Girmit, postmemory, and Subramani

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Abstract

The centenary of indenture in Fiji was celebrated with public displays, speeches, parades, and publications. The momentum for critical and creative response grew in tandem with the wave of publications inspired by the end of colonial rule in many Pacific Island countries. This period of increased agency and autonomy was also a time of political uncertainty in Fiji, as questions of the nation's identity and direction were raised. For many Indo-Fijian writers rootedness in Fiji was voiced through the traumas of indenture, which they invested with mythic valence, and which can be understood as operating as an origin story for Indo-Fijians. Vijay Mishra considered indenture, or girmit, to be a foundational ideology for Indo-Fijian writers, but viewing girmit in terms of false consciousness leads him to read Indo-Fijian anxieties in terms of political blindness and cultural insularity. Building instead on Sudesh Mishra's elaboration of girmit as non-agreement, and Vijay Mishra's later revisions of girmit ideology as founded on memories of betrayal, this article argues that girmit can be productively understood through Marianne Hirsh's work on postmemory. Looking at writings of the centenary, and in particular Subramani's short stories, this article proposes that the traumas of girmit that haunt writings of the period do so as postmemories.

Keywords: Girmit, indenture, postmemory, Fiji, Subramani

> In our midst today, there are less than a handful of surviving Girmitiyas left, but their voices remain with us, and their memories will remain forever.
> – Tej Ram Prem, Introduction to the *Girmit Gāthā* series, 1979

In 2017 Subramani, a prominent Indo-Fijian author, critic, and academic, reissued his collection *The Fantasy Eaters* (1988), adding new short stories and entitling the volume *Wild Flowers*. The original collection's content consisted of writings published before Fiji's 1987 coups, but the new volume traverses Indo-Fijian history from indenture to the twenty-first century. The reissue of Subramani's shorter writings brings the trajectory of Indo-Fijian literary engagements with colonialism, indenture, cultural tensions, and unsettled identities back into focus – albeit a focus made ghostly and strange

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by the power of Subramani's fragmentary, kaleidoscopic imagery – and makes, even during a time of relative calm in the Fijian political landscape, a critical return to his writings timely. Subramani's Fiji is a place whose manifold histories and diverse traditions share in collective, if differently experienced and separately understood, national traumas. The texts of *Wild Flowers* perform the upsets and confusions of post-indenture, post-independence Fiji through disorienting, aching narratives; Subramani's stories follow time-lines that fold, loop, and slip away from the reader's grasp, and his characters live in liminal spaces between past and present, with their truths half-told and their secrets whispered from the margins. As memories and histories continually intrude into characters' present-day lives, time in *Wild Flowers* is always out of joint, motivations are rarely straightforward, and consequences are fraught but unclear.

Subramani's complex accounts of Fiji take their place in a wider moment in Pacific literature and history. Fiji had returned to independence in 1970, as reacquired sovereignty was being experienced or expected across the Pacific. A groundswell of novels, poetry collections, periodicals, and little magazines probed and promulgated new senses of agency and identity. The centenary of indenture in Fiji came during this period of creativity and reflection, and was commemorated in 1979 with public displays, speeches, parades, publications, and first-hand accounts on radio programmes such as *Girmit Gāthā*. It is of little surprise that such an anniversary would render indenture a framing narrative for Indo-Fijian society, but the way in which indenture lingers in Subramani's short stories, and in the critical writings of the period, speaks to more than a deliberate gesture to a topical theme. Indenture pervades precisely because it has been memorialised; that is, it inhabits the texts as a traumatic memory inherited by the generations after the girmitiyas. Drawing on Vijay Mishra's and Sudesh Mishra's analyses of girmit, as well as Marianne Hirsch's work on postmemory, this article proposes that the writings of the centenary, as well as Subramani's characters and texts, are haunted by the traumas of girmit, traumas that repeat and linger as postmemories.

Indenture and Girmit

Fiji was ceded to Britain in 1874, and as the colonial powers required the country to be financially self-supporting, Fiji was deemed in need of economic modernisation. Sir Arthur Gordon, the new Governor General of Fiji, decided to promote the plantation system, with sugar cane as the primary crop, but as he was committed to protecting iTaukei culture from commercial enterprises he required an externally sourced workforce. Gordon turned to indentured labour, a system he knew from his time in Mauritius and Trinidad. The first group of indentured workers arrived on the Leonidas on 14 May 1879, and by the cessation of indenture in 1916, some 60,553 Indians had arrived in Fiji. Their contract of agreement, from which the word "girmit" and their identity as "girmitiyas" arises, specified the details of their employment and potential repatriation. After the first five-year contract the indentured workers could return to India at their own expense, but if they signed a new contract and completed another five years, they could return at the expense of the government. Few could endure a second period of life on the lines, however, and few had saved enough to return after the first contract, and so, following five years of hard labour, the majority chose to remain in Fiji.

There can be little doubt that indentured life in Fiji was physically and emotionally demanding. The first point of cultural rupture is often associated with the voyage from India, as the crossing of the kala pani (the black sea) was traditionally understood as dissolving caste, and as groups normally separated by strict social divisions were forced into intimate proximity by life on board the ship (V.

Mishra, 2015; DeLoughrey, 2011).[1] On arrival in Fiji offenses against the workers such as corporal punishment, irregular payment, poor rations, sexual abuse, and unsanitary, inadequate housing were rife (Ali, 1979; Naidu, 1989; Lal, 2000; S. Mishra 2005), and resulted in Fiji having one of the highest rates of suicide of the indentured colonies (Lal, 1993: 187). The tasks appointed to the workers were usually excessive, and couldn't be completed on time, which meant that workers didn't meet their quota and weren't paid in full. This led to inadequate diets and subsequent illness, which caused a spiral of more missed work, less pay, poorer food, poorer health, and more missed work. This is not to say that testimonials from the surviving girmitiyas present a consistent story of degradation – accounts include details of harmony between Hindus and Muslims, the occasional ability to save money, and for some, cordial relations with iTaukei (Ali, 1979; Gounder 2011). Nor were they a uniformly victimised, passive group; Margaret Mishra, for example, has done important work on female resistance and agency during this period (M. Mishra, 2012, 2013, 2016). However, in general, girmit must be acknowledged to have been a period of collective trauma, and the word "narak," meaning "hell," comes up in literature repeatedly (Gillion, 1962; Ali, 1979, 1980).

Diasporic communities are rarely without complex relations to both their ancestral homeland and new home, and it is unsurprising that a community that feels only tentatively rooted should both identify with and reject the old country, as over-identification could be interpreted as indicating little investment in its new residence. Subramani's introduction to *The Indo-Fijian Experience* (1979), a collection he edited to mark the centenary of indentured labourers in Fiji, is exemplary of an involved, complex relation to an ancestral land. Subramani, the son of an indentured worker, begins the book by describing his imaginative links to India as having died with his father. "India remained an important emotion" for the ex-girmitiyas, he writes, because "in an environment where the Indo-Fijian was still insecure, it was a symbol of home" (Subramani, 1979: x). Subramani's decision to place this sense of insecurity in the past tense is an interesting one: while the 1987 coup was to come, the late 1970s were not without the expression of anti-Indo-Fijian sentiment. In 1975 Sakiasi Butadroka had, albeit unsuccessfully, proposed a motion in Parliament to repatriate all Indo-Fijians, and in December 1976 his party, the Fijian National Party (FNP), included this call in the party's list of commitments and aims. In the 1977 general election the Alliance party, a party ostensibly committed to harmony between iTaukei and Indo-Fijians, lost power, and the Indo-Fijian National Federation Party (NFP) won by a slim majority of seats. However, as the NFP, surprised by their victory, scrambled to organise, the Governor-General intervened, and appointed Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara, the leader of the Alliance party, as Prime Minister and leader of a minority government. The government lasted until September, when it was taken down by an NFP-led vote of no confidence, and a new election was held. By this time Butadroka was in jail for inciting violence and support for the NFP had waned among Info-Fijians, and so the Alliance party reclaimed power.

Political tensions during this period were matched with wider concerns about land, education, and social advancement. As Fijian land could not be alienated, the aspirations of the majority of Indo-Fijians were channelled through urban routes and middle-class ambitions: education, business, the civil service, law, medicine, and so on. There was a widening gap between educational success in Indo-Fijians and iTaukei students, and in 1977 it was revealed that while Indo-Fijian pupils needed to reach 261 marks to be awarded a university scholarship, iTaukei pupils received scholarships with marks of 216 (Lal, 1992: 229). If Indo-Fijian success was visible in classrooms, it was also highly noticeable on the streets. As Ahmed Ali writes in 1977, iTaueki looked around "and saw who owned

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[1] Brij V. Lal, however, argues that the injunction against sea travel applied only to the highest castes, and that kala pani operates more accurately as a metaphor for a hard journey (Lal, 2004a: 8).

and drove buses, who constructed and lived in new middle class homes in the new suburbs […]; in the streets in the towns in Fiji the shops bore names such as Patel, Bhai and Lal" (Ali, 1977: 194-195). Concerns that iTaukei were losing the country were voiced, and a "hundred years of anxieties suddenly surfaced" (V. Mishra, 1979: 1).

As such, while Indo-Fijians felt insecure in Fiji at the end of indenture, by 1979 that insecurity had not abated. It is unsurprising that Subramani's introduction to *The Indo-Fijian Experience* is marked by a need to affirm Indo-Fijian identity as a century away from India and the ability to "go home." Although the indentured workers might have had India as a symbol of belonging, for their descendants, Subramani writes, India is little more than a "vague, undefined emotion," and Indo-Fijians are tied to India only through the mediations of the culture industry: "Bombay movies, visiting cultural troupes and occasional package tours to the holy places" (Subramani, 1979: ix, xi). This is echoed in Vijay Mishra's anniversary collection, *Rama's Banishment: A Centenary Tribute to the Fiji Indians 1879-1979* (1979). For Mishra the Indo-Fijian tries to fill his emptiness and impermanence with the cultural trappings of India, but when the "momentary infatuations are over, he comes face to face with the void again, with a sense of emptiness compounded by helplessness. He must find permanence, for to die without a house is the ultimate damnation" (V. Mishra, 1979: 4). India is not and cannot be home, not even an idealised, imaginary one, and Indo-Fijians needed to find a narrative and new mythology that would tie them to Fiji. And so both Mishra, Subramani, and the Indo-Fijian writers of the period turned to indenture, as Subramani explains, "to find intelligible patterns. Already indenture has been recreated into another kind of reality – into mythology" (Subramani, 1979: xi). As Ali writes, also in 1979, "Indians interpreted *girmit* as their baptism of fire which gave them inalienable rights in Fiji" (Ali, 1979: xxx). The girmitiyas were (re)born in Fiji, and their children took their first breaths on Fiji's soil. This new mythology, for Mishra, could result in a "new voice which would capture the dying cries of the coolies on the *Syria*," as well as the living voices of a people whose home is Fiji (V. Mishra, 1979a: 142). In texts such as these girmit was formalised as the mythic origin story for Indo-Fijians, as it marks the difficult birth that gave rise to Indo-Fijian identity. "Girmit," that is, rather than "indenture." If "indenture" names a system of unfree contract labour created by colonialism and capitalism, to this "girmit" adds traumatic rupture and betrayal in expectation and meaning. The founding narrative of Indo-Fijian identity, and the haunting memory at the heart of Subramani's short stories and the analytic work of the centenary is not indenture as such, but *girmit*.[2]

Girmit and ideology

For Mishra, girmit came to represent "an entire ethos, a legend, a tyranny, and finally a history *and* an ideology" (V. Mishra, 1991: 79). He first proposed "girmit ideology" in 1977, when he argued for a "readily identifiable 'consciousness' which is specifically Fiji-Indian," and which "forms the ideological 'base' against which Indo-Fijian fiction must be evaluated" (V. Mishra, 1979b: 172).[3] Mishra saw Indo-Fijian identity as predicated on the history of a "failed millennial quest," that is, a quest that failed because the Fiji that greeted Indians on their arrival was far from their dreams of a new, promised land (V. Mishra, 1979b: 172). Regardless of the benefits that came with girmit, such as the relaxation of caste divisions and, for some, later prosperity, for Mishra the "bitterness of displacement and its consequent dehumanisation in the coolie lines" had "a deep psychological effect" (V. Mishra, 1979b: 172). As Mishra develops the concept over a series of essays and a

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[2] This should not imply that all Indo-Fijians came to Fiji in the same way; while the majority of the first generation came as girmitiyas, other smaller groups, such as Guajarati, came as traders.

[3] This pagination stems from the 1979 reprint.

number of years, girmit ideology gradually grows from a cultural consciousness predicated on an historical disappointment into a false consciousness that renders Indo-Fijians insular, embedding in them a lingering inferiority complex and obscuring the realities of contemporary Fiji (V. Mishra, 1980). By 1992 girmit ideology's blindness seemed stark, as Mishra writes that the 1987 coups had "demonstrated the pathetic inadequacy of that ideology to come to terms with historical realities" (V. Mishra, 1992: 3).

In 1979 Mishra describes Subramani as "deeply conscious of the entire *girmit* experience" and considers Subramani's work to draw on girmit "as a very real ideological construct" (V. Mishra, 1979c: 4). Given the directions in which Mishra would develop girmit ideology it is unsurprising that, in *South Pacific Literature: From Myth to Fabulation* (1985), Subramani disagrees, seeing Mishra's formulation as leading to "an over-simplistic view of Indo-Fijian writing" (Subramani, 1985: 92). It is not the importance of girmit that Subramani critiques, but Mishra's insistence that indenture rendered the girmitiyas and their descendants incapable of "com[ing] to terms with changing historical circumstances" and the complex present of Fijian life and politics (V. Mishra, 1979b, 171). Subramani retorts, with some justification, that the Indo-Fijian writer is very aware of the "great fissure in Indian psychology, [the] deep trouble in his society, which requires urgent examination," and is developing his or her writing in this direction (Subramani, 1985: 92). The disagreement, quite clearly, is not with the residual traumas of Indo-Fijian history, but the idea that Indo-Fijian literature and politics is blind to its effects. There can be little doubt that collective anxiety arises from shared trauma, and that a culture's identity, discourse, and self-image is affected by the suffering of previous generations. It is also clear that cultural narratives and rhetoric have very real impact on the way in which members of that community write, and the way that they conduct politics. Following the coups of 1987 Deryck Scarr put much weight on the inability of Indo-Fijian discourse to respond to political circumstances, arguing that their "rhetoric of democracy and equality had been mistaken for reality" (Scarr, 1988: xiii). The perceived disconnection between rhetoric and reality was a strong component of Mishra's "girmit ideology," as he too argued that it had invested the Indo-Fijian community with a "pathetic rhetoric which could not grasp the real issues at stake" (V. Mishra, 1991: 82). Yet, despite the importance of Mishra's work on girmit, I am in agreement with Stewart Firth when he writes that in trying to understand the 1987 coups, "[i]deology will not do" (Firth, 1989: 242). Mishra's use of ideology ensnares him in a logic that presumes that the illusionary relation that groups have to their reality can be peeled away to access an objective real. The anxieties associated with a history of girmit surely had a part to play in the Fiji coups, but exploring these fears in terms of cultural memory rather than ideology prevents the stark division of a world into objective reality and illusionary system of beliefs. But before we explore the mode of these memories, let us examine what is remembered. For this we turn to Sudesh Mishra's refinement of "girmit."

In "Time and *Girmit*" (2005) Sudesh Mishra notes that although "girmit" is often understood simply as a vernacularized form of "agreement," that is, the worker's agreement to the indenture contract, a more accurate understanding recognises the term as naming a visceral response to the emptiness of the arrangement made. The indentured workers who came to Fiji were misled by their contract, a deception that caused them to get on "the wrong ship, to undertake the wrong voyage, to disembark at the wrong destination" (S. Mishra, 2005: 22). The word "girmit" was not coined, but was pulled into being in order to articulate a specific experience of betrayal and nonagreement, and stems from, Mishra writes,

that extreme point when a positive intentionality—which is, after all, a species of good faith—is traumatically and perplexingly violated in the very place and time of its anticipated fruition. It names a time, a place, and an experience that bears no relation to the time, place, and experience of agreement, to the destined point of the general intentionality (S. Mishra, 2005: 24).

With girmit "a memorable subaltern category" was formed, as the girmitiyas, a people engendered by this nonagreement, agreed to something very different to what awaited them (S. Mishra, 2005: 15). When they arrived to life on the lines,

> the recruits experienced a trauma so epochal in its magnitude that it took hold of mind, body, and soul, eventually throwing up a name that belonged not only to a different order of speech but also, it appears, to an altogether different order of understanding. Not agreement nor disagreement, but *girmit*. Neither a deliberate coinage nor simply an error of tongue, but a verbal-visceral response to a predicament, to a state of extreme perplexity generated at the limit point, at the antithetical abyss of intentionality (S. Mishra, 2005: 23).

For Sudesh Mishra, rather than an ideology, girmit was an "atemporal ontology of suffering, hardship and deceit" (S. Mishra, 2006: 14). In rendering girmit a state of being in nonagreement rather than an ideology of unfulfilled expectation, we move away from a totalising false consciousness, and towards a state of existence rather more indistinct. In an earlier essay Mishra formulated girmit in terms of an asynchronous, split subject, as it involved a "spectral translocation." That is, the relocation of girmit was both a physical journey to Fiji and an imaginary journey to a land, not simply of prosperity, but of properness and propriety, and thus on the ships the Indian labourer, not yet a girmitiya, was split between a spectral self projected into a place of comfort, and a corporeal self enduring the hardship of the voyage. This transportation was aided by songs, sacred poems, and fables of India, and Mishra notes that "because of its spectrality, this act of translocation was always already a sleight of memory" (S. Mishra, 2002: 139). Which is to say that India was misremembered as they moved further away from port, and Fiji was misremembered even before arrival at its shores. For Mishra, girmit is always about "(re)memory" (S. Mishra, 2002: 144), and, as John O'Carroll writes in a critique of "girmit ideology," "the memories of migrancy are not dismissible as mere falsehood: the dream envelopes within which communities live are themselves grafted into material realities of actual lives past and present" (O'Carroll, 2002: 108-109; see too O'Carroll, 1998, 102). Reality always incorporates our imaginary versions of it, and Vijay Mishra's sense that girmit ideology primarily obscures an accessible, separate reality simplifies a complex relation.

Importantly, however, when Vijay Mishra revised his essay in 2007, 'girmit ideology' incorporated Sudesh Mishra's refinements. Vijay Mishra's understanding of girmit remained predicated on ideology, but now it was expressed through a softer rhetoric, and understood as 'a structure (of feeling) that grew out of the experience of the plantation diaspora' (V. Mishra, 2007: 39). The only way the girmitiyas could transcend the disappointments of girmit, Mishra argues, was to participate fully and with nuance in a democratising Fiji, but instead they invested in a girmit ideology, that is, they invested in their own unhappiness (V. Mishra, 2007: 23). The unhappiness of girmit could be readily mapped onto Indian epics of banishment, and so gradually girmitiyas and their descendants, with their eyes too much on old memories and new aspirations, tried to perform within the Fijian political scene as if it were an Indian narrative. In this later rendition Mishra's sense of girmitiyas' descendants' lack of self-reflexivity remains, as 'prone to political hysteria, [they] became so self-

enclosed that [their] activism became […] a parody of the anti-colonial struggle of the Indian National Congress' (V. Mishra, 2007: 26). But, rather than seeing girmit ideology as a false consciousness obscuring an objective reality, Mishra now understands it in terms of 'memory, promise and trauma (V. Mishra, 2007: 23). That is, as arising from inherited memories of indenture. Once he looks to the causes of ideology, Mishra finds memory, and in a form that we can recognise more specifically as postmemory.

Girmit and postmemory

Marianne Hirsch's works present postmemory as a means of understanding the experiences of the children of Holocaust survivors, but she has not tethered it to this trauma (Hirsch, 2001: 11), and it has been used by authors such as Nona Fernández to study the generation after Pinochet in Chile, by Natasha Alden to read literature produced by post-Second World War British authors, and by Geoffrey Maguire to reflect on post-dictatorship Argentina (Trostel, 2018; Alden, 2014; Maguire, 2017). Postmemory is particularly apt for diasporic texts, as both map a situation in which "home" becomes impossible, as it is located in a different country and a different time. As Hirsch writes, this "condition of exile from the space of identity, this diasporic experience, is a characteristic aspect of postmemory" (Hirsch, 1997: 243). And this doesn't go away: the "children of exiled survivors, although they have not themselves lived through the trauma of banishment and the destruction of home, remain always marginal or exiled, always in the diaspora" (Hirsch, 1996: 662).

In figuring girmit in terms of memory we, first of all, understand it as an affective aspect of personal and collective consciousness, and engage with it not as a relationship with fact and verifiable truths, nor with lies and fabrications, but with emotional and narrative resonance. In the introduction to "Time and *Girmit*" Sudesh Mishra presents a short vignette in which Clem Seecharan describes his grandmother's attempt to coax information about indenture from her mother, but Seecharan's great-grandmother can give neither dates nor particulars, simply a familiar account of deceitful recruiters and broken promises. "[A]ffective memory," Mishra writes, has in this instance "less to do with irrefutable statistical data and more to do with the traumatic negation of the [indentured worker's expectation]." It is effectively "beyond true/false, credible/incredible dichotomies." Thus, instead of a rich and clear account, Seecharan just gets "an intensified and oft-repeated memory," a story he has heard so often as to become exhausted by it (S. Mishra, 2005: 17). Desiring facts instead of an intimately familiar family memory, one whose legitimacy cannot be proven, Seecharan is effectively longing for knowledge outside of himself – longing for something other than postmemory.

Postmemory names the memory a person has of a past he or she didn't personally experience, a memory handed down by family members or the wider community. Specifically, postmemory is the relationship that subsequent generations have to the trauma suffered by their predecessors, a trauma passed down in stories and accounts, but with such impact as to become a memory, something as if personally experienced by the listener. Postmemory is thus the intergenerational transfer of memory, and describes descendants' inheritance of an open wound, a wound inherited by the affective internalisation of the suffering narrated by those who lived through it. These layers of mediation and the ways in which a history of ordeal is recounted are deeply important to Hirsch's concept of postmemory. Postmemory is a memory often formed through stories told to the next generation as children, and so the past takes on the conventions of narrative structures. Depending on the way in which it is told, it can operate as fairy tale, nightmare, or myth, and can be internalised when children are too young fully to understand what they are being told. Thus, the cognitive and affective

process of memory transferral is mediated by the often fragmentary, frequently unclear structures of "imaginative investment, projection and creation" (Hirsch, 2012: 5). For the listener, postmemory means that he or she is "shaped, however indirectly, by traumatic fragments of events that still defy narrative reconstruction and exceed comprehension" (Hirsch, 2012: 5). The "post" of postmemory signals this mediation, as for Hirsch it does not imply an absolute break, but a relation of reiteration and supplementation. It gestures towards the idea of citation, rewriting, layering, and denotes an "uneasy oscillation between continuity and rupture" (Hirsch, 2012: 6). Postmemory thereby names the way in which memory returns and is rewritten across generations.

In instances of postmemory the traumatic experience of family or community members becomes a formative point of identification in the self – a shaky, unclear narrative in which the self is written. This is not to say that the open wound inherited with postmemory is the same as the wound inflicted on the earlier generation. Memory and postmemory are not the same thing, and despite inherited memories the second generation has not directly experienced the same trauma as their parents or their community. Nonetheless, it is on the shaky grounds of mediated, transgenerational memory as continuity and rupture that subsequent generations often found a sense of self. Of course, as Hirsch notes, to "grow up with overwhelming inherited memories, to be dominated by narratives that preceded one's birth or one's consciousness, is to risk having one's own life stories displaced, even evacuated, by our ancestors" (Hirsch, 2012: 5). The affective relations with the traumatic fragments of lives lived by others – and Hirsch notes how often small fragments are repeated as broken refrains – make a living connection that is itself frequently and powerfully mediated by literature and photography. She writes that

> [s]econd-generation fiction, art, memoir and testimony are shaped by the attempt to represent the long-term effects of living in close proximity to the pain, depression, and dissociation of persons who have witnessed and survived massive historical trauma. […] Loss of family, home, of a sense of belonging and safety in the world "bleed" from one generation to the next (Hirsch, 2012: 34).

In an earlier paper Hirsch recounts her personal experience of postmemory as one of fullness, as she felt so full of the reconstructions of her parents' memories that recollections of her own life seemed comparatively vague and ill-defined (Hirsch, 1996: 664). In Subramani's stories characters' heads are crowded, but often what they are filled with are not clear recollections but confused, repressed memories. Hirsch acknowledges this trend, and notes that postmemory can be an experience of a "mixture of ambivalence and desire, mourning and recollection, presence and absence" (Hirsch, 1196: 659). She writes of Henry Raczymow's depiction of postmemory as a filling emptiness, or images shot through which holes (Hirsch, 1996: 663). Raczymow notes in his own works a void, which he deems to be created by "empty memory," that is, memory full of absences and caesuras as records were lost, genealogies interrupted, stories forgotten, places erased (Raczymow, 1994: 104). In a similar way girmit does not provide a clear and accessible history, but a confused mythology of inherited memories. Brij Lal's short story "Marriage" illustrates a typical position: "[Sukhraji's father] had been a train driver for the CSR on the Tua Tua line, but that was all that was known about him. How he became a train driver, when he came to Fiji, and from which part of India, were all lost, like so much of the history of his people" (Lal, 2004b: 211). As Vijay Mishra puts it, the end of indenture saw "a people illiterate in origin" (V. Mishra, 2004: 132). If many of the girmitiyas were illiterate in the conventional sense, the next generations, with increasing abilities to read and write, were frequently unclear about their origins in indentured Fiji and pre-indenture India. Memories were painful, and passed down indirectly, at times through strained omission, at times with dark shame:

"People recalled *girmit* – when they recalled the past at all – as a period of brutality and violence and debauchery, of poverty and degradation, of moral disintegration and cultural and social chaos, altogether a dark period best left unexplored to the obscure pages of a fading history" (Lal, 2004a: 4). For many, then, girmit is present as a blank in the background, or a dark part of family history, indistinct but insistent.

This is the mode of recollection, experience, and identity we find in Subramani's work. "Tell Me Where the Train Goes," published in the *Mana Annual* of 1977, is set during indenture, and the confusion, betrayal, and nonagreement of girmit resounds in the haze enveloping the story. References to violent deaths and images of barricaded rooms float to the surface and disappear. Names and secrets are mentioned briefly and fade away. Girmit, even while it is happening, is too traumatic to fully grasp, and after it ends, its memory pervades, but indistinctly. "Sautu," published in the *Mana Annual* of 1974, is set after indenture's end, and the ex-girmitiyas talk to each other "of indenture, but the period was no longer clearly defined; it seemed like a labyrinth full of shadows and memories" (Subramani, 2017: 4). Girmit, and its memory, are a dim maze of non-agreement, and so the postmemory that the next generation receives is one of confused, semi-repressed memories. The dimness of the narratives passed down are complicated by the fact that they were associated with shame; as Lal notes in 1979, "many a derogatory myth has been built around the origins and character of Fiji's *girmitiyas*, and these myths have been unfairly and cruelly used […]. Strangely, some Indians themselves believe in the myths" (Lal, 1979: 26).

Postmemory can be rather like a haunting, the presence of something indistinct but distressing. This is what Maria Rice Bellamy refers to as "trauma's ghost," as postmemory's "intersubjective communion suggests a space inhabited by narrators and auditors, survivors and descendants, in which temporal and subjective boundaries are blurred, allowing the memories of one to haunt and infect the other" (Bellamy, 2016: 1, 4). Vijay Mishra, in an autobiographical text on the place of his schooling, Dilkusha, Fiji, writes that "Dilkusha requires no history; its people were saturated with historical knowledge." But this saturation does not mean clarity, and he continues: "[a] father's memory is always so haunting; talking about him and, indeed, internalising his knowledge as one's own (he alone knew all the secrets of Dilkusha) unsettles the mind, plays tricks with memory" (V. Mishra, 2004: 120). This is a perfect evocation of the confusions of memory, postmemory, and history, aptly summarised as a haunting. But while memory is confused, Mishra is adamant that it must be retained: it is, he writes, "absolutely necessary for diasporas to […] keep their own spectres of slavery and coolie life […] [and] a lived memory of the passage […] firmly in place. The reflection demands that we constantly revisit our trauma as part of our ethical relationship to the ghosts of the diaspora" (V. Mishra, 2001: 28). At the heart of the diasporic imaginary, for Mishra, is the impossible mourning of the moments of trauma, with the core trauma not the abstract loss of the homeland, but girmit's "space of the ships, the passage and the barracks" (V. Mishra, 2001: 29, 34).

Postmemory and *Wild flowers*

Haunted by confused memories of broken promises and betrayal, Subramani's characters are always already betrayed, and their sense of the inevitability of this betrayal means that it is often self-enacted. Chetram, of the story "Marigolds," written in 1979 for Subramani's collection *The Indo-Fijian Experience*, is not, by common social measures, an unsuccessful man. He is the deputy head of his school, is married and appears to own his own house, and yet his very body has absorbed a deep sense of the impossibility of promise or security. His world is an ugly one in which even the young

and the beautiful have bodies that are hard or ill. To be alive, for Chetram, is to be broken down and trapped in a frame that ages, falters, and embarrasses. His very form, an embodiment of the nonagreement of girmit, continually betrays him, and every detail of his life confirms "the historical bias of [his] existence" (Subramani, 2017: 65). Manu, the child of indenture in "Tell Me Where the Train Goes" feels the pain of lacking support (Subramani, 2017: 18); many years later, Chetram feels precisely the same hurt: "[a] slow anguish grips my heart, the anguish of being unsupported" (Subramani, 2017: 67). Overcome with the urge to rebel against the mild, inoffensive, harmless image he has long assumed for everyone's benefit, Chetram goes to Suva, gets horribly drunk, visits a prostitute, and on his return home viciously beats his wife. The story ends with the lines: "[a]fter the futile gesture, my pathetic freedom, what was I supposed to do? […] Everything, history and customs, has prepared me for this impasse. There is no alternative life: a hundred years of history on these islands has resulted in wilderness and distress" (Subramani, 2017: 67).

Much work has been done on the return of the repressed, and the ways in which those who have suffered traumatic events tend to repeat them. Chetram repeats the postmemories of trauma – the repressed that continually returns in him is the postmemory of girmit. His entire being is an enactment of nonagreement, of discord, of betrayal. So broken does Chetram appear that the fear in which his wife Dharma lives seems, at first, comically preposterous. There is an absurdism to the scene when, needing salt for the cucumbers he is cutting, Chetram walks into the kitchen holding a knife. His wife screams, and spends the rest of the day hiding in a hedge, not returning until dark, when she locks herself in the bedroom. Yet their lives, Chetram admits, have "slipped beyond the margin of security" (Subramani, 2017: 62), and Dharma's genuine fear – a fear that leads her to spend hours in the yard among the mosquitoes and the flies – is realised as an appropriate reaction to his capability for violence when after his drinking session he strikes, kicks, and semi-strangles her. Their middle-class life is overshadowed by the brutality of life on the lines, as if scenes of the past and the present are being played on the same reel.

Hirsch has written that

> postmemory seeks connection. It creates where it cannot recover. It imagines where it cannot recall. It mourns a loss that cannot be repaired. And, because even the act of mourning is secondary, the lost object can never be incorporated and mourning can never be overcome. […] In perpetual exile, this/my generation's practice of mourning is as determinative as it is interminable and ultimately impossible (Hirsch, 1996: 664).

An impossible mourning brings us into the realm of melancholia, which Freud understands as a pathological, narcissistic identification with a lost object. If, in the case of mourning, the loss is recognised as final – hence we mourn the recognised death of a loved one – in melancholia the melancholic does not know with certainty what he or she has lost, and so the melancholic replaces the finite process of mourning with a prolonging of involved, interiorised dejection, and a protraction of the sense of uncertain, ambivalent loss. The ambivalence with which the object and the loss itself is regarded is directed internally, and the ego becomes a site of confused feelings of partially registered loss and anger. Postmemory is a deeply melancholic experience – a pained, impossible mourning caused by rewriting in the present the traumas of the previous generation.

The alienation, masochism, sadism, and violence within "Marigolds" is a clear performance of melancholic loss and lack. The trauma of girmit's nonagreement, the bad faith in which workers were enticed, created a situation of confused, unclear mourning for abstractions such as trust. This grieving is remembered by the next generation, as is the sense of trauma, but as they are without the

prior experience of innocence, they are trapped in indefinite mourning for that which they never possessed. Not only is the distress of the lines hazily remembered, the melancholic relation with that trauma becomes internalised, and the self is blamed. Chetram confusedly grieves for the experience of belonging he never had, and laments the fact that his "whole existence [is] in bad faith" (Subramani, 2017: 65). He possesses a house, but has no home, possesses family members but no family, possesses employment but no career, possesses acquaintances but no friends. He is aware of these losses, and conscious of those things he never possessed, and exists in melancholic relation with them. The longstanding historical trauma of being othered imbues his body with the smell of death, and causes the imminent violence permanently feared by his wife. He exhibits a constant disassociation from the time and place in which he dwells; a present he cannot engage with, a past he cannot properly mourn. Instead he dwells in a liminal space in between, and like the marigolds in the jar he keeps for the garden he will never plant, he is not quite dead and hardly alive, just existing with an inexpressible, directionless sense of loss. When he dreams brief moments of pleasure come crashing down, as children's voices lead him to a crumbling altar surrounded by goat dung, where he first endures reproaches and blame, and then loses all sense of self (Subramani, 2017: 64). The memories of the nonagreement of girmit have created a world out of synchronisation, a place of disjunction and uncertainty.

Cathy Caruth has written that "history, like trauma, is never simply one's own, […] history is precisely the way we are implicated in each other's traumas" (Caruth, 1996: 24). This is the case for memory too – memory and postmemory map out the ways in which we are implicated in each other's entwined histories. In "Across the Fence," published in Subramani's *The Indo-Fijian Experience*, Pio Manoa writes that "the fate of one race or ethnic group is inextricably bound up with that of the other," and asks what iTaukei and Indo-Fijian can do collectively "to exorcise the ghost that gnaws at the heartstrings of this nation even in the noonday sun" (Manoa, 1979: 189, 191). All the protagonists of Subramani's stories exhibit alienation, dispossession, and a troubled relationship with the present, and all are deeply traumatised by their positions within the entwined histories of Fiji. Mosese, the iTaukei protagonist of "No Man's Land," first published in the *Mana* Annual in 1977, is trapped by the history of colonialism and the loss of land; Chetram and the other Indo-Fijians are ensnared by the colonial history of indenture and the difficulty of being at home in the land; and Elaine, the Fiji-born white woman of "Dear Primitive," first published in *Kunapipi* in 1979, is cornered by a colonial history that makes her privileged within a land that simultaneously rejects her. Each is so consumed by the weight of this past that each slips in and out of consciousness, finding it almost impossible to retain a sense of self that keeps pace with the present. Mosese loses himself in Suva's multicultural crowd as his "head began to spin. Everything slipped into fragments of textures, odours, and sounds without colour or warmth like a speeding mis-focused strip of film" (Subramani, 2017: 52). For Chetram Suva becomes an uncanny extension of his own confusion: "I cannot distinguish, having become a prey to so many delusions, how much of what happened that night was real. […] I recall feeling that all the unlit streets and alleys, vacant rooms and parks were so many empty and unilluminated realms of my existence" (Subramani, 2017: 66). Elaine, a deeply liminal character whose temporal and sensual confusions hint that she herself is a long-dead presence, finds the elements conspiring against her to empty her of meaning, leaving her standing outside the Suva playhouse one night, "totally oblivious of who she was and why she was there" (Subramani, 2017: 76). What we can term postmemory, for these characters, is the turning of the self into a placeholder for the past, and for the narratives of displacement and dispossession communities tell themselves. The history of colonialism and girmit affects the characters and their communities differently, but for Subramani their traumas are inseparable.

The postmemories of trauma pervade Subramani's texts, rendering Fiji a place in which consciousness is not false, but split, overdetermined, and in permanent discord. For the majority of his protagonists this terrible disquiet stems from the inherited memories of girmit; for others from the distress of a colonial system that numbers indenture as one of its sins. Throughout, haunting the texts of the centenary of indenture, percolating through Indo-Fijian writing, is the family ghost of life on the lines.

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