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## REVIEW

Gounder, Farzana 2011. *Indentured Identities: Resistance and Accommodation in Plantation-era Fiji*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins. Pp. xviii + 345. ISBN 978-90-272-2655-6

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It's got maps and even a couple of old photographs. This was the first thing I noticed on opening *Indentured Identities: Resistance and Accommodation in Plantation-era Fiji*, by Farzana Gounder, a recent PhD graduate from Massey University. The book explores the life narratives of indentured Indians who worked on the plantations of Fiji between 1879 and 1916. The preface titled 'Shards of memories' makes the ties between the author and her research explicit, and sets the tone for this account that is both beautiful and harrowing, both compelling and scholarly, and both personal and political. If you are in the habit of skipping through the front matter: don't. The roman numeral pages, from its dedication to the list of glosses, tell the story of this book.

The book proper begins by introducing us to the seven Girmityas, the Indian laborers indentured to work in Fiji, whose life narratives are the subject of the book. Note is made of the extent to which background, ethnicity, gender, marital status, recruitment and indenture of these Girmityas are typical, and of those voices that are unheard. The research is then introduced through a brief general overview of the linguistic and narrative approaches, and of the chapters to come. The overview of the chapters shows that the book is, in fact, roughly divided in two: the first half is largely the research background and

the second half is the analysis or restorying of the narratives. I say roughly and largely because the division is not neat: the author uses the narratives themselves to explicate her approach to them.

In Chapter 2, one of the narratives is used to provide background knowledge about Girmityas. Chapter 3 explains the context of the narratives as data, which were originally recorded for a Hindi-language Fijian radio station beginning in 1979, using extracts from the narratives to demonstrate how the interviews were co-constructed. In Chapter 4, the focus on methodological considerations continues in the admirably thorough and critical account of the transcription, transliteration and translation of the narratives, again illustrated with narrative extracts. The use of narrative extracts to illustrate the processes of the research continues in Chapters 5 and 6. Unfortunately these two chapters lack the rigor that one might expect given that of Chapter 3, and lack the breadth that one might expect given their length. Chapter 5 uses Labov's (Labov & Waletzky, 1967/2003) structural approach with one of the narratives to show how the narrative was constructed. This chapter has several references to literature that goes beyond the structural approach, namely Ochs and Capps' (2001) dimensional approach, but these differences are unacknowledged. This is unfortunate because the contrasts between dramatic and everyday narratives and the tensions between narrative as activity and text of the dimensional approach might have usefully informed the discussion of habitual narratives and possibly issues raised in Chapter 6 as well. Chapter 6 uses Bamberg's (1997) positioning analysis with the same narrative to show how it was reconstructed, that is, how identity and agency were performed through the narratives. I found myself wishing for a more thorough discussion of the issues this chapter raises about positioning, which are presented in less than two pages. Gounder then unites the two types of analysis; again, I wished for a more thorough discussion of what appears to be a novel and important contribution to narrative analysis.

Chapters 7 through 12 are an impressively detailed analysis of the other six narratives (one of them is in two parts in two chapters). We are carefully guided through each narrative in terms of structural and positioning analysis, so that they are genuinely woven together. The analysed narratives are broken up into segments, which are attractively set off from the text with table-like formatting. They are cleverly organized so that those who want to wallow in the linguistic detail of narrowly transcribed, transliterated and glossed Fijian Hindi text can do so by focusing on the left hand side of the tables, while those who wish to go directly to the English translation may focus on the right

side. There is surprisingly good flow between the text and the narratives in the tables, making these chapters far more readable than might be expected with such a detailed analysis. Nonetheless the brief introduction and overview of the structure of each narrative is essential reading. So, too, is the summary and discussion that concludes each of these chapters, which identify themes not only relevant to the individual narratives, but to the history of Girit. Although these vary in length, in general I found that they did not say quite as much as I was hoping for. Given the overall length of each chapter, however, brevity may have been compulsory.

The last two chapters do much more than merely bring the book to a conclusion. Chapter 13 sets out a model for narrativization that some will think needs to be explained, supported, and argued for more thoroughly and possibly even presented much earlier. It may well be the case that this model arose through the research process, but that does not mean that temporal location is best mapped onto the corresponding spatial location. It would have enhanced Chapter 6. This could have allowed a single concluding chapter that focused on the themes that arose through the analysis, some of which involve the cultural and historical situatedness of identity and agency, and are interesting enough to deserve a fuller treatment than they receive. As it is, Chapter 14 is a rather mechanical thesis-style conclusion to a book that is anything but mechanical.

This book achieves a difficult balance between the need for technical detail and readability. Much of its readability is because it is a history that many of us may be completely unaware of, but that resonates with other histories we do know about. It is, therefore, a quietly powerful book, one that makes us think not only about language and narrative, but also about the very real people whose lives were lived and relived through language and narrative. This is a praiseworthy accomplishment.

## References

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