

# Migrants' Memories : Migrant Labourers in Abhimanyu Anat's Novel *Lal Pasina* or *Red Sweat* (1977)

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## Abstract

Mass migration can be forced or voluntary. People are forced by agencies to move from one place to another. People also move from their original location on their own. Migrants settle down in their new location temporarily or permanently. As they make their journey and relocate themselves in their new location, they continue their cultural practices imbibing some from the local culture. Jasbir Jain in her book titled *Writers of Indian Diaspora: Theory and Practice* (1998) rightly states “Cultures travel, take root or get dislocated and individuals internalize nostalgia or experience amnesia”(11). Such people have memories of their original homeland, memories of their journey and relocation. Some express these through different narrative forms including stories, songs, personal narratives, novels and so on. These are precious resources and deserve to be documented and studied as this body of narratives “occupies a significant position between cultures and countries”(Jain 11). The Marutius writer Abhimanyu Anat's Hindi novel *Lal Pasina* (1977) which can be translated as *Red Sweat* or *Blood Sweat*

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is such a narrative. It tells the story of the migrants from India who travelled through sea route to Mauritius in the nineteenth century to earn their living by working in sugarcane fields. It is an account of exploitation, human suffering and struggle. The novel is also a reservoir of cultural narratives and a document on a phase of history of Mauritius. The aim of this paper is to foreground these aspects in the novel highlighting how memories constitute history of a community.

**Key Words:** Migration, memories, journey, Mauritius, indentured labourers

## **1.The Outline**

The paper begins with a discussion on the relationship between memory and history to show that people's collective memory of indentured labourers that come through their experience, memoirs, songs, tales, myths, folklore and other forms of narratives including fiction contribute to the formation of history. Then the paper describes the historical backdrop which the novelist has adopted in writing the novel on the indentured labourers. The next part of the paper gives a detailed introduction to the novelist. Then the paper gives a short the story line of the novel followed by the issues highlighted by the novelist in the novel including the living conditions and cultural practices in the plantations. The last part is the Conclusion which sums up the kind of representation we get of the people and their life.

## **2. Memory and History**

The discourse of indentured labour is intimately associated with history

and memory. It is pertinent here to understand their relations. Received knowledge informs us that historical narratives are factual and objective and therefore scientific. Hence they should be valued more than any other imaginary forms such as folklore and fiction. However, since the middle of the nineteenth century, this view has been challenged. Hegel called historiography as interpretation, whereas Levi-Strauss states that historical facts are constituted. Northrop Frye calls historiographical narratives as emplotment. As Hayden White explains, “ During the nineteenth century, four Major theorists of historiography rejected the myth of objectivity prevailing among Ranke’s followers. Hegel, Droysen, Nietzsche, and Croce all viewed interpretation as the soul of historiography, and each tried to work out a classification of its types” ( 1982, .52).

If we view history as not no-objective, we ascribe its inadequacy in constructing the past. If we call historiography as memory, interpretation, construct and emplotment, we make its comparison with other forms such as memory, folklore(songs, tales and anecdotes), and fiction. Memory not only represents the official history but it interprets the past. History is official whereas memory is personal memory is passed down from generation to generation through different forms of narratives it tells about the history of a community. Some historians opines that memoir, speeches, debates, autobiography, collective memory is found in the forms of practices and ideas embedded in a culture which people learn assert their identities. David W. Blight compares Memory and History and points out that Memory “ however, is often treated as a sacred set of potentially absolute meanings and stories, possessed as the heritage or identity of a community” (2).

For Blight the role of memory is crucial in the reconstruction of the past. For this reason Paul Recouer states “Memory Is of the Past”(15

These views explain two arguments. First, the archival historiography is inadequate, and second, it should be supplemented by other forms such as myth, fiction and folklore. Using these two arguments, I would like to use the novel- *Lal Pasina* and narratives of the indentured labourers and suggest that they may also be used to reconstruct the past in addition to the colonial accounts about them.

### **3.Historiography as Interpretation**

Hayden White, a Professor of Historical Studies and a renowned scholar from the University of California in his book *Tropics of Discourse* subverts the traditional notion of historical accounts as facts. He states that “critics of historiography as a discipline, have taken more radical views on the matter of interpretation in history, going so far to argue that historical accounts are nothing but for understanding of historical progress in general”(1982, 55). White takes help from Levi Strauss and Northrope Frye to substantiate his argument. Strauss concludes that “Historical facts are in no sense “given” to the historian but are rather “constituted” by the historian himself by abstraction and as though under the threat of an infinite regress (qtd. in White, 55). Strauss further adds that, “ if historical facts are constituted rather than given so too they are selected for an audience. This means that in Levi Strauss’s view history is never simply history but always history for history written in the interest of some intra-scientific aim or vision ( qtd. in White, 1982, 56).

#### **4. Historiography as Emplotment**

Northrop Frye views historiography as emplotment. As White points out A historical interpretation , like a poetic fiction, can be said to appeal to its readers as a plausible representation of the world by virtue of its implicit appeal to those “pregeneric plot-structures” or archetypical story forms that define the modalities of a given culture’s literary endowment” (58). As White understands Frye, just as there can be no explanation in history without a story, so too there can be no story without a plot by which to make of it a story of a particular kind ( 61).

#### **5.The historical backdrop**

The British Government in India introduced a system called “ Indentured System “ in 1834. Under this system, labourers from India could go and work as indentured labourers in different parts of the world under fixed terms and contracts. Because the labourers had to sign agreement, for them the system was called *girmit*. A lot of people from Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Bengal went as labourers to work in Mauritius, Fiji and Dutch Guiana and worked as labourers in the sugar cane fields run by the European plantation owners. They were subjected to hardship, ill-treatment and lived in inhuman conditions. The novel highlights how aspects of their culture such as songs, rituals and other forms of cultural practices are reflected in their narratives. When we talk about diaspora, we tend to think of the elite and educated people, but there is little discussion on illiterate and the lesser gods who migrate and settle in another location. Hence I have chosne to take up this novel which deals with the subaltern Diaspora.

It is to be mentioned here that the plantation owners were capitalists who were influential members of the British Parliament and they had their ways of manipulating the law and also treating the labourers. The following song sums up the purpose of the agreement:

*Aaye hum sab hind se karan naukari het*

*'Girmit' kati kathin se phir sarkari khet.*

We came from India to do service here,

Completed girmit (agreement)with difficulty and then toiled on government field well”( qtd. in Kumar, 1).

This paper relates to the conditions of workers who travelled to Mauritius and lived there. It will primarily study the novel by Abhimanyu Anant and explore mainly three aspects- the journey, living condition and cultural practices. . For historical facts the paper relies on historical texts on the subject.

The novel describes how people are transported from their original places. They are transported like cattle in large number. A writer states it was no better than the slaves were taken to the plantation sites. The ship was overcrowded. In one ship there used to be more than 500 people loaded like sacks and bags. There used to be smell- emanating from below the ship. Many workers were unaware of where they were going. They were told they would be taken to a good place where they could have enough sugar cane to eat and good tea to drink. They would have enough leisure. They could play flute but when they reached the place, the actual scene

was different. One of the labourers describes:

... this *arkati* fooled me and brought me to his house. Once there, I saw about 100 men sitting in one line and about 60 women in another...*arkati* explained things to the people there “ Look, brothers, the place where you work you will never to suffer any sorrows. There will never be any kind of problems there. You will eat a lot of bananas and a stomach full of sugarcane, and play flutes in relaxation.” ( qtd. in Kumar, 167) .

There also private papers and personal narratives (that of Munshi Rahman Khan, banarasi Das Chaturvedi, for instance) of the immigrants that correlate the fictional narrative and supplement the novel in question. As Laura Marcus points out “Autobiography is both introspective and centrally concerned with the problematic of time and memory”(2).

The immigrants felt cheated. But there was no alternative. They had to slug. There was no medicine, no food. They were not aware of the rules of indentured labourers. Many died on the way. Many fell sick. Diaries of Captains record that many people died of cholera. The Acts had provisions to treat the workers well but all the rules were violated. The handbook for Surgeons in the Coolie emigration service which was issued by the colonial office had these rules encoded but the coolies had no access to that. From the official documents we come to know that the coolies were given food according to the dietary provisions made for them. Provisions for food include, Rice, Dal, Ghee or oil, salt, onions, Tamrind. Scholars, however state that ‘ indentured labourers were not properly fed during their journey

in the high seas, which led to sickness and mortality on the ship”(qtd. in Kumar 102). The labourers carried dry food like chura and satto during bad weather. There is a song describing this. A labourer asks his wife to prepare chura so that he can carry that with him. It says:

Chiura kutu chiura kutu sawaron tiriya re

Are ham jabo sawaron Maghre deswa re

Roi roi sawanre chiura kuteli

Are unsi hunsi umar ban havele re

*O pretty woman do husk chura*

*O pretty woman I shall go to the country of Magh*

*The pretty tearful woman husks chura and shows a smiling face,*

*{Her husband} boosts the morals with smiles).*

(qtd. in Kumar, 104)

Before going into the issues, it will be helpful if we know a little about the novelist.

## **6. The author**

Abhimanyu Anat is a famous novelist from Mauritius. He was born in a village called Triyol located in the northern part of Mauritius on 9 August 1937. He worked as a teacher since his 18<sup>th</sup> year. He was also a teacher of drama at the Youth Ministry for three years. He has written more than



seventy books in Hindi including novels, verses, prose and essays. They include *Cactus ke Dant*, *Nagphani Ke Ulljhi Saanse*, *Gunga Itihas*, *Insan Aur Machine*, *Jab Kaal Ayega Yam Raj*, *Laharon Ki Beti*, *Ek Bigha Pyaar*, *Virodh* and so on. His writings depict the fate of the indentured labourers working in the sugar cane fields. He is known for description of daily life realism, and as a sharp critic of exploitation and injustice. His writings also highlight the injustices and hardship experienced by common people. Anat has been honoured with many awards. He received the Sahitya Akademi Award, Soviet Land Nehru Awards, Maithili Sharan Gupt Sanman, Yashpal Puraskar, Jan Sanskruti Snman, Uttar Pradesh Hindi Santhan Puraskar and so on.

## **7. The novel**

The novel *Lal Pasina or Blood Sweat* was published first in Hindi in 1977. It is yet to be translated into English. It depicts the life and struggle of the indentured labourers in Mauritius who are taken from India showing them beautiful dreams. They are carried away by the dream, but as they land up there, they have nothing but only pain and suffering. These labourers produce very good crops through hard labour, sweating day and night. The European plantation owners benefitted the crops of sweat blood of the workers but the workers' life was miserable. As a member of the same community, Anat had first experience. He has fictionalized their problems in a realistic manner by describing their day to day life.

### **7.1.The storyline of the novel- *Lalpasina*.**

The story of the novel is set at the historical backdrop which describes

how people from Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Bengal were transported to Mauritius to work in the sugar plantation fields in the nineteenth century owned by the British and French capitalists. The three main characters in the novel are Kundan, Mangru and Kishan. They represent the labour class. They work hard shedding their sweat and blood, make the barren land filled with crops, but they starve and suffer. Their life is miserable. The novelist vividly portrays their life. They are beaten up, their women are sexually exploited. But this is not the only thing. They live a life of community of migrants in solidarity remembering their homeland maintain their cultural practices. The reservoir of cultural capital they inherit from their home land remain with them and in many cases bind them together, sometimes longing for their homeland.

### **7.1.2. Life on the Plantations**

Labourers who landed on the plantations found the place new. They lost the freedom they used to enjoy way back home. It was a new world. They realized that they were brought there only to work. They had supervisors to supervise their work. They had to work from morning to evening. They had no leisure. Women were exploited by the supervisors. For instance, in the novel the character Meera has been assaulted by the supervisor. If someone raises voice, they are accused and punished. In the novel Kundan, Kishan and Mangru who rebel against the authorities are subject to punishment and ill-treatment. They have to spend their time in jail. The labourers are punished for petty things such as for not coming to work due to illness, breaking the token given to them and so on. Kundan is whipped and beaten on his back with a sugar cane. The novelist also describes the

kicking of the Saheb to Lalan and Ruplal with shoes. He says: “ Everyone was aware of the experience the labourers of the colony went through. It was as if someone throws a stone at the dog peacefully lying down in front of a courtyard. The dog barks helplessly wagging its tail behind its hind legs” (Anat, 45). They are put in jail and move to hospital if they fall terribly sick. In the novel we can see that Jatan is dead for some reason nobody knows. People gave different reasons: “Some said: he had been working in empty stomach for three days. Some body said he had fever for last few days.” (Anat, 67; Translation mine). His death in mysterious circumstances tells many things about the employers. They are given rice as wages that is not worth eating. Anat points out “even horse or donkey would not smell it” (46). When the labourers are engaged in songs and music at the end of the day’s hard work, that was seen as mere noise. For instance, Langdawa Saheb sent people to stop them. He calls them the following morning and enquires why they make such a noise” (52). But the labourers sing and rebuke their employers calling them names.

Aurre re muse Langdwa ke raj me

Kuran ke bada bhagwa

Dum hilal se okar to banal batwa

Muse re to ke raj me

Gor khete ke mol wa

Aadmi wa kuta kata sardarwa.

*In the regime of Langdwa sahib*

*The dog shows his power*

*He achieves his goal by wagging his tail*

*The rat also shows its power here*

*It is hard to say the Sardar is a man or a dog. (Anat, 54)*

This shows that even suffering and resistance has poetic flavor which is a rare element.

We can decipher the kind of struggle the workers have to undergo. The novelist has vividly portrayed their life and struggle in the plantation. We find that Kundan is jailed for many days. When he is ill he is shifted to hospital. The hospital is also not a good place to live in. Along with Kundan Mangru is also falsely accused and put in jail. Kishan who takes up the leadership to fight for the rights of the labourers is eventually killed. His son, Madan who takes up from Kishan is also subject to humiliation and hardship. Nandu one of the labourers is beaten up on his back. To make it more painful, the employers put red chili powder on the wounds. The supervisors and the white masters on the other hand exploit the labourers and their women. Daud is asked by the master's son to send his wife to him to spend one night with him. The workers continue their fight amidst hardship and suppression. Though they are not able to defeat their exploiters, they do give a strong fight without succumbing to the pressure.

### 7.1.3. Cultural life

As they reach the island after travelling in the ship they tend to think that they have lost their castes. Consequently, they regard themselves as one community forgetting their castes. They also forget their identity. One of the characters rightly says: “ In India I was known as Lakhan Thakur, but here No.45 ”(Anat 237). In India the person enjoys high social rank but in the plantation, he is just a coolie.

It is interesting to look at people's life in on the plantations. The migrants are from rich cultural backgrounds. They carry with them their religious beliefs, customs and cultural practices. They practise these religious rituals like aarti, listening to Ram katha, gurmukhi, chanting of Gayathri mantra, Hanuman Chalisa and reading the *Ramayan*. In the novel the characters read *the Ramayana* and recite *Hanuman Chalisa* (Anat 238). Many sects and sadhus also exist and people follow them.

They observe the religious festivals even in their new land followed the rituals for marriage and other social ceremonies. Rituals of birth and Death are also observed in the manner they had in their homeland. The following song for marriage collected by Suchita Ramdin is an example:

Rosejil se aawe bariyatiya ta, lataant(mandap) me paani bahata

Kerpip me jene-tene logwa, samdhiniya ke soch paral ba

(The groom's procession has come from Rose Hill, due to heavy rains wedding pavilion is flooding with water. The people in the groom's procession are in a pathetic situation, as they are

not used to rain. The bride's mother is anxious that the groom's people may sulk.) (qtd. in Kumar 141). Another song on the birth of a child can be cited as example:

Uthal aj sohar gawe re mahaliya, horila ke janam bhaile aj horila  
Kedali ke banawa katu re beliya, bundawa ras chwawela gulab  
bundhwa

*(Come let's sing sohar, for our son is born*

*I got the juice drops from vine in the banana forest...)*(qtd. in  
Kumar 143)

The following song is sung by the mother of a new born child:

Sasu aibe na hamar, are ka karihe

Abatan apan amma bolaibo

Hame rangilli ke kehu karihen

Hame aisan sundari ke ka kehu kahi

Babuwa kelawana ke bahin bolaibo

Halawa banaike bhauji bolaibo

Gotani na aihe hamar ka karihen

Ham rangile ke ka kehu kari

Hamara aisan sundari ke ka kari

*My mother-in-law does not come, what to do*

*I will call my mother for the perfume massage of my baby*

*I am so colourful, what can anybody say*

*My sister-in-law has failed to turn up*

*So what, I will call my sister to baby-sit my son*

*I'm so beautiful, what can anyone say. (qtd. in Kumar, 144)*

In case of death, the corpse if a Hindu is carried on and it was called arthi, rathi or tikthi. The burning of a corpse was dagh dena or dagdh. The cremation place is called smasan, soraghat. The cremation rites are followed even in the sugar cane plantation.

## **Festivals**

Majority of the indentured labourers were from the northern part of India. So they celebrated the north Indian festivals even in Mauritius. Festivals like Diwali, Holi, Phalgun, Muharam and Eid were celebrated by the indentured labourers in Mauritius. Patrick Beaton describes the celebration of Muharram as the following:

There is one great religious festival, if it can be so called [sic], which is observed once every year by the whole Indian population, and by some of the lower classes among the creoles is known in Mauritius as the the

Yemesh.... Corresponds with the feast[sic] of the *Muhhurum* in india (qtd. in Kumar 148).Prabhu Mahapatra too describes in his article the Tazia procession which was seen by the British as a law and order problem. In the novel too we find instances of celebration of some of these festivals. These festivals bound the laborers as one as Indians living outside India.

People who came back from the island for some reason were looked down upon as they considered to have lost their caste by travelling in the same ship. They are also made to pay fine if they are to be taken back. Some told a researcher that their people had not received any letter or telegrams they had sent their home from Mauritius.

After they come back from the island, they are penalized for losing their caste. They were branded as *tapuha* (from island) made to take a dip in the Ganges. For this reason many were not willing to return even if they were not happy.

## 8. Memory

Memory is one aspect of migrant life that remains with them and connects to their former homeland. The immigrants have fond memories of their former homeland. When Kundan sees a “Maina” in Mauritius, he feels nostalgic. The narrator says “he was not so interested to see a Manina in India but when he saw it Mauritius, he loved that bird immensely” (17). He is reminded of his place in India. The recital of songs, performance of rituals are all part of their cultural memory the migrants have. Through this novel we get an idea about the a slice of history. The characters of Kundan, Kishan and Mangru who represent the labour class tell the



story of the hardship the people had to undergo in the past. The novelist very artistically weaves themes of memory, history and cultural artifacts like stories and songs in the novel. One is reminded of Laura Marcus who states about autobiographical narratives which are “both introspective and centrally concerned with the problematic of time and memory”(2). This novel though is not an autobiography, it can be read like a testimony of the labour class to which the writer and his people too belong.

## **9. Conclusion**

It is to be observed that the indentured system was a capitalist system meant to exploit labour and make profit. The masters made profit but the workers lived in misery. The labourers were doubly colonized. They were colonized as subjects of the British regime in India also as subjects of their masters in the sugar cane plantations. The life of the immigrants reflects many aspects. Though their life gives us a picture of pathetic picture due to exploitative behavior of their masters. However, it also tells about the rich cultural life. In spite of their suffering and hardship, they retained their culture. Their songs and tales give evidence of this. Above all, the novel is a magnificent testimony of these aspects. To go back to the relationship between history and memory it can be stated that certain facts from this novel can serve as a correlative to the views on the official history of indentured labourers and their life. This representation is an engaging interpretation of the life and history of a community.

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