V.S. Naipaul once wrote that Indian indentured labourers to Trinidad came from an 'old and perhaps an ancient India' untouched by 'the great Indian reform movements of the nineteenth century'. The Indian migrants Naipaul referred to were part of a movement of humanity which began soon after the abolition of slavery. In response to a request by white settlers in the sugar growing colonies for labour, the British Government turned to India and began recruiting workers from the populous United Provinces (Uttar Pradesh) and Bihar in the first instance to work in the sugar plantations of British Guiana (Guyana), Dutch Guiana (Surinam), Trinidad, Mauritius, South Africa and, finally, Fiji. This movement of labour spanned some eighty years, from 1840 to 1917, when the 'new system of slavery' was finally abolished. Thus began the saga of indenture, or girmit, as it came to be known by the indentured labourers themselves. The 'agreement' that had to be signed, through a characteristic process of linguistic transformation, became girmit, the contract now representing an entire ethos, a legend, a tyranny, and, finally, a history and an ideology. What V.S. Naipaul referred to was in fact a background which would affect the psychology of these migrant Indians and would become, in years to come, a defining feature of the three million or so Indians of the Indian diaspora. Since these Indians came, on the whole, from a relatively homogeneous part of India, they developed a language (a variant of Bhojpuri and Standard Hindi) which quickly became the language of the indentured labourers regardless of their place of origin. Such was the impact of this language that indentured labourers to these plantations from other linguistic groups (Tamil, Telegu, Malayalam and Bengali for instance) quickly adopted this language. Subsequent free migrants too, notably from Gujerat and the Punjab, acquired this language with a speed that has confounded linguists.

Some 60,000 Indians came to Fiji during indenture which, for Fiji, began in 1879 with the arrival of 467 labourers on the Leonidas. The initial batch of indentured labourers were from North India, mainly Hindus and peasant in origin. By the time the system came to an end the Indian population in Fiji stood at a few thousand above the 60,000 figure with small additions to it being made by the migration of free traders from India. The population also reflected in a microcosm the caste and linguistic divisions of India itself. The unified experience of indenture and the remarkable linguistic homogeneity that followed helped in the creation of a phenomenon to which I gave the term 'Girmit ideology' some fifteen years ago. Though internally ruptured and empirically elusive, this 'Girmit ideology' unites the experience of indentured labourers of the Indian diaspora, from Natal to Fiji, from Mauritius to Trinidad. Like any ideology, however, its strength lay precisely in its capacity to falsify reality and project itself unwittingly, though appealingly, as an imaginary set of beliefs which nevertheless is invoked as a point of reference for purposes of (spurious) legitimation.

The Indian fragment in Fiji constructed imaginary belief systems for its own self-authentication, self-generation and legitimation. But the Indians themselves were essentially a fragment which had been forcefully wrenched from its centre. For the Girmitiyas (the indentured labourers) their life in Fiji was retrospectively seen as a deception played upon them by recruiting agents (arkatis) who convinced them of future possibilities filled with millenarian expectations. This dual process - the logic of a fragment and the process of millenarianism - led to a Fiji Indian cultural complex which is both specific to that racial group as well as connects it to the larger Girmitiya diaspora around the world. As Australian settler society knows only too well, one of the characteristics of any fragment is that it very quickly becomes fossilised. The principle of dynamic growth which is at the very centre of the contradictions of the land left behind is replaced by a synchronic principle which 'stills' history and constructs a world based upon fantasies which
have no real foundation in fact. In this respect the Fiji Indian fragment was no different.

The imaginative world of Satendra Nandan grows out of the special predicament of this Indian fragment in Fiji. It is built around an intuitive grasp of the Girmit ideology, which Nandan occasionally blasts open, often parodies, but invariably enters into through a process of self-dialogisation. To read Satendra Nandan's fables about Fiji has been, for me, a kind of a return to a past which I had repressed through something akin to racial amnesia. His fables confront me with uncanny specular images which haunt me and which rekindle a language and a cultural complex I left behind so many years ago. Like a ghost from one's past, Nandan's fictions suddenly energise my powers of imagination as they take me back to a world no longer available to me directly. What are the constituents of Satendra Nandan's fictive world that, years later, remind me of my own rootlessness, lack of permanence and, as if to over-compensate for an absence, my almost perverse idolisation of great (yet decaying) civilisations?

The first thing that strikes me about The Wounded Sea is the enormous weight of an 'anxiety of influence' which stalks these pages. Behind the literature of the Indian diaspora stands the gigantic figure of V.S. Naipaul. It was Naipaul who gave form and language to the Girmit ideology; it was Naipaul who gave the Indian diaspora a distinctive discourse and a consciousness. Two fictive figures borrowed from Naipaul - Biswas and Ganesh Pandit - sum up Nandan's character types: the tragic hero, Biswas, trapped in the contradictions of the fragment and its fictions, finally, fails to recognise himself in the mirror, and the comic hero, Ganesh, seeking release from the girmi ideology through the mastery of a colonial language. By introjecting the Girmit ideology and transforming it into a comic discourse, the comic heroes plunge on regardless; the tragic hero, a shadow of the totality left behind, play out Gautama's curse from which release is possible only through Rama, himself banished. In a way Naipaul is the literary precursor for Nandan, a 'structure of possibility', defining limits and suggesting alternatives. Great writers have the capacity to do this since great writers, as Foucault once said, are founders of discursivity. Naipaul is the founder par excellence of the Girmitiya discourse. What other writers of the Indian diaspora will have to do is embellish that discourse, add to it, challenge it, destabilise it and yet recognise that founding discourses - like those of Marx or Freud - can never be dislodged. In this respect I believe Satendra Nandan adds to the Naipaul discourse through a writing which modifies it. Where Naipaul, the monolingual Girmitiya, transformed a Hindi discourse into English, Nandan brings the discourse of the colonised to the fore, thereby simultaneously appropriating and abrogating the language of the coloniser, and problematising bilingual writing itself.

Naipaul finds a centre, a fictive order by, initially, positioning himself at the very heart of oppositions and tensions in the Girmi ideology itself. It is a device not unknown to Western literature, and certainly not unknown to Indian literature where the authorial voice often expresses itself in a signature line such as kahata kabira suno bhai sadhu (‘says Kabir, the poet, listen to me fellow saints'). The centre in Nandan's fiction is also the self; the beginning of all his narratives is the writer himself. This is not to say that what we have here are simply autobiographical pieces. No, that is certainly not the case. In fact Nandan transforms his 'memorial reconstructions' (since the memories are really of 'texts') through a strategy of polyphonic composition. Here the narrator's own sympathies never remain fixed as other voices destabilise the seeming monopolical imperialism of the narrator. As a consequence a plethora of voices invade Nandan's text as the various utterances of the grandfather, the father, the son, the Fijians, the school master or the priest struggle for momentary ascendancy. In the Mahabharata such multiplicity of voices is marked by the use of the Sanskrit verb uvaca (said or spoke) alongside the speaker to indicate his/her quite independent narrative presence.

Discovering the Naipaul text in Nandan is, however, not necessarily the central nor indeed the primary role of the informed reader. What the reader like myself discovers beyond the influence of the precursor text are the ways in which the Indian fragment reconstituted itself and the texts that framed the life of the fragment. The crucial text that emerges in these fables is the Ramacaritamanasa of Tulasidasa (1532-1623), the Avadhi-Hindi re-writing of the Sanskrit classic the Ramayana. Popularly known as the 'Ramayan', this vernacular version of the Sanskrit classic seems to have acquired the status of the 'Book' among the Hindu Fiji Indians. The concept of the 'Book' or the single 'Holy Text' invested with all moral
and spiritual authority is something new though it is clear that peasant North India had in fact given the Tulasidas Ramayana something of this auratic status. Yet in India, where textual heterogeneity and ritual seem to be the over-riding principles, the power of the single book had to compete with other texts and rituals. In the Fiji Indian fragment, probably in response to the Christian missionary's emphasis on the Bible as the ultimate 'Book', the Ramayana found an extraordinary receptivity and soon became the pre-eminent text. In many ways the principle of fictive order that Naipaul imposes finds an earlier expression in the dharmic order always already present in Tulasidasas's 'book'. The narrative structure of Rama's banishment is already there, as are the discourses on suffering and salvation, the renouncer and the man-of-the-world, and the paths that lead one towards human perfection.

The narrative of Rama's banishment is an underlying structural imperative of Fiji Indian culture and society. Its force lies not in any vulgar homologisation - as if Fiji Indians consciously played out this structure - rather it is a function of the complex transformation of the fossil society itself as it attempts to construct a narrative to explain its own existence in terms of the only available and shared discourse in which a similar act of displacement or banishment had been documented. Satendra Nandan's work expresses the agony of banishment in other forms but the narratives are written against the backdrop of this 'primal' banishment. Thus the complete inclusiveness of the village world, its closed world-order and most importantly its myths and idioms are informed, at every point, by a complex transformational process which, finally, left the Fiji Indian with an ideology which was dated and bereft of any revolutionary impetus. A fossil retreated into its memories of a prior narrative which was itself an uncritical glorification of a mythic past, with its sexism, racism and caste ideology intact.

It is this dominance of a fictional imperative that takes me to the second crucial historical 'moment' after the foundation event itself that informs The Wounded Sea. This 'moment' was the Fijian rebellion of May 14, 1987. Exactly 108 years after the arrival of the Leonidas in Fijian waters, the Fijian coup confounded the Fiji Indians at the very moment when, through political power, one kind of millenarian fulfilment was within their grasp. If the Girmit ideology was a consequence of a repression based upon unfulfilled expectations, if the Fiji Indian could be cured only by a political act which would legitimate his/her existence in a land to which he/she had been banished, then the Fijian rebellion effectively brought an end to that possibility. The repressed returned to haunt them and the Indian fragment was left in a state of shock. The fictions which the fragment had internalised - the pre-eminence of parliamentary democracy, the contradictory obsession with all things colonial and Indian Ð when my father built his house in 1959, the first thing he did was cover the wooden floorboards with lino and place pictures of Gandhi and Nehru on the walls (he also painted the outside walls of the house blue and red) Ð manifested themselves for what they were, an empty ideology responding to psychological rather than social needs. The Girmit ideology lay in tatters, its believers distraught; there was no self-sustaining belief system since the ideology was always retrospective, a racial memory. The cure for the Fiji Indians lay in political power and this was denied them. Without the dynamic tensions of the centre left behind, the Indian fossil turned inwards and panicked. It could not respond through any radical action, since its own commitment to Fiji remained so deeply ambiguous. The Fiji-Indians, as a relatively homogeneous and self-sufficient community, trapped in a cultural time-warp which existed only as a fragment and not as a political totality, relapsed into a pathetic rhetoric which could not grasp the real issues at stake.

The peculiar logic of the Indian psychology and even the inevitability of the Fijian rebellion seem to me to be so prophetically implicit in Satendra Nandan's fictions. In this respect The Wounded Sea offers both representations of the fragment as well as its simultaneous critique. If literature is to be critically read as much by the unsaid, the marginalised, as by the said, the central, then Nandan's curious absences, negations and self-enclosed imaginative worlds are equally important points of entry for purposes of critical interpretation. In other words, the ideological flaws in this fragment's world-order from which Nandan himself is not immune and which makes immensely problematic Nandan's own position on the fundamental question of race in Fiji (marked, for instance, in his rejection of the Fijian 'Other' and the failure to define the Fiji-Indian self in terms of this 'Other') are heightened precisely by the self-enclosed world of The Wounded Sea. It is a kind of a black-hole theory of race relations in which self-sufficiency and gestalt replace interaction and mutual dependence. And in this crucial sense Nandan is never able to
transcend the blinkered racial lebenswelt of the Fiji Indian. Thus when the Fijians do invade the text, they are there as already formed texts, as racial stereotypes such as the comic village chief and the screaming brothers of the Fijian girl framed, finally, in an essentially scatological discourse. It is informative at this point to recall the way in which the entire tradition of the carnivaleque and scatology is so much more powerfully deployed by another Pacific writer Epeli Hau'ofa in his hilarious Kisses in the Nederends (Auckland, 1987). Here we get an ethnographic narrative that uses the oral traditions of the culture of the informants and grafts them upon a massively silenced underside of the bourgeois novel. Rabelais and the picaresque rather than the dominant discourses of realism now invade the texts of the Other as it seeks to legitimate itself through writing. In Hau'ofa one gets a reworking of the parable of the chief of the Nambakawara tribe stoically responding to Levi-Strauss's notes, his ciphers, on paper. Nandan, however, avoids any real encounter with the Fijian Other because he has no unmediated access to it (as Epeli Hau'ofa has). For both races - Indian and Fijian - the 'Other' has existed only as scattered idiomatic phrases (kai si bakola, kai Idia, magaichinamu, rakshasha, junglee, etc.). The 'Other' never became a legitimate object of knowledge in its own right. A hundred years later neither the Fijian nor the Indian understood each other's social practices. And Nandan's fiction refuses to intervene except to caricature.

Throughout The Wounded Sea the generic conventions and discursive domain of comedy mediates between the irreconcilable yearnings of the rootless fragment for its past, and its desire to adapt to the new land. Humour, as any reader of Naipaul's Miguel Street would remember, is one way of bypassing censure and self-criticism. But the comic dimension is also precarious since it cannot, finally, prevent the hero from relapsing into madness: those whom the gods wish to destroy are first transformed into comedians and madmen. In one of the fables in Part II of The Wounded Sea the period of five years ('Five years have past' wrote Wordsworth) in an institution symbolises yet another banishment and typifies yet another possibility for the Fiji Indian - racial insanity. In this regard the hero's own affair with Joan is superimposed upon the fascination with things Indian, upon the 'Sitaness' of India, as it arose out of the fragment's reading of the pre-eminent text of the Hindus, the Ramayana. 'Our fate in Fiji', writes Nandan 'had echoes of the Ramayana: exile; suffering; separation; battles but no return' (p. 88). Yet this India too, through other forms of mediation, is never available to the Fiji Indian in its true, historic form. Its contradictions, its own multiplicities (linguistic, religious, cultural) are glossed over and replaced by its artificial projections, notably by Bombay Cinema. This Cinema projects a homogeneous India which is very much like the Fiji Indian fragment in that it is not fractured by linguistic, religious or caste divisions. The duplicities, the illusions of Bombay Cinema, reconstruct, for the Fiji Indians, a naive confirmation precisely of their own historical memory: Sita, the actress Nirupa Roy, the 'filmi' song 'ek ghar banaunga tere ghar ke samne'. In to this world enter the figures of Joan, the Indian expatriate, the lawyer, the politician, the priest, the magistrate, Birbal, Gautam, Ratu Reddy all of whom struggle to find a ground for their existence in a world no longer available to them in its simple colonial form. The Fiji Indian postcolonial must continue to live uneasily in a climate where the label of 'migrant race' will be periodically directed against them. As recently as 14 August 1991, Ratu Mara demonstrated the effectiveness of this label when he emphasised the need for a 'migrant race' to accept, more or less uncritically, a subservient political role in the new postcolonial world order.

Out of this conjunction emerges Nandan's fictional autobiographical pieces which represent the essentially tragic world of the Fiji Indians. Its comic dimension is a social reality since it is an unconscious survival mechanism. Since tragedy is always around the corner, comedy alone can triumph over (even if momentarily) the immense rootlessness of the fragment. Satendra Nandan's tales explore a fragment society searching for concordance and a centre. Though the centre is never found, the pathos of the search continues to be played out through the comic mode: Mr Krishna Datt, another Labor minister in the Bavadra Government and the 'character' who snores heavily in the fourth part of The Wounded Sea (he has his own version of the events narrated by Nandan at this juncture) told me how comedy (of the Fiji-Indian variety) sustained them during those terrible days of political incarceration in Borron House. Behind the immense laughter and generosity of the Fiji Indian lies a trauma of almost Popol Vuh proportions. 'The Day of the Colonel' made that trauma a condition of being since the myths which were constructed to ward off certain insanity were destroyed forever. Like the tale of the Ancient Mariner, the act of writing, the act of telling, can only gesture helplessly towards the precarious unity of word and deed.
lost during the original banishment. For the twice-banished 'race' of the Indian diaspora generally, Satendra Nandan's writing is a cure for the return of the repressed.

[This is a slightly revised version of a speech made at the launching of Satendra Nandan's The Wounded Sea (Sydney: Simon and Schuster, 1991) in Fremantle on March 6, 1991].

Murdoch University