

Copyright is owned by the Author of the thesis. Permission is given for a copy to be downloaded by an individual for the purpose of research and private study only. The thesis may not be reproduced elsewhere without the permission of the Author.

**From the outside looking in: identity in  
selected Fijian short stories written in  
English**

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements of a Master of Arts  
at Massey University

by Sandra Dawn Tuvuki

Dec. 1999

## **Abstract**

Construction of colonial identities in Fiji were built upon the premise of British superiority and difference from others, as they were in other parts of the colonised world. Colonial discourse regularly employed stereotypes to reduce other communities into simple and therefore controllable concepts. Fiji's post-colonial voices have had to write their ways out of these reduced roles and clear a space for representations of life in Fiji that differ from earlier elucidations. The body of writing which began to emerge in the 1960s is represented here by a selection of short stories by a number of authors writing from and about Fiji.

The main focus here is on the ways identities which emerge from these stories pull the texts together into a definable body of writing, despite the diversity of writing positions, and despite some gender-based distinctions highlighted by Arlene Griffen and Shiasta Shameem. It is concluded that identities are more difficult to negotiate when outside opinions or forces are powerful. This observation is discussed in relation to the movement of characters from innocence to experience, the affect of progress on communities and individuals, the representation of women in the texts, and the position of individuals who travel to or from Fiji or who are descendants of migrants.

## **Acknowledgements**

Thanks go to Dr Victoria Carchidi, my long-suffering supervisor, for having faith in my ability to finish this thesis. Thanks also to Dr Som Prakash, Senior Lecturer, USP, for his advice to let the texts tell their own stories. I'm also indebted to Mum and Bill for the computer, the home cooked meals, and a bed to sleep in during my stay in Tuakau, New Zealand. And thank you Matthias for your love and support towards the end of this project. This thesis is dedicated to my children: Elizabeth, Pita, Luisa and James.

## Contents

Abstract	ii
Acknowledgements	iii
Preface	v
Chapter One: Introduction	1
Chapter Two: Historical Context and Colonial Discourse	13
Chapter Three: Fijian Short Stories by Male Writers	26
Chapter Four: Fijian Short Stories by Female Writers	54
Chapter Five: Conclusions	82
Works Consulted	87

## Preface

The Marquis de Sade asks the question, "Of what use are novels?" He answers this by writing "the novel is . . . the representation of secular customs, and is therefore, for the philosopher who wishes to understand man [sic], as essential as is the knowledge of history" (in Strobbe, 304). Building upon de Sade's idea, I initiated this research to understand something of life and culture in Fiji by reading the writing from and about this nation, more specifically the relatively recent writing of short fiction in English, thus discovering some of the issues that characterise life in post-colonial Fiji.

The approach used here to read the selected texts began as a working through of the conclusions made by two Pacific women, Arlene Griffen and Shiasta Shameem, who provide gender-based interpretations of some selected Pacific texts in the case of Griffen and selected works by Fijian-Indian authors in the case of Shameem. However, the focus of my analysis has shifted to provide a broader vision of writing from Fiji, thus subverting critical models based on simple binaries based on gender.

In this reading, aspects of the texts that make the stories resonate with the particular tensions that characterise Fijian life are identified. I also acknowledge that there are many differences to be found in this body of writing and some of these differences are distinguished. This type of reading looks at the ways women are represented in the texts, but also looks at wider issues relating to identity formation. The focus here is on how identities are constructed in relation to the different pressures that exist outside the main characters of each story.

My perspective as a reader is in one sense as an outsider: I am classified as an "ex-pat" by the immigration authorities in Fiji and as a *kaivalagi*<sup>1</sup> by

---

<sup>1</sup> European.

those I live amongst. I am English, born to working-class English parents who emigrated to New Zealand in search of a more prosperous and less socially restricted life. As I grew up in New Zealand, I frequently identified with my English roots, and still do. I sense somehow that I belong to both countries and also to neither. It is as though I have slipped between the cracks. The sense of being caught in between two places has intensified since I married into a Fijian family and into a culture that is quite alien to my own. I am outside by way of my heritage, and yet, through marriage, I am inside the Fijian family structure and therefore the culture with all its relative freedoms and encumbrances. This is a very uncomfortable place to write from and the tension I have experienced while writing has made it hard, nearly impossible at times, to carry on with this research.

The resistance I have felt to being easily categorised reflects something of the difficulty that ensues when simple binarisms are used to classify anything or anyone. I hesitate therefore to label myself as anything other than a reader. But as for the issue of technically being an outsider because of my British origins, I lean on Gayatri Spivak's directive that,

the position that only the subaltern can know the subaltern, only women can know women . . . cannot be held as a theoretical presupposition . . . for it predicates the possibility of knowledge on identity. Whatever the political necessity for holding the position, and whatever the advisability of attempting to "identify" with the other in order to know her, knowledge is made possible and sustained by irreducible difference, not identity. What is known is always in excess of knowledge. (in Suleri 11-12)

It is from this position of being irreducibly different that I have attempted to read the selected texts, and I hope that the following analysis provides an effective overview for those readers who wish to understand something about life and culture in Fiji, both past and present.