Vijay Mishra, *Subaltern Narratives in Fiji Hindi Literature*. London: Anthem, 2024. Pp. xx+205. Hardcover £80. ISBN 978-1-83999-070-0.

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Modern written literature from the Pacific islands was born in the decolonizing era of the nineteen-sixties and 'seventies. A cluster of writers emerged at the University of the South Pacific, Albert Wendt, Satendra Nandan and Subramani being three of the leading figures, and three of the few who continued to produce literary work. Subramani has been the least prominent, though he is no less interesting a writer. He published the first critical survey of the region's writing in 1985 and over the previous decade put out a set of haunting short stories in journals. These captured the oppressive atmosphere of poverty and simmering rage among displaced laborers exploited and bullied by colonial plantation bosses, to which they added the anomie of the educated offspring of cane workers in modern times. (Mishra's phrase, "the pastoral hides danger," p. 129, captures the vision of the early stories and questions the pastoral ideal of the colonial-era painting on the book's cover.) Subramani's narratives were often fractured and infused with a sense of confusion and existential unease controlled by an intelligent awareness that was evidenced in his edited collection, *After Narrative: The Pursuit of Reality and Fiction* (1990).

Subramani's stories were collected as *The Fantasy Eaters* in 1998. This was published in America, but by Three Continents Press, which specialized in marginal "third word" writing. The potential reach of Subra's stories is indicated by the publisher's blurb, which points to the foreignness of tone and the sense that "the most important things in life are sacred and fiercely resistant to scrutiny." The writer has remained a *quiet* achiever in the global postcolonial literary marketplace.

He has remained so because, after a long gap, Subramani came out with *Daukā Purān* (2001), and *Fiji Mām* (2018), epic novels written in Fiji Hindi and in devanagari script. The ideal readers for such a work could only be small in number. The language is a worker's argot developed by cane cutters transported from eastern India under indenture over half a century up to 1915 and then perpetuated in isolation save for a handful of visits to India and a regular diet of Hindi movies. Its grammatical modifications (elements of Bhojpuri and Avadhi) and adoption of creolized English and Fijian words (listed in a glossary) makes it eccentric if not obscure to the standard Hindi reader. The actual speakers of the language are mostly not used to reading it. These books, then, present a number of challenges, ably delineated by

Vijay Mishra. Subramani himself contributes a Foreword "On the Genesis of *Daukā Purān*."

Mishra is one of the few critics adequately equipped to assess Subramani's work. Born in Fiji and well-read in Indian literatures and postcolonial literatures and theory, he is able to provide an outline of Fiji Hindi and reflect on the rediscovery through reading Subramani's work in his vestigial mother tongue. (A brief sign of Mishra's closeness to the world of the novels is the reproduction in his own commentary of the word "rumpus," in *Fiji Mām* apparently denoting a scandalous item of clothing for a female Indian athlete in Fiji—not a usage mentioned in either of two dictionaries I consulted.) Straddling the two worlds of overseas academia and a proletarian family past in Fiji, Mishra can position Subramani's novels in their local socio-historical context and discuss them in Indian and world-literary frameworks.

Running through ideas from Benjamin, Derrida, Apter and others and favoring Moretti over Damrosch or Casanova, Mishra shows how "world literature" comes into being through the authority given it by translations. He then canvases the subaltern history theorists and others to argue that "the silent underside of the national literary project" resists translation and therefore subverts the ideal of "the classic" and a world literary canon. Subaltern literature relies on oral "talk-story/ talanoa"—anecdotal, ironical, self-mocking, digressive, collective: "the subaltern novel eschews the principle of realist conceptual unity" (pp. 14 and 103) as its realism reflects an essentially erratic demotic experience outside of world-historical, even proletarian, ordering systems. Mishra's extensive commentary on the two large picaresque novels illustrates with reference to Fiji's modern history, how people are affected by political upheavals but do not engage with them, sliding sideways under the "vertical" imposition of nation-related power. (There are some interesting comments on Fiji's coups.)

The primary virtue of *Subaltern Narratives in Fiji Hindi Literature* is that it gives us a comprehensive and clear idea of the richness of Subramani's two novels, the second being in keeping with their aims: "to legitimate the subaltern world itself on its own terms; ... not [to start] a new multicultural perspective or world view" (p.126). A critical study cannot really avoid doing the latter, and there are inherent contradictions between Mishra's argument that the language/ experience of the subaltern is untranslatable and the fact that his study spends a lot of time translating Subramani's novels. However, we can qualify that by seeing the very need to provide large slabs of transliterated and translated text (in places sounding more formal than the demotic speech being represented) as signifying the intensely local and recondite nature of both novels and the world they portray. At the same time, Mishra is able to connect Fiji Hindi work to similar localized expressions of colonial adaptation across the globe.

If there are elements that might be further developed, they would include adding a pronunciation guide to the transliteration list of Hindi characters for Anglophone readers (is "c" as used in "cār, four" a hard or soft c or a ch sound?). More importantly in terms of Mishra's

overall argument about subaltern work, greater recognition that Subramani himself is not subaltern is warranted: he is a university professor, travels internationally, and uses English as at least a co-first language (and with reference to his second novel, *Fiji Mām*, he is not a woman). Indeed, Mishra shows that the two novels rest on knowledge of work by V.S. Naipaul and Salman Rushdie, Cervantes, Tulsidas (and I think one echo of Epeli Hau'ofa). The study uses Bakhtin to argue that an authentic depiction of subaltern experience (carnivalesque randomness, focus on the body, food, acceptance of the non-rational) is found in the novels, but again, when *Dauka Puran*'s peasant narrator says, "'Now your history will become topsy-turvy, upside-down, rough shod. That which you educated people thought was useless, which you throw out as refuse, the same I have kneaded into my Dauka Puran'" (p. 47), we have to remember that it is Subramani (occupying in the novel the position of the "Babu" interviewing the speaker) who puts these words into Fijilal's mouth—a kind of Rushdie-esque double irony (recognized by Mishra, p. 137). This adds layers of complexity to the oppositional (world/nation-subaltern) aspect of Mishra's argument. (I kept thinking of Mahasweta Devi's efforts to write subaltern language and stories.) Indeed, the title of Subramani's first "subaltern" epic is an entanglement of oppositional complicity (ahistorical rustic village linked with the literary tradition of the puranas, even if the latter are subaltern relative to the more classical Indian texts).

Informed by Bhabha and Spivak, Mishra is aware of the many problems in shaping the colonial subject in literature and history. These do not, however, negate what his study claims: it is the language of Fiji Hindi itself that is subaltern so that its texts effectively "speak to themselves." We can translate them, but there is a Derridean "incommensurability" between the subaltern and its literary representation (p. 175). This challenges our understanding of world literature and the translatability of everything into global modernity. *Subaltern Narratives in Fiji Hindi Literature* has a finely tuned focus but pushes our thinking into a much wider vision of postcolonial writing.