

The Psychogeography of Homelessness: Reconstruction of Fractured Girmitya Identity in Satendra Nandan's Requiem for a Rainbow

Anshika Agarwal

Research Scholar, Department of English and MEL., University of Lucknow

DOI: 10.46609/IJSSER.2026.v11i08.037 URL: <https://doi.org/10.46609/IJSSER.2026.v11i08.037>

Received: 13 July 2026 / Accepted: 17 August 2026 / Published: 30 August 2026

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the psychogeography of homelessness and the reconstruction of a fractured Girmitya identity in Satendra Nandan's semi-autobiographical work, Requiem for a Rainbow: A Fijian Indian Story (2001). Due to his life journey spanning a complex geography connecting Fiji, India, England, and Australia, Nandan's life path reflects the compounded trauma of a twice-displaced community. Unlike voluntary migrants who navigate a singular spatial divide, Nandan's sequential dispossession from both Fiji and his ancestral India complicates his diasporic journey, transforming it into a narrative of un-belonging. After the traumatic disruption of Sitiveni Rabuka's 1987 military coups, which shattered Indo-Fijian assumptions of domestic security, Nandan was thrust into forced exilic flight to Australia as a secondary exile.

It thoroughly analyses the text's chapters—from the political shock of Fiji's inaugural coup to childhood memories of Maigania along the Nadi River, student years in Delhi, parliamentary realpolitik in Suva, and academic settlement in Canberra—this paper examines how physical eviction from national spaces inflicts imperceptible psychological trauma. In response to this dislocation, Nandan constructs an "imaginary homeland" that is not merely a lost city of the mind, but a fractured, layered construct encompassing both the ancestral India of the Girmitya imagination and a paradisiacal Fiji. Hence, the paper demonstrates how Nandan utilizes the sanctuary of language and the emancipatory power of literature to heal the void of homelessness, rewriting dislocation into a space of belonging and reclaiming a sense of self beyond rigid geopolitical boundaries.

Keywords: Girmitya Identity, Satendra Nandan, Psychogeography of Homelessness, Secondary Exile, Indo-Fijian Diaspora

Introduction

In *Four Quartets*, T.S. Eliot poetically observes, “Home is where one starts from. As we grow older / The world becomes stranger, the pattern more complicated / Of dead and living” (“East Coker” sec. 5). This philosophical contemplation resonates highly with the lived as well as literary realities of Satendra Nandan, whose doubly hyphenated identity renders his displacement inimitably moving and unsettling. For decades, Nandan lived, worked, and flourished in Fiji, operating under the assumption of his uncontested belonging. He remained largely insulated from the latent precarity of this borrowed homeland until his perceived reality was violently shattered by the terror of a few masked and armed insurrectionists. The abrupt realization that a highly familiar and nurturing space could be suddenly wrested away was so far-fetched that it caused an existential rupture. But even more devastating was the psychological toll of carrying lifelong scars and navigating through an omnipresent undercurrent of fear upon returning to his place of birth.

Home forms the foundational premise of the human trajectory and anchors both the psyche and the self. It is a place where a person spends his childhood, a place that becomes indelibly etched into the mnemonic landscape and regardless of how many journeys a person undertakes, these foundational memories remain impervious to erasure. Therefore, Nandan’s sequential dispossession from not one, but two homes complicate his diasporic journey, transforming it into a highly unsettling narrative of un-belonging. While residing in Fiji, the ancestral pull of India remained largely abstract; it was only upon traveling there on a scholarship that the realization of Fiji as a historically borrowed space crystallized. But the young academic could scarcely anticipate the absolute parameters of this exclusion and was shaken when the postcolonial state rejected his community’s claim to indigeneity. Despite ascending to the ranks of a prominent parliamentarian, Nandan’s life was upended by a few military coups which made his survival in Fiji entirely untenable. He could not have foreseen that he would have to settle as a secondary exile in Australia and will be forced to seek refuge there. Such a tumultuous and eventful biography demands rigorous academic intervention, particularly given Nandan’s own stature as a fellow scholar. To look closely into the intimate contours of this displacing journey and its psychological aftermath, we must turn to Nandan’s seminal work, *Requiem for a Rainbow*, which captures the bittersweet dissolution of his paradisiacal homeland.

Concept of ‘Home’

This sense of fragmented belonging finds an echo in the theoretical insights of Salman Rushdie who argues that the modern experience of displacement has radically altered domestic and national spaces. In *East, West*, Rushdie observes that “home has become such a scattered, damaged, various concept in our present travails” (93). For Rushdie, as for Nandan, the concept

of home signals a departure from homogeneous nation-states anchored in strict ideologies of cultural assimilation. Instead, it demands a much more fluid, albeit contradictory, definition of the nation that is reimagined as a multiplicity of shifting diasporic identities. These modern diasporas are defined by their existence at the threshold of multiple worlds and are haunted by an intense feeling of historical loss, geographical rootlessness and cultural alienation.

An exiled writer almost out of impulse wishes to look backward and reclaim the lost homeland through their writing. Salman Rushdie while observing in *Imaginary Homelands* that this reclamation is limited to the realm of creative myth-making, posits that exiles, emigrants, and expatriates are “haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back... that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind” (10). He reflects on a photograph of his ancestral home in Bombay and notes that such artifacts remind that “it’s my present that is foreign, and that the past is home, albeit a lost home in a lost city in the mists of lost time” (9).

Thus, the writer is largely disconnected from the immediate present and discovers that the past remains the primary architect of their contemporary identity. When transposed onto the literary and historical trajectory of Satendra Nandan, this framework undergoes a critical intensification. Nandan’s writing reflects the compounded trauma of a twice-displaced community and is different from voluntary migrants’ writings that grapple with a singular temporal or spatial divide. Hence, as for Nandan, the “imaginary homeland” is not merely a singular lost city of the mind, but a fractured, layered construct encompassing both the ancestral India of the Girmitya imagination and the lost, paradisiacal Fiji fractured by military coups.

Although the Girmityas have crossed distinct geopolitical boundaries, they remain inextricably bound to their natal territories through cultural and spiritual linkages. They learn to navigate an ambivalent relationship with both their host nation and their place of birth. On one hand, the ancestral landscape is constantly romanticized through the lens of collective memory, while on the other, the host environment is initially perceived with hostility, as a site of alienation. However, with time, the host country undergoes a gradual transformation and becomes home. Through strategic acculturation, these individuals synthesize elements of the dominant culture with native traditions and generate a distinct cultural space for themselves. In this regard, their writing emerges as a hybridized product.

In Nandan’s narrative, this threshold existence becomes particularly acute as the Girmitya legacy ensures that the dream of return is already a double impossibility. This leaves the characters to navigate the painful fractures of a home that is simultaneously scattered and irretrievable. The Girmityas left the space originally designated as home, whether India or, in Nandan’s unique case, the dual spaces of Fiji and India, only to reconstruct the domestic sphere by constantly

moving beyond geopolitical boundaries. As bell hooks, while reflecting on the changing nature of home, observes that “[h]ome is no longer just one place. It is locations” (148). Nandan and the Girmityas at large, thus, become perpetual residents of nowhere and everywhere, marooned in a liminal space where belonging is constantly renegotiated across multiple geographies.

Concurrently, the concept of home operates as a multidimensional construct that informs human experience and is capable of altering the sense of self. It encompasses physical, psychological, emotional, and cultural registers. In *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard insightfully notes that “a house is a great machine for living in, but it is also a place where the mind can unfold” (11). Consequently, when an individual experiences a physical eviction from their domestic and national spaces, it is not merely a structural loss, but a disruption of the sanctuary where the psyche expands. This dislocation inflicts imperceptible trauma and leaves deep scars whose healing timelines remain inscrutable. The resultant grief and despair cannot be easily quantified and present a fertile ground for postcolonial trauma analysis.

About Satendra Nandan

Satendra Nandan’s remarkable life path spans a complex geography that connects Fiji, India, England, and Australia. He was born in 1939 in the village of Maigania and grew up in Votualevu on the banks of the Nadi River, where he spent his early youth grazing cows on land that would later become Nadi International Airport. His parents were born in Fiji but were the descendants of the girmityas from the United Provinces (now, Uttar Pradesh) in India. In 1958, he became the first member of his family to go back to India as a 19-year-old on a scholarship to pursue an honours degree in Delhi University. Here, he also met his wife and mother to his children, Jyoti.

After a brief return to Fiji, his affection drew him back to Delhi to marry, leading to teaching stints at Delhi Public School and the prestigious Doon School, alongside journalistic training at *The Statesman*. He formally entered academia by joining the University of the South Pacific in 1969. For academic development, he travelled to England to complete two master's degrees at the University of Leeds and briefly studied at the University of London. It was in London that his encounter with Patrick White's fiction inspired a deep curiosity about Australia which prompted him to complete his PhD at the Australian National University (ANU) between 1974 and 1977 under the supervision of Dr. Bob Brissenden.

Nandan entered public service and politics after being motivated by an urgent need to combat an increasingly fractured and racialized politics. He delivered an influential 1978 address titled “The Fijian Indian: A Complex Fate” that propelled his admission into the legislative arena. He secured massive electoral victories in both 1982 and 1987, transitioning from the National

Federation Party to become the first Labor MP under Dr. Timoci Bavadra. His political career peaked in April 1987 when he resigned from his university post to become the Minister for Health, Social Welfare, and Women's Affairs. This appointment was cut short after just 33 days by Sitiveni Rabuka's military coup, a trauma that forced Nandan and his family into permanent exile.

He returned to Canberra on an HRC fellowship at the ANU in December 1987. He later took up a tenured position at the University of Canberra and founded the local chapter of International PEN to campaign for persecuted global writers. Nandan eventually resigned from the University of Canberra in 2005 to return to Fiji with his wife to establish the nation's second university as its Foundation Dean and Professor of the School of Humanities and Arts. His contributions to post-colonial letters were recognized with an appointment as the international Chair of ACLALS and the title of Emeritus Professor at the University of Canberra. Keeping in view his lifelong commitment to democratic equity, he was appointed as a commissioner in 2012 to help draft Fiji's new constitution. Today, Nandan resides primarily in Canberra as an Emeritus Professor in the Donald Horne Institute, splitting his time across Fiji, India, and New Zealand which are the four corners of his heart.

Satendra Nandan's extensive and evocative body of work creatively transforms personal exile and the Giritiya experience into universal narratives of post-colonial survival. His notable publications span poetry, fiction, and essays, including titles such as *Voices in the River*, *The Wounded Sea*, *The Loneliness of Islands*, *Requiem for a Rainbow*, *GIRMIT: Epic Lives in Small Lines*, *1987 - Six Nights in May*, *Across the Seven Seas*, *Nadi: Memories of a River*, *Lines Across Black Waters*, and *Faces in a Village*.

Examining his semi-autobiography

Requiem for a Rainbow: A Fijian Indian Story was published in 2001 by Pacific Indian Publications and functions as a multi-layered, semi-autobiographical text where personal history seamlessly converges with national destiny. He was encouraged to write a memoir by Professor Ian Donaldson in 1990. The text rejects the rigid constraints of a conventional memoir. Nandan frames the piece in his preface as a purposefully flawed and fragmentary work which operates on Graham Greene's premise that autobiography is merely "a sort of life" i.e. selective by necessity. Nandan's daughter Kavita Nandan writes an unflinching introduction to this memoir that transcends individual memory to map a collective, intergenerational exilic journey and serves to preserve and "gather up the fragments that remain" so "that nothing be lost" (2). She succinctly sums up how the Giritiyas rely on the sanctuary of language to construct their shifting worlds and reclaim a sense of belonging:

They remember in their life stories, knowing how unstable the reality of home is, that the only grounds they have to stand upon is language, remembrance, a haunted imagination. They have to create a world which exists on no map — for them the remapping of memory, the reshaping of experience and the renewal of self within imagined islands, is imperative and essential. (4)

She admits that Nandan's writings provide a vital sense of creative security which reinforce her belief in literature's power to transcend geographic displacement by establishing an imaginary home within the text. This literary reclamation counters the psychological toll of exile by allowing the displaced subject to rewrite their dislocation into a space of belonging. As she observes: "My sense of unhomeliness, of a sense of out-of-placeness in Australia is healed in part by reading about my roots and memories of loved ones, lived places" (4). As V.S. Naipaul rightly said that to know oneself, it is necessary to go back to one's past. She concludes by saying that "*Requiem for a Rainbow* is full of love for Fiji. But there's an indefinable loss: of home, of childhood friends. And those who have never felt bereft of a home will not understand this void: homelessness. Fiji was home" (8).

In the first chapter, titled "Fourteenth May: An Eclipse," Nandan explores the psychological shock of Fiji's inaugural military coup alongside his own sudden thrust into institutional governance under Prime Minister Dr. Timoci Bavadra. Nandan while referencing the philosophical maxim that "it is not enough to ask what is good for man; ask also what the good man is for" argues that governance requires deep moral purpose rather than opportunistic statecraft (7). He initially conceives of parliamentary democracy as "a most exciting and ingenious institution" due to the democratic dignity it offers ordinary citizens. However, this democratic space was structurally undermined by the lopsided 1970 Constitution, which institutionalized racial hierarchies by dividing the voter base into rigid ethnic roll calls. This legal asymmetry became clear in the demographic allocations of the legislature: native Fijians, who comprised 44% of the population, were allotted 22 seats, matching the 22 seats allocated to the Indo-Fijian majority, which made up 52% of the populace. Meanwhile, the General Electors category, encompassing Europeans, part-Europeans, and Chinese, held 16% of the parliamentary seats despite making up a mere 4% of the population. This disproportionate arrangement sowed early institutional seeds of discrimination and political alienation.

The underlying vulnerabilities of this fractured polity culminated in the catastrophic 1987 military takeovers led by Lieutenant Colonel Sitiveni Rabuka, which shattered Indo-Fijian assumptions of domestic security. Nandan utilizes an explicit literary allegory to critique this authoritarian overreach, aligning the coup leader with Napoleon from *Animal Farm* to show how dictatorial power reduces civic systems to armed coercion. The detained parliamentarians were

captured and placed in urine-scented cells but even in great sorrow they forged a transient space of intercommunal solidarity where they recited prayers across a multicultural spectrum of Fijian, Urdu, Hindi, and English. Nandan captures his deep institutional disillusionment during this period of captivity through an adage: “Ministers propose, Colonels depose” (34). The systemic failure of non-violent political resistance within the camp is underscored when Nandan’s recommendation of a satyagraha hunger strike is met with a colleague’s blunt dismissal: “You’re preaching vegetarianism amongst cannibals” (49). As Nandan confronted this shifting constitutional crises of the state, which Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama later characterized as a recurring, regressive cycle of elections followed by ineffective governance and subsequent coups, he chose to flee the country after eighteen months of systematic dispossession. This displacement left him an exiled observer of a homeland where the hopeful idea of shared national identity was violently arrested by the barrel of a gun.

In the second chapter, “Nadi: The River Between,” Nandan takes up the exilic imperative articulated in Salman Rushdie’s *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, operating under the premise that for the displaced subject, “Everything must be made real, step by step... We have to imagine it into being from the ground up” (5). The narrative functions as an act of remembering as he converts his childhood village of Maigania, a “haunting, protean place in my imagination,” into a tangible space of community and continuity. He documents the ancestral naming practices, where pundits read from “frayed pothas, always wrapped in red,” alongside pre-wedding and marital rituals like Telwaan and Bhatwaan. Nandan underscores how the Girmitiyas actively preserved their heritage under an alien sky. But this pastoral reconstruction is shadowed by an invisible, rigid colonial segregation. Nandan also highlights the socio-cultural chasm dividing the Indo-Fijian and indigenous communities and observes that centuries of cultural distance and difference divided and distanced their worlds. This occurred due to the institutionalized tyranny of difference in colonial policy that fragmented the local population and is responsible for creating distinct linguistic and geographic worlds separated by a shallow river that was seldom crossed.

This alienation was reinforced by the colonial educational apparatus, which deliberately decoupled the subaltern student from their immediate historical reality. It forced the youth to prioritize the “iron dictates of the canon” and made them to memorize Imperial metrics while remaining completely oblivious to their own agricultural landscapes. This system formed what Nandan terms “a constituency of historical darkness in my consciousness” (119). Within this landscape stripped of public monuments, Nandan realizes that the aging Girmitiyas themselves constituted the true archives of displacement, asserting that “while we may not have that quality of ruins, our grandparents were our ruins” (112). It is only through the later shock of the military coups that these historical and mythological inheritance patterns are violently recontextualized.

Moreover, *The Ramayana*, once perceived by children as a mere myth, transforms into a mirror for their own political banishment, prompting Nandan to ask, "Who saw in the death of Dashrath his father's death? Or in the exile of Rama, one's own?" (112). Finally, Nandan's departure for India in 1958 via a "rainbow bridge" from the Nadi airport represents a flight toward intellectual emancipation, seeking an education that could break the mental chains and transcend the colonial trauma left in the wake of the fractured archipelago.

In the third chapter, "Delhi: A Light among the Ruins," he navigates his formative student years in India. He transforms his sense of exilic isolation into an eclectic reclamation of his civilizational identity. The Girmitiya community in Fiji viewed the ancient Indian epics as a "portable motherland," which helped them to remain tethered to their Dharma in a foreign soil. However, Nandan mounts a critical intervention against this scriptural insularity and argues that an over-reliance on ancient myths locked the community into a distant past due to which they failed to produce their own literature. He challenges this historical blind spot and asks them that why they "[failed] to see the holiness of the Nandi, the river on whose banks I grew up? Were we so obsessed with the sanctity of the waters of the Ganges?" (144). This tension between myth and material reality sharpens upon his arrival in Delhi, where the harsh urban reality subverts his idealized expectations and forces him to admit that the metropolis was quite different from the India and the Indians he had read about in the myths.

However, he immersed himself in the academic community of Hindu College and begin to find symmetry between his own fractured identity and the historic spaces around him in Delhi. He concludes with certain hope that "it took generations to create even ruins" and this realisation helps in forming his self-definition. This spatial romance is further anchored by his marriage to Jyoti, whose initial image in a blue saree inspired him to write, "I wish I were your saree wrapped around your waist and thighs like my sighs" (141). Together they watched Satyajit Ray's *Pather Panchali*, which allowed him to map the rustic simplicity of rural Bengal directly onto his childhood memories of Fiji. Therefore, Nandan's exilic journey collapses nationalistic limitations and casts his evolving identity as an open-ended process of becoming and viewing his faith in his heritage as "a marvellous definition of our unfinished humanity" (153).

In the third section titled "Suva: The Twice Banished," he walks with us into parliamentary realpolitik but the reason was to counter institutionalized ethnic division. He grounds his journey in the text of Bertolt Brecht's poetry and mirrors his own repeated uprooting by noting how his generation went "changing our country more often than our shoes" (178). Nandan relies heavily on a humanistic education to challenge a distorted constitutional setup where "one man can get elected with 700 votes or even fewer; another loses with 17,000" (187). Nandan utilizes his parliamentary platform to deliver moral indictments against the ruling elite and warns that "nothing saps public confidence more than corruption in the political system" (205).

Unfortunately, the multiethnic coalition's brief democratic breakthrough is violently crushed by the 1987 coup, transforming Nandan's ideological resistance into forced exilic flight. As he escapes the institutional malice of a compromised state, he is left to mourn a silenced Parliament whose legacy of free speech has "all gone under the Battery Hill," turning his text into a vital archive of a bygone democratic era.

The final section, "Canberra: The Goldengrove Unleaving," maps Nandan's settlement in the Australian capital. He changes this space of banishment into a therapeutic crucible for literary and existential healing. He immerses himself in the academic sanctuary of the Australian National University and relies on the works of Patrick White and V.S. Naipaul to navigate his transplanted consciousness. Therefore, he validates art's capacity to illuminate life, no matter how seemingly arid the outer landscape of one's existence. This peaceful setting provides a lens through which he assesses the ongoing degradation of his homeland. He also participates in democratic movements to expose how institutionalized racism reduces pluralism to an undignified social death. He likens the physical territory of contemporary Fiji as a graveyard of lost freedoms, noting that "'mate' here means friendship; in Australia while 'mate' in Fijian means death" (243).

Conclusion

To conclude, Nandan's text operates as a profound post-colonial critique that uses the emancipatory power of language to dismantle the binary between the displaced victim and the authoritarian oppressor. Through a conciliatory reading of epic mythology, he rejects post-colonial resentment, seeking a nuanced reconciliation by looking beyond pure malice to recognize the complicated human impulses that drive political antagonists. He views a disrupted post-colonial geography as an unwritten canvas waiting to be deciphered through its tattered lives. His writings provide enough proof that no matter what happens, the diasporic umbilical cord which connects the writer to their birthland remains uncut, and that the language and literature help them in making the arduous journey back home.

References

- Ashcroft, Bill, et al. *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*. Routledge, 1989.
- Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies*. Routledge, 1998.
- Bachelard, Gaston. *The Poetics of Space*. Translated by Maria Jolas, Beacon Press, 1994.

- Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 1994.
- . "The World and the Home." *Social Text*, no. 31/32, 1992, pp. 141–53.
- Brah, Avtar. *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*. Routledge, 1996.
- Eakin, Paul John. *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves*. Cornell University Press, 1999.
- Gandhi, M. K. *Hind Swaraj or Indian Home Rule*. Navjivan Publishing House, 1938.
- Hall, Stuart. "Cultural Identity and Diaspora." *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, edited by Jonathan Rutherford, Lawrence & Wishart, 1990, pp. 392–403.
- . "Culture, Community, Nation." *Cultural Studies*, vol. 7, no. 3, 1993, pp. 349–63.
- hooks, bell. *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*. Turnaround, 1991.
- Lal, Brij V. *Broken Waves: A History of the Fiji Islands in the Twentieth Century*. University of Hawai'i Press, 1992.
- . *Chalo Jahaji: On a Journey through Indenture in Fiji*. Division of Pacific and Southeast Asian History, Australian National University, 2000.
- . *Girmitiyas: The Origins of the Fiji Indians*. *Journal of Pacific History*, 1983.
- Eliot, T. S. *Four Quartets*. Harcourt, Brace & World, 1943.
- Mishra, Sudesh. "Time and Girit." *Social Text*, vol. 23, no. 1, 2005, pp. 15–36.
- . "The Time is Out of Joint." *SPAN*, vol. 52, 2002, pp. 136–145.
- Mishra, Vijay. "The Diasporic Imaginary: Theorizing the Indian Diaspora." *Textual Practice*, vol. 10, no. 3, 1996, pp. 421–447.
- . *The Literature of the Indian Diaspora: Theorising the Diasporic Imaginary*. Routledge, 2007.
- Naipaul, V.S. *An Area of Darkness*. André Deutsch, 1964.
- . Foreword. *The Adventures of Gurudeva and Other Stories*, by Seepersad Naipaul, André Deutsch, 1976.
- Nandan, Satendra. *Fiji: A Paradise in Pieces, Writing Ethics-Politics*. Pacific Indian Publication, 2000.

---. Requiem for a Rainbow: A Fijian Indian Story. Pacific Indian Publication, 2001.

Rushdie, Salman. East, West. Jonathan Cape, 1994.

---. Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981–1991. Penguin Books, 1992.

---. "The Empire Strikes Back with a Vengeance." The Times, 3 July 1982.

Tagore, Rabindranath. Nationalism. Macmillan, 1950.