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14 Spectrums of Indo-Fijian Women's Identity: Literary representations of emancipation in the new millennium

ABSTRACT
For a century, the representation of Indo-Fijian women came from men, but the rise of Pacific literature in the 1970s opened the space for self-representation, and the increased possibilities for self-publication have allowed several lengthier texts by Indo-Fijian women authors in the new millennium. The development of women's movements in the Pacific have made it possible for women writers to portray female characters with a dynamic identity, pushing against patriarchal stereotypes and working towards an Indo-Fijian feminine aesthetics. This chapter will demonstrate how, through the act of writing, Indo-Fijian women authors, namely Satya Colpani and Vindu Maharaj, reflect upon social values that have led to gender discrimination and the overall oppression of women.

Introduction

Throughout history and across cultures, patriarchy has relegated women to what the influential French feminist Simone de Beauvoir has termed the position of the *other*. In her highly acclaimed book *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir discusses how a man has been able to transcend and control his environment, always furthering his physical and intellectual domain, while a woman has remained enslaved within her maternal and reproductive functions (de Beauvoir 1952). The early European literary canon mirrored social conventions that used the difference between women and men as the tool of social control to keep women as oppressed subordinates.

Indo-Fijian feminists and writers, such as Margaret Mishra, Shireen Lateef, Satya Colpani and Vindu Maharaj, have attempted to break away

from these societal norms and have more broadly sought to effect social change through their work. In doing so, however, they have had to endure a certain struggle. One important challenge facing these writers and their readers is that of unlearning patriarchal conditioning. The rise of Pacific literature in the 1970s opened the space for self-representation, and in the new millennium new possibilities for self-publication have enabled longer texts by Indo-Fijian women authors to appear. This chapter examines, in particular, the case of two such emerging Indo-Fijian female novelists, Satya Colpani and Vindu Maharaj.

In spite of the fact that both these women are Fiji-born, they have spent most of their lives in Australia. Colpani migrated as a young girl with her family in the late 1950s, while Maharaj, born in the early 1960s, moved there from Fiji in the mid-1980s and it was in Australia that the two women took up writing. Colpani's first work, *Beyond the Black Waters: A Memoir of Sri Sathi Narain* (1996), is a biography of her father. It is her second book, and her first published work of fiction, *Veiled Honour* (which emerged from her Master's degree in Creative Writing at Macquarie University, Sydney), that we will focus on in this study. As for Vindu Maharaj, we will examine her first novel, *Cultural Prison: A Daughter's Worth*, which she self-published in 2017.

While we might consider the fact that both women moved to Australia as a matter of coincidence, we might also wonder whether they would have had the freedom and the opportunity to focus on their writing had they remained in Fiji, given the patriarchal Indo-Fijian home culture. Conversely, it is significant that even though they have spent the greater part of their lives in Australia, the work of these writers is set in Fiji, in an Indo-Fijian cultural context, in which families, particularly daughters, continue to grapple with issues of essentialist confinement and patriarchal power.

Satya Colpani's *Veiled Honour* (2001) and Vindu Maharaj's *Cultural Prison* (2017) present a wide range of potential identities for the Indo-Fijian female characters. They show that, while male writers may continue to predominate in contemporary Indo-Fijian writing, Indo-Fijian women in the twenty-first century are working to construct their own narratives and visions of possible Indo-Fijian female identity. Focusing on works by these writers in which female characters take control of their own lives enables us to identify alternate models of gender relations and individual autonomy

in the evolving context of Indo-Fijian society. To this end, following Gupta (1993: 180), our chapter takes as its starting point that 'women experience the world differently from men' and hence that women writers 'write out of their different perspective'.

Our study is concerned with issues related to women's status, equity and social justice. Literature is certainly not produced within a vacuum. Instead, it is the product of a given period and place with their particular circumstances. With this in mind, we will adopt a content analysis approach, which aims to 'examine taken for fated assumptions' that underlie representations in creative fiction (Leavy 2007: 224). Our purpose is to adapt this approach to contemporary writing in order to gauge the gendered ideas and social realities of Indo-Fijian society from the perspective of two female authors.

The discussion will unfold in three parts. Firstly, we will introduce it by giving a perspective on Indo-Fijian literature within the context of Pacific literature. Then examples of some obvious gender stereotyping that exist in Indo-Fijian society will be presented. Lastly, there we will conduct a qualitative content analysis to determine how gendered norms, especially in relation to women, are constructed and reinforced within Indo-Fijian society.

Indo-Fijian literature in the context of the Pacific

Indo-Fijian literature falls under the broader category of Pacific literature. Pacific literature is a relatively new component of world literature. This body of literature consists of a diverse cross-section of experiences arising from the demographic make-up of the Pacific region. Firstly, there is the experience of the colonized indigenous Pacific Islanders, and then there is the experience of the *girmitya*,[1] who were colonized and coerced, and finally, there is the experience of the settler colonizers such as the British, Australians and New Zealanders.

1 The word *girmitya* is a Fiji Hindi word that has been coined from the English word 'Agreement'. It is a colloquial reference to the indentured labourers and their descendants in Fiji.

As proposed by one of the pioneer Pacific writers, Subramani, not only did Pacific literature incorporate the imperial language, but in its early stage it also internalized the imperial culture's 'critical canons and discursive practices' (2001: 150). The materials, events and experiences that Pacific authors write about come from the backdrop of colonialism, independence, 'smallness, isolation, limited resources, dependency and the fragmented nature of their cultures'. As articulated by Subramani, in such a situation the predominance of the imperial culture could have also acted as a threat to Pacific cultures if it had succeeded in making the Pacific writer feel overly comfortable in its 'Eurocentric discourses' (2001: 154).

The works of Pacific writers reflect a distinctly Oceanian ethos. The spread of Western education, which followed colonialism, equipped Pacific Islanders colonized by Britain or its Dominions with the medium of the English language to write about their concerns. Additionally, Pacific literature grew significantly with the opening of the first two universities in the South Pacific island region, the University of Papua New Guinea in 1965 and the University of the South Pacific in 1968.

The 1970s is often seen as the period in which 'Pacific literature was born' (Subramani 2001: 161), even if, before this period, there had been some Pacific writing, particularly in Papua New Guinea, and a rich tradition of oral literature, in the form of songs, myths and legends. Indeed, according to Subramani, the 'task' of the new generation of Pacific writers 'was to unravel and discover myths and metaphors that would reflect the true essence of their culture and society' (ibid.). In his view these writers were not just writing for pleasure but also had a sense of responsibility to document, restore and explain first-hand the essence and vibrancy of their unwritten culture and life.

Indo-Fijian literature, mostly in English, also emerged in the 1970s. Subramani states that a prominent feature that distinguishes this writing from other regional works in the South Pacific is that it had less obvious links with the indigenous Pacific oral literature, even if we should remember that the culture of Indo-Fijian indentured labourers had, like that of their Pacific Islander counterparts, also had their own collection of myths, stories and songs.

The indenture period in Fiji lasted from 1879 to 1920, during which time approximately 68,480 Indian labourers (or *girmitiyas*) were brought to Fiji on exploitative contracts called 'indentures'. According to one Fijian historian, the quota system of recruiting forty women to every hundred men significantly worsened the plight of women. This quota system led to its own set of sexual, moral and physical violence in which women were the common victims. They were subjected to squalid living conditions, domestic violence, lack of privacy, rape and sexual assault by overseers and other labourers, long hours of work on the plantations, and wage cuts for low attendance during sickness and pregnancy (Vijay Mishra 2007: 23). For the Indian women labourers, the conditions of indenture were doubly hard.

Paradoxically, however, a measure of economic independence provided by indenture may have afforded a certain advantage to the indentured women. This advantage, compounded by the breakdown of the traditional patriarchal family structure, gave women some degree of autonomy over their personal relations with men. Indian men in general saw women's assumed promiscuity as a justification for placing stringent control over women's sexuality, behaviour and physical space. Male writers, contemporary to the period, have hardly acknowledged this small but significant control that women were able to acquire over their personal lives. Instead, what was recorded is what Shireen Lateef, an Indo-Fijian feminist, has termed a perceived 'moral decay and women's disregard for the sanctity of marriage' (Lateef 1987: 5).

Vijay Mishra, an Indo-Fijian historian, has proposed that the concern of Indo-Fijian writers has traditionally been to show 'the nature of the spirit of the girmit man' (1979: 173). The word *girmit*, coined from the English word *agreement*, has been a common colloquial term used by indentured labourers/Indo-Fijians to describe the indenture period. According to Mishra, the writers' portrayal of the 'girmit man' is inclusive of the dynamic influence that the whole experience of indenture has had on the Indians in Fiji. Thereby the indenture experience became a strong ideological base in the works of Indo-Fijian writers. However, while Mishra's observation may be true for certain works, it cannot be used to generalize the entire collection of Indo-Fijian literature.

The girmit consciousness and the related fictional directives are not in every case applicable to today's Indo-Fijian society. According to another Indo-Fijian writer, Raymond Pillai, 'a major segment of Fiji fiction necessarily addresses itself to the exploration of the local Indian ethos' (1979: 3). He tries to give an overview of the general motifs that Indo-Fijian writers have portrayed through their work. For Pillai, Indo-Fijian writers have not just been limited to 'cross-grained invective hurled at colonial oppressors or self-serving tracts aimed at vindicating the immigrant cause' (ibid.). He suggests that Indo-Fijian literature contains a wider range of themes apart from indenture.

While the corpus of Indo-Fijian literature is relatively small, the major trends of more established literatures of the global 'North' are visible in it, in particular themes such as patriarchal dominance and the issues related to women's representation. The Indo-Fijian society reflected in literary works is largely patriarchal. Women writers' output is slight in comparison to that of their male counterparts. Nonetheless, the female authors considered in this study are writing back against the male representation of Indo-Fijian women. When examined from a feminist perspective, the male writers' works reflect dominant social values, while the woman writer reflects *upon* those values. In particular, women writers focus on the harm the patriarchal social values cause to women. With the act of writing, women writers encourage their readers to think about those social values that lead to gender discrimination and the overall oppression of women.

Gender Stereotyping in Indo-Fijian Society

This section looks at the portrayal of gendered roles in Satya Colpani's *Veiled Honour* and Vindu Maharaj's *Cultural Prison*. Feminist critics have been of the common view that human society is most certainly gendered, bestowing specific advantages to men at the expense of further suppressing women. A number of societal and cultural norms are in place

to ensure that from the time a girl is born, she is conditioned to believe that she is inferior to a boy. She grows up believing that there would be certain opportunities denied to her just because she was a girl. Both the novels discussed are women-centric, with female protagonists. A qualitative context analysis enables us to identify three mains forms of gender stereotyping reflected in Indo-Fijian society.

The first of these sees marriage as the most important and necessary requirement in a girl's life. Both stories start from the point of marriage and focus on how their respective protagonists deal with their various responsibilities and roles post-marriage. More precisely, Colpani's *Veiled Honour* is the story of how the main character, Mala, is forced into an arranged marriage. Mala finds herself engulfed in her roles of a dutiful daughter, wife, daughter-in-law and mother. While Mala had the desire for further education and a possible career, she had neither the means nor the opportunity to realize her dream. Similarly, Maharaj's *Cultural Prison* is a tale of how two women are entrenched in their roles after marriage. The novel is about Saras and Priya, who willingly accept their arranged marriages. Saras loses herself in the doom of domestic violence and eventually loses her life. Her death sees her husband quickly getting married a second time. And this time it is Priya who enters the same turmoil and misery that Saras had suffered through.

Not allowing equal opportunities to girls is the second form of stereotyping seen in both the novels. For instance, as Mala's mother states in *Veiled Honour*, 'you don't need Senior Cambridge to be a wife and a mother' (Colpani 2001: 7). The novel attests to the fear that allowing the girls opportunities like higher education would 'get ideas into their heads, which go completely against our traditional beliefs and customs' (ibid.: 16). As a result, girls such as Mala often learnt to content themselves within such disparity: 'her fate is sealed, and she's powerless against her parents' decisions. She has no choice; she has no voice. She belongs to her parents. They decide whom she marries, and after marriage she becomes her husband's property' (ibid.: 8). A similar biased attitude is reflected in *Cultural Prison*. 'You don't need to go to college to learn how to wash dishes. Once you are married, your in-laws will not care about your certificates' (Maharaj

2017: 174). These comments stereotype Indo-Fijian parents' initial reluctance to get their daughters educated, especially when their ultimate fate was to be someone's housewife.

The final form of stereotyping is the culture of normalizing domestic violence. As pointed out by Savita Goel (1999: 169), women have 'conditioned themselves to silence their feelings, diminish their needs, restrict their freedom and have firm conviction in the values of self-sacrifice and self-effacement'. In the domestic violence scenarios depicted in the two novels, women rarely confront their husbands or seek outside help. They see violence as being part of their marriage. Hence, they try to compromise and adapt in ways as to not incite their tormentors any further. For example, Saras wonders after yet another episode of physical abuse: ' "What could I have done differently to avoid this beating?" ' (Maharaj 2017: 63) Similarly, in *Veiled Honour*, Mala's advice to her friend who is a victim of constant domestic violence is that: 'You shouldn't have made him angry Joti, you know what he is like. Now look at you' (Colpani 2001: 96). Such attitudes reflect the conditioning that girls and women have gone through in the process of internalizing domestic violence as a part of married life.

Instead of being concerned about the pain and suffering inflicted through domestic violence, the characters, including the victims themselves, are quick to dismiss them as ordinary and normal. The family members and the perpetrators continue with their normal routine, as if nothing had happened. The victims, on the other hand, learn how to cover up any bruises and cuts as well as learn how to lie convincingly to any outsider who may become curious. For instance, Saras knows how to apply 'some make-up to her swollen and bruised face to hide some of the damage' (Colpani 2001: 60). Both Colpani and Maharaj are trying to depict the irony of the situation in which the male perpetrator remains unaffected while the female victim tries her best to hide her bruises. The perpetrator is shown to absolve himself of any guilt by blaming the victim. As shown in the husband's thoughts in *Cultural Prison*, 'I wish she wouldn't make me do this to her [...] I could have killed her' (ibid.: 91). The practice of victim-blaming is very common, and, as the story shows, it is used by the perpetrators to absolve themselves of all guilt.

Construction of gender norms

This section aims to identify the ways in which gender norms are constructed and maintained within Indo-Fijian society. Through a qualitative content analysis, the four main ways to ensure women's subordination are identified.

The first way concerns the fear of alienation from all forms of support. As observed earlier, in both the novels the female protagonists lacked the willingness to protest against their abuse due to the fear that they would be alone in their fight. Not surprisingly, the narration also included those women who were of the view that it was 'better to put up with a husband who beats you from time to time than to be without one' (Colpani 2001: 21). In spite of the abusive conditions these women were subjected to, remaining in marriage was the only way they felt that they could have financial and social security. The society depicted in the two stories is not receptive to the idea of a woman's independence or her ability to survive on her own. This attitude is orchestrated by the belief that a woman has 'no status on her own' (Maharaj 2017: 40). The women were financially dependent on their husbands, which meant that opting out of even an abusive marriage seemed like a path to an insecure future for her and her children.

The second element is the prominence given to the institution of marriage. The fact that in both novels the plot begins from the point of marriage symbolizes the importance that the ceremony holds for the Indian society in Fiji. In *Veiled Honour*, Mala is seen reminding her rebellious sister that, 'You're not properly a woman unless you're married, a wife' (Colpani 2001: 44). Many times, as shown in *Cultural Prison*, girls are just as eager to get married. Saras, for instance, willingly gives up her city lifestyle and the identity that she had created for herself, once her marriage is arranged.

In both the stories, the marriages have been arranged and the criteria used by the girls' parents rested primarily on the boys' financial success and their economic viability in ensuring a comfortable status for his wife and family: 'he is well educated and has a great paying job. What more could we ask for? We are truly blessed' (Maharaj 2017: 20). On a similar note, in *Veiled Honour*, even without seeing the boy, Mala's mother agrees to the

marriage proposal simply because her daughter would be 'marrying into a well-to-do family, and be well provided for' (Colpani 2001: 7).

The third means of generating gender norms is through literature itself. And this can be seen in the two novels when the females are able to empathize with the characters or situations that are depicted in movies and other books. From the movies that she saw, Mala could identify with a number of themes such as: 'male domination, female subordination, a dutiful and devoted wife – longsuffering, obedient, passive; the stereotypical images of a cruel mother-in-law and the oppressed daughter-in-law; the conflict and relationship between the women of the same household' (Colpani 2001: 29). Seeing such themes depicted on screen play a role in helping women to realize those common ways, in which not only her but other women were being suppressed.

Literature also works to help women identify with other women. Colpani is able to juxtapose women in two different scenarios. Mala may be too timid to oppose Raj; however, there are women who are able to do so and live happy lives. Similarly, in *Cultural Prison*: 'Priya remembered reading a novel about a battered wife and realised that she had also become one of them' (Maharaj 2017: 238). The authors in these texts stage characters perceiving other media images of female suffering. Such staging of other media can be seen as a self-reflexive or a self-referential indication that the authors are also presenting their own texts as models to help women in real life. Novels such as these also open the potential of examining those societal practices that are still holding women back in subordinate positions.

The fourth and final means of maintaining control over women is through the stereotypical hard-hearted mother-in-law character. The two female authors have been able to reflect on the contempt that women hold for each other, especially in the relationship dynamics of the mother-in-law versus her daughter-in-law. In *Cultural Prison*, Laxmi, as the matriarch, rules her household with a heavy hand. She even resorts to beating her daughter-in-law when things are not to her expectation. Additionally, she is quick to incite her son to beat his wife as often as possible. In spite of having been a victim of domestic violence, Laxmi has turned into a perpetrator herself. Maharaj portrays Laxmi as a manipulative mother who is able

to emotionally blackmail her son into siding with her and punishing her daughter-in-law: 'She should have protected her daughter-in-law and not exposed her to the same sort of treatment. How could she have condoned her son into doing the same to his wife? At what point does a victim become a perpetrator?' (Maharaj 2017: 91). Quite clearly, Laxmi had internalized the culture of domestic violence. Far from the passive and submissive stereotype, she is portrayed as a woman who was able to instigate violence in her household just to maintain her own dominance.

The themes of marriage, gender stereotyping and domestic violence intertwine in the works by female writers. These themes bear a significant weight when it comes to the formation of Indo-Fijian women's identity. An Indo-Fijian woman's depiction is of someone reared to be submissive and content in her subordinate status. She is portrayed as passive and often as a victim, whether of her own family or of her husband and in-laws. However, there are certain additional elements that are seen in the works of the two female novelists. These elements help to create a wider spectrum in the characterization of Indo-Fijian females.

Both these novels contain a female character, who, in spite of going against the stereotypical role of the female protagonist, is highly successful and much respected and admired. On the other hand, the main character suffers abuse and dejection despite conforming to the stereotypical feminine role of 'Angel in the House'. Such a portrayal is in direct contrast to how male writers generally portray their 'Angel in the House'. In the patriarchal literary tradition, a woman who obliges and fits into her predetermined role is much celebrated. She is further admired if she is able to persevere through the hardships and abuses inflicted upon her by her husband and society in general. Her suffering is celebrated as her salvation – earning her much respect by everyone.

Encouragingly, both Colpani and Maharaj are able to show through their characterization of the alternative female characters that just because a female does not fit into her predetermined role, it does not turn her into a villainous character deserving punishment and ridicule. In fact, such women can also be celebrated for remaining steadfast to their desires and aspirations. Mala's sister, Savita, is shown to become the first Indo-Fijian female doctor in Fiji.

Savita not only brings honour to her family, but also becomes an aspiration for other young girls such as Mala's daughter Veena, who is hopeful of making something more meaningful of her life. In addition, Savita is more independent and is able to free herself from the obligatory clutches of arranged marriage: 'I don't believe in arranged marriages in which I have no control over my own life, and am my husband's footstool?' (Colpani 2001: 141). Savita is a perfect example of a woman who has become empowered through her education as well as through her steadfastness.

Similar alternative characters are presented in *Cultural Prison*. They are Shakuntala and Veena, who, unlike their two sisters-in-law, are able to realize that life could be about other things apart from marriage. Both these girls had witnessed the manner in which their brother and mother had ill-treated Saras and Priya. Hence, they resist the idea of an arranged marriage. Shakuntala's protests go unheard, and she is forced into marrying, since her parents are completely unwilling to support her education. It is through a stroke of luck that she finds herself in a very understanding and loving household after marriage, and her husband and in-laws are supportive of her wish to become a teacher. They give her the opportunity to complete her education in spite of being a married woman. Maharaj's portrayal of such a liberated husband and in-laws foreshadows much promise, showing that more receptive and liberal families can offer a way out of the domination of orthodox patriarchal values.

Conclusion

Our analysis shows that the works of writers like Satya Colpani and Vindu Maharaj are making a contribution to the emancipation of Indo-Fijian women through their depiction of alternative images of the place of women in this society. This contrasts with the traditional representation of women in literature, which is from a patriarchal biased perspective. As we have seen, the women writers in this study are challenging the beliefs established in patriarchal writings. The works discussed also

show how gender disparity exists and affects people in the Indo-Fijian society. The predominant notion of girls as a commodity has acted in stifling females' desires as well as in making them susceptible to exploitation by others. For parents, daughters become the commodity to be guarded and kept pure and unblemished from outside influence. This conception involved having restrictions imposed on women against education, further curtailing their possibility for fulfilment. For the male-dominated community, a woman was a commodity that he acquired through marriage, which in turn meant having the liberty to treat or ill-treat her as he pleased.

These female novelists have also tried to depict why society in general has accepted the marginalization and subordination of women. Their stories portray how, from an early age, a male child is conditioned to believe that he is superior to the girls. This happens because through everyday simple things the male child is allowed prerogatives that are denied to the girls. Both stories show how girls are told and expected to take greater precautions in doing anything or how they are denied opportunities simply because they are not boys. The novels have further portrayed the significant role of education in enabling women to prove themselves in a society that is otherwise eager to doom them to passivity. In spite of their characters' varied experiences, both are in agreement that education certainly empowers the female characters in taking better decisions or having more options in life.

The two women writers have also elaborated significantly on the pain and trauma associated with domestic violence. The victim's pain, her gashes, bruises and cuts, are all described with detail. Through their action of writing about the trauma that victims go through, writers such as Maharaj and Colpani raise awareness of domestic violence. Most importantly, the female writers have tried to advocate through their work that women are in danger of remaining vulnerable if they are unwilling to break away from their timid and submissive roles. Rather than conditioning themselves and other women into self-effacement, they need to support each other towards emancipation. At the same time, the writers have also emphasized the importance of educational pursuits and economic autonomy in being able to make the much-needed stand for themselves.

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