

RAYMOND PILLAI

The Celebration

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Fiji achieved independence from Britain in 1970 after nearly a hundred years of colonial rule. For various though definable reasons, very little creative writing was produced during the colonial period. Since independence, however, a number of writers have appeared whose work is attracting international attention, among them Satendra Nandan, Raymond Pillai, and Subramani.

Raymond Pillai's first collection of stories, *The Celebration*, has now appeared under the imprint of Mana Publications, the publishing arm of the South Pacific Creative Arts Society. Most of the stories, which date back as far as 1969, have been published separately, many of them in early issues of the *Mana Annual of Creative Writing*. A number of them have also been anthologized, including the title story and "Laxmi" in *The Indo-Fijian Experience* (University of Queensland Press, 1979).

Pillai's fictional world reflects the society of Fiji's Indians, originally indentured sugar cane workers who now account for more than half the country's population. His best stories are about marriage: impending, achieved and under stress, or disintegrating. Arranged marriages are the norm here, and Pillai has used this to advantage in a number of his stories. In "To Market, To Market" for example, the practice offers a convenient resolution to the problems of Meena, a sluttish village girl who has been having an affair and finds herself pregnant. Although she has been disdainful of her father's attempts to find her a husband, she suddenly acquiesces and allows him to come to terms with the next "suitor" who comes along. An agreement is struck, and the wedding takes place. Yet while Meena's immediate problem is solved, the end of the story suggests that she has abused the custom of arranged marriages at her peril, and that both retribution and anguish will swiftly follow.

In "Brief Skirmishes" a young school-teacher named Vincent, who believes that "arranged marriages are out of date," asks an attractive colleague, Parvati, to marry him. She refuses because of "an old family arrangement" which has committed her to

someone else. Vincent's essential shallowness and lack of sensitivity is revealed in his unwillingness to understand Parvati's position, and in the end he chooses to leave the school rather than stay and accept Parvati as a friend.

"Muni Deo's Devil" and "The Celebration" sensitively explore the difficulties of a woman's position in a male-dominated society. In both cases blind pride on the part of the husband causes intense suffering for the wife. Shanti, the wife in the title story, must learn to cope with her husband's violent outbursts, to listen to her mother-in-law's advice on ways "to endure a lifetime together." Ragini, in "Muni Deo's Devil" suffers abuse and indignities from her insanely jealous husband, and in the end is brutally murdered by him.

Superstition of various kinds is important in Pillai's fictional world. His treatment of the subject is sometimes light and amusing, as in "A Case of Diabolical Possession" in which a local witchdoctor of dubious qualifications is called in to exorcise a household devil. On the other hand, it can be quite terrifying, as in "Bride of Dakuwaqa," a story which makes hauntingly effective use of a native Fijian legend.

The Celebration is a first collection, and not unexpectedly some of the stories are contrived and even occasionally clichéd. (This is particularly true of the two or three stories dealing with interracial relations.) Still, Pillai is a writer of some promise, and on the evidence of the fourteen stories here, deserves to be read. It seems likely, given his obvious talent and the wealth of material he has to draw on, that we shall be hearing from him again before long.

Stan Atherton