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Restorying Indenture

The First Fiji Hindi Speakers Narrate Girit

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in
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Dedication

To Ryan

for understanding I needed to find myself

And

To my great-grandparents

for the journey

Abstract

This research is about the framing of Girit through Fiji Hindi life narratives. The study is symbolic as it focuses on the life narratives of the first generation of Fiji Hindi speakers. The seven narrators in this study are part of 60, 965 Indian indentured labourers, or *Girmityas* /'gɪr,mɪtjəz/, who voyaged to Fiji between 1879 and 1916, most to work on the Australian Colonial Sugar Refining Company's plantations. This study traces their experiences of indenture, or *Girit* /'gɪr,mɪt/, through their life narratives. To date, Girit researchers have relied on official documents about the Girit system while the Girmityas' voices are either absent, or, at best, excerpted to support the master narrators' discourse on Girit. This study turns to the Girmityas' life narratives with the question: How do Indian indentured labourers to Fiji construct life narratives in Fiji Hindi to reconstruct their indenture experiences, and through the narration process, negotiate positions of identities and agencies? Beginning with Labov & Waletzky's (1967/1997), and Labov's (1972; 1997; 2001; 2004; 2006) high-point analysis, the study analyzes how each Girit recollection has been re-constructed. Further, using Bamberg's (1997; 2003; 2004a; 2004b; 2004c) positioning analysis, the study analyzes the Girmityas' adopted positionings in, and through their life narratives. The interweaving of the two frameworks takes the life narratives from the textual back into the social world of production. The scope of the research is limited to understanding the interconnectivity between structure, focus, and manner of narration, within the bounds of memory, the shared knowledge of cultural ideologies, and the master narratives of indenture, for the purpose of negotiating identities and agencies favourable to the Girit narrator. The variables conform each other, and help explain why *these* seven life narratives are told. The research makes the following major contributions: it uses a culturally relevant model of analysis, it details the movement from structural to performative analysis, it analyzes the factors underlying the performativity of the Fiji Hindi life narrative; and it analyzes the consequences these performativities have for the contextually produced self(s). In working towards these contributions, the study also contributes back to the Fiji Indian community.

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Shards of Memories

My journey with these Girmityas' life narratives began when I was seven years old. In my earliest memories of visiting *dādi*, I see us all sitting, and listening, the Girmityas' voices entering the house through the large speakers on either side of a silver rectangular box as we drink hot milky tea. The radio had pride of place in my grandmother's living room, where the television now sits. We listened to the Girmityas recollecting their experiences, which they did with sometimes laughter, sometimes tears, and at other times with anger, bitterness, or resignation.

It was a time when Fiji Indians were searching to define who they were, a hundred years after the first Girmityas arrived in Fiji. As our family's history with Fiji began with Girmit, we would listen to the life narratives with great interest, after which came the adults' critique. This was the only time that I heard the life narratives, until I began this study twenty-one years later. But although I did not hear them again, the Girmityas' narratives whispered to me through my memories.

In my mind, the hearing of the Girmityas' life narratives is juxtaposed on the memory of Fiji's first coup, which occurred a year later in 1987. We heard the news on the radio. My mother and the old man next door wondered what a coup was. I remember the fear and unease as Sakeasi Butadroka, the leader of the Nationalist Taukei Movement, re-voiced over the airwaves his 1975 parliamentary motion that Indians should be repatriated to India, courtesy of the British Government, which had brought them. I was eight years old, and my right to call myself a Fiji citizen was challenged. My hybrid identity, as a product of four generations of Indians living in Fiji, marked me out in the land where I was born.

I carry these memories to New Zealand. As I study the life narratives of the Girmityas, whose great-grandchildren are coming to terms with Fiji's fourth coup, I admit that this research is not only about the understanding of the Girmityas' identity constructions; it is also a research about my search for an understanding of the experiences that define "Who am I?"

In many ways, the telling of my life narrative mirrors that of the Girmityas. We are telling our narratives not in the country of our birth, but in our adopted homelands. We are taking the opportunity of speaking to a wide range of interlocutors to tell our narratives. And in shaping our narratives for, and with these interlocutors, we shape ourselves. We discover strengths within us to articulate experiences that we carry with us, and in doing so, we move our narratives into the realm of heard voices.

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Gloss

1	FIRST PERSON
2	SECOND PERSON
3	THIRD PERSON
ACC	ACCUSATIVE
ACCDUR	ACCUSATIVE DURATION OF TIME
ACCLOC	ACCUSATIVE LOCATION OF PLACE
AFM	AFFIRMATIVE
AUX	AUXILLIARY
COMP	COMPLETIVE
CMPT	CONTEMPTUOUS
COP	COPULA
DAT	DATIVE
DIR	DIRECTIONAL
EMPH	EMPHATHIC
EXCLM	EXCLAMATION
EXP	EXPLETIVE
FAM	FAMILIAR
F	FEMININE
FOM	FORMAL
FUT	FUTURE
GEN	GENITIVE

IMP	IMPERATIVE
INF	INFINITIVE
INFOM	INFORMAL
INS	INSTRUMENT
INV	INVARIABLE POSTPOSITION
IP	IMPERFECTIVE
LOC	LOCATIVE
MOD	MODIFIER
NEG	NEGATION
OBJ	OBJECT
OBL	OBLIGATORY
PST	PAST
PFV	PERFECTIVE
PL	PLURAL
POSS	POSSESSIVE
PR	PREVIOUS REFERENCE
PRS	PRESENT
PROG	PROGRESSIVE
PROX	PROXIMATE
RFLX	REFLEXIVE
REM	REMOTE
SG	SINGULAR
TOP	TOPIC MARKER
TR	TRANSITIVE

within their life narratives. The section that follows concentrates on the research undertaken. Here, the model of analysis is presented, the purpose and rationale behind the research are provided, the research question is identified, and the boundaries of the research question are defined, after which, the key areas of contribution of the study are discussed. The penultimate section outlines the structure of the study. The chapter ends with a discussion of my own positioning, as both an insider and a researcher, and the influences these dual positionings would have had on my point of view of the Girmityas, and my understanding of their life narratives.

1.1 The Girmity narrators

In order of the presentation of their life narratives, the seven Girmityas are: Gabriel Aiyappa, Ram Rattan Mishar, Guldhari Maharaj, Ram Sundar Maharaj, Jasoda Ramdin, Ram Dulhari, and Ghorī Gosai. While six of the Girmityas describe their own Girmity experience, Guldhari Maharaj is an exception. She went to Fiji as a child, and describes her mother's experiences on a harsh plantation environment.

Of the seven Girmityas, Jasoda Ramdin appears to have been the earliest Girmitya to Fiji, although this is difficult to verify as Gabriel Aiyappa, Ram Rattan Mishar, and Guldhari Maharaj did not provide details of the year of arrival, nor the name of the ship. By noting the date of arrival to Fiji in Table 1 below, I am not attempting to verify their credibility as Girmityas; rather, I am attempting to put their Girmity experience in context, relative to the master narratives, and relative to the other Girmityas' experiences.

Table 1: The narrators' dates of arrival to Fiji

Name	Date of arrival	Ship
Jasoda Ramdin	30 th July, 1904	Ems II
Ghorī Gosai	18 th March, 1908	Sangola I
Ram Sundar Maharaj	29 th May, 1913	Ganges V
Ram Dulhari	1 st September, 1916	Chenab III
Ram Rattan Mishar	?	?
Guldhari Maharaj	?	?
Gabriel Aiyappa	?	?