitiyas are trapped in the same nihilism like their ancestors, no matter what positions they reach through their hard work. The school master also experiences a sense of alienation when his Fijian colleague regards him as “member of the desperate money- grubbing fraternity which he despises but secretly hopes to emulate” (43). Chetaram being humiliated by the laughter of the students finally reflects into his meaningless life which he had spent much according to the acceptance of the society.

I saw clearly how my whole existence has been in bad faith. The lies I had lived in order to hold, to maintain serenity, accepting countless humiliations without rebelling, suppressing all aggression out of fear of creating new situation which I might not be able to control, where my tolerance was just a mask to preserve my inner freedom and weakness, my reticence and anti posture to cover my defects and avoid censure, had warped everything that was wholesome and fine in my life. (44)

Finally, he attempts to break the social construct and seek freedom from the barriers. He “wanted a life of my own to start a new road” (45). He travels around the street as a “free spirit” and witnesses the city which appeared like a “mela”, he could feel the fragrance of absent marigolds. He returns home drunk, with a hope of being accepted by Dharma, the way he is. However, an atmosphere of monotony and rejection on part of Dharma only upsets him. He again feels the same ‘turmoil in the sky where heavy black clouds are lit up by wafts of red like blood” (45). The relationship he shared with his wife seems to be “shrinking” again because of her incapability to accept him with his flaws. Analyzing his own hopelessness and failed urge for

freedom, he finally questions the whole existence of the Girmityas because his roots are in Girmit experiences and he cannot separate himself from it.

There's a hopeless gulf between the lounge and the kitchen. After the futile gesture, my pathetic freedom, what was I to do? 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 these islands has resulted in wilderness and distress. (45)

'Kala' is yet another story reflecting an individual search for identity. It is a story about a woman with the name Kala who had been trapped into the so-called perfect marriage, and her attempt to establish her own identity within the given structure. She is a woman who had the ability to see extraordinary even in the ordinary. Her lively nature is soon interrupted by the fact that she is a victim of the patriarchal system. She reflects back to the time when her marriage to Sukhen was itself a deception.

She had regarded her marriage as a trap. It undermined her true self. She had believed that she had married for love. She was beginning to doubt even that. Things were little confused from the start... She liked Sukhen. But it was his 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. (65)

Now, when she has married him, she notices how her life is governed more by the way Sukhen desires. In a way "she lived his life". However, when she wishes to do something of her own, she senses hollowness in his reactions. The love they have shared has changed with time. Now when she was thinking of her independence, Sukhen's indifferent attitude upsets her more. She began to see the stillness in her life and wished she had the "fighting spirit, a bit of the abrasive manner, to retaliate, or at least stand up to him" (65).

Kala seeks freedom in her walks on the streets young and free. The half empty streets bring out the real Kala which had been lost in the process of loving and being loved. She senses love and happiness in the lustful gaze of the people walking on the streets. She began to realize

how she had spent her years being unkind to herself just performing her duty towards Sukhen and her half torn marriage.

She saw a pair of bare feet on naked shingle slaked with rain. . Again she experienced the strange spell of those feet that had ages of solitude moving with them. She wanted to touch them, wash them off their weariness and sorrow with her tears. (68)

When Sukhen leaves for abroad for a few days, Kala senses boredom and loneliness but soon she “felt a youthful glow invade her body” (70) and wanted to “enjoy the freedom of her aloneness” (70). Suva, where she had been married for years remained unexplored

Now as she broke free of her sheltered life, the city suddenly took on a romantic aspect; it seemed to contain an extraordinary amalgam of feelings and sensations. It started to open up, come under her control. (71)

However, the freedom she gains is temporary. When Sukhen arrives, she wants to discuss the chaos she has been facing in her married life but it only further strains their relationship. She undergoes a conflicting situation whereby her desire to be understood remains unfulfilled. The indignant and indifferent attitude of Sukhen complicates their marriage. Although Kala witnesses a momentary bliss in her loneliness, yet the story does not end liberating Kala from her so-called “trapped marriage”. She again becomes victim to the same love for which she had married him, with a probable notion of happily ever after.

To conclude, Subramani’s “Sautu”, “Tell Me Where the Train Goes”, “Kala”, “Marigold” are epitomes of destruction caused by migration upon the life of simple people because of indenture. These stories are significant to the readers because they denote the mental state of not just the first generation Girmitiyas but the other generation to come. The loneliness, despair and identity crisis governs their personal life resulting into dilemma of existence. Thus, through these stories Subramani peeps into ‘self’ of the Indo-Fijian lives.

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