



Language and identity

A short review of the book, *Subaltern Narratives in Fiji Hindi Literature* by Vijay Mishra, published by Anthem Press, London, 2024.

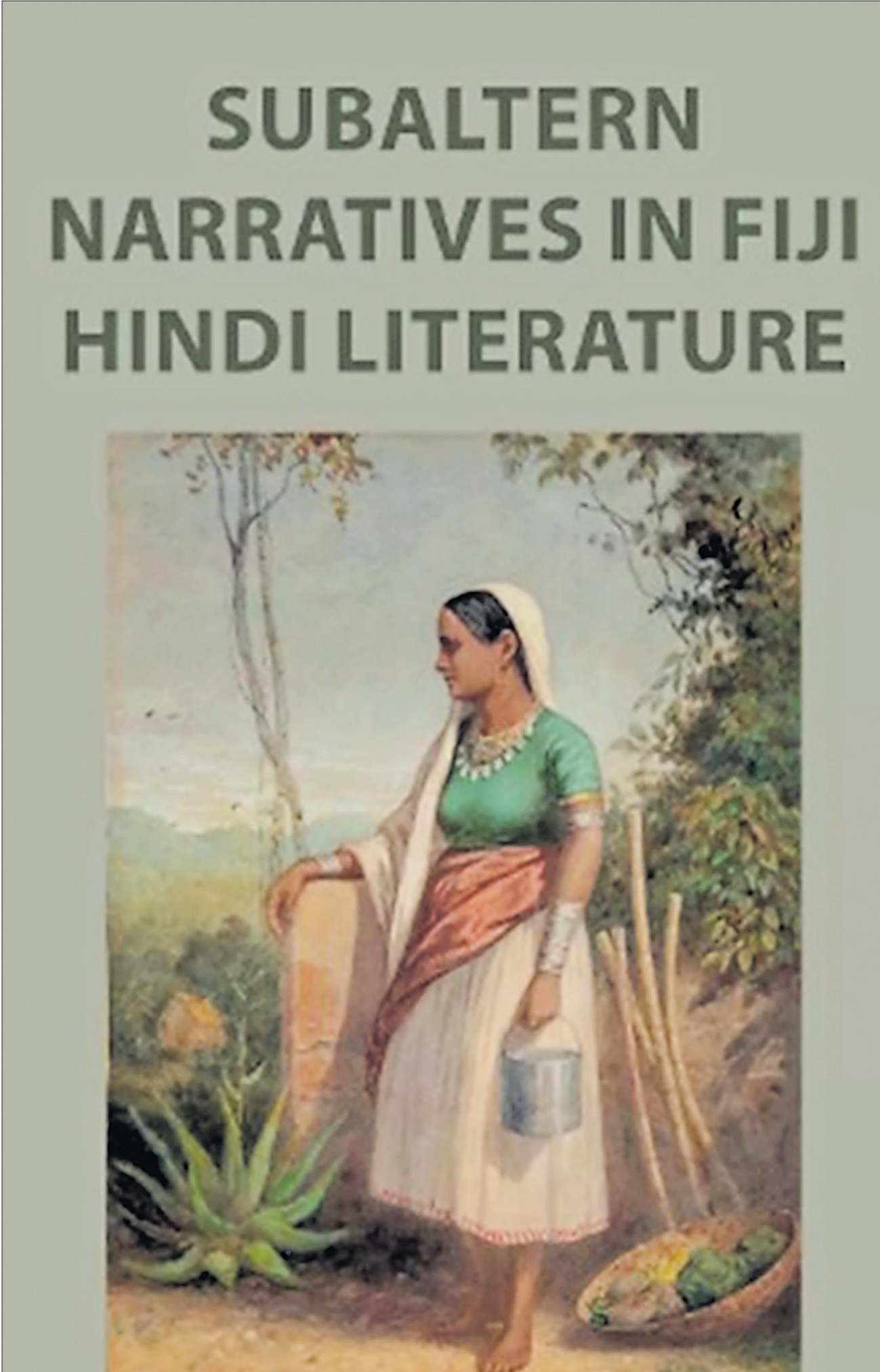
Language as people always say is a symbol of identity. But what constitutes identity through language? Most of readers of books will agree that it is the stories passed down from generations in our mother tongue that makes an individual and communal identify. For this part of the world the most important stories passed down to us have been in the oral form and composed in the vernacular language. When those stories are translated into the English language, there is a disconnect between the language and the range of emotions in them. Few writers have dared to cross into the unknown and ventured in telling their forefathers stories in their own language. In our region most writers have found it convenient to adopt the English language for creative work. There is a tinge of loss concealed in Vijay Mishra's dedication of his book to his parents, Hari K and Lilawati Mishra, 'Who gave me the gift of a mother tongue.'

ONE prominent writer from Fiji who dared to abandon the accepted practice of writing in English and take up the challenge (and the risk) of writing in his own language is Professor Subramani. Prof Subramani, an established writer in English, recognised as one of Fiji's leading prose writers by The Literary Encyclopedia. After producing an extensive body of distinguished work in English - short fiction, plays, and essays - has ventured into writing two extraordinary novels in Fiji Hindi, that Mishra says, "are both a sociology of culture as well as complex works of art that push the boundaries of the postcolonial experience".

The first novel, *Dauka Puran*, went on to win considerable acclaim, and Prof Subramani was felicitated at the 7th World Hindi Conference in Suriname in 2003 for his contribution to Hindi. His second novel in Fiji Hindi, *Fiji Maa; Mother of a Thousand* (2018), took more than a decade to write; the writer's magnum opus of 1026 pages is written from the perspective of a female protagonist, is winning him wider acclaim.

By producing these two novels Prof Subramani has dispelled one of the myths related to Fiji Hindi, that there is no worthwhile written literature in the language (see; Prasad & Willans 2023, Debunking ten myths about Hindi in Fiji: Taking some of the hot air out of the Mirchi FM debate).

It is a sad fact that these two novels may have not caught the attention people of Fiji, it has certainly captured world-wide attention of prominent academics and critics as well as general readers. One



Prof Vijay Mishra critically analysed *Dauka Puran* and *Fiji Maa* in his latest work *Subaltern Narratives in Fiji Hindi Literature*. Picture: SUPPLIED

of them being Professor Vijay Mishra. Prof Mishra is an Emeritus Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Murdoch University and Fellow of the Australian Humanities Academy. In addition, he is a visiting professor in numerous universities all over the world. Many would be surprised to know that Vijay Mishra hails from Nausori, Fiji. Today

he is an extremely distinguished figure in the literary world. He has written acclaimed books on V.S Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Australian, the Indian diaspora, Bollywood Cinema, and Bhakti poetry.

Prof Mishra in his latest work, *Subaltern Narratives in Fiji Hindi Literature*, he has critically analysed *Dauka Puran* and *Fiji Maa*. Prof Mishra says at

the beginning of the book that "occasionally one comes across a text that moves you in a different way, a text that makes you feel that you are not only reading it but speaking and writing it". The two novels he says, places Prof Subramani in the pantheon of world literature.

The title of his book, *Subaltern Narratives in Fiji Literature*, needs a

quick explanation. Who is a Subaltern? The term was initially conceived by the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, who was in prison and his writings were subject to censorship. He used the term Subaltern as a code word for any class of people (especially peasants and workers) subject to the authority of another powerful class. Since then the term has been adopted

by postcolonial studies scholars, thus forming a sub-discipline within the field known as Subaltern Studies. It was founded by South East Asian historian, Ranajit Guha and over time it has included such scholars as Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak, Partha Chatterjee, and Dipesh Chakrabarty.

Going by this definition, the Subaltern in Fiji were the indentured labourers and their descendants. They lived under the authority of the colonial rule, but their stories remained within them. In recent decades few people have written about indenture, but in the foreign language. The writings were mostly of the indenture system and not the indentured individuals.

Prof Subramani has used the Fiji Hindi language creatively to give a voice to the subaltern indentured Indians and their descendants, men and women. According to Mishra the two novels have placed Prof Subramani into the pantheon of great writers of world literature.

According to Mishra, the language used in these two novels is untranslatable though he attempts to provide extensive translations from the novels, showing us how translation might be accomplished.

Mishra shows great respect to the original language and uses very intricate details in the transliteration in Roman of selected verses. He pays great attention to see that the voice is not lost in the transliteration.

To have an eye like Mishra to capture the intricate details in the two novels is extraordinary. While he gives full justification to the language through proper linguistic analysis, he does not fail to explain the emotions in the novel often demonstrated through the words of the characters. We would like to hope that the two novels by Prof Subramani are eventually translated because here is a dot on the map of the world, according to the Indian professor Harish Trivedi, writing back to global discourse.

Every Fiji Hindi speaker must read these two novels and realise it is their inner voice which had been silenced for a very long time finally finding a voice. It will be a sad irony if the novels remain unread in Fiji.

There is so much in the book by Mishra on the two novels that it is not possible to discuss in a brief review. The greatest praise Mishra gives to these novels is the provide an answer to the famous question; Can the subaltern speak? by the renowned critic Gayatri Chakravorty. In these two novels, the subaltern has indeed spoken.

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