
A LIFE IN VERSE: EXAMINING SATENDRA NANDAN'S MONUMENTAL COLLECTED POEMS (1975–2025)

PRASHNEEL RAVISAN GOUNDAR

University of New England
pgounda2@une.edu.au
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2267-9862>

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During a recent trip to Newcastle, NSW, I stumbled upon a second-hand book shop on the main street in Hamilton. The bookshop had new, second hand, and a rare collection of books. Amongst piles and endless shelves of books, I found the complete works of poetry by William Wordsworth, T. S. Eliot, W. B. Yates, and a personal favourite Robert Frost. Their poetry has been published in different places but having a collection of completed works makes it readily accessible for a reader to have almost every work written by the poet. Satendra Nandan's latest book *POEMS - 1975-2025: Waves in the Wounded Sea*, is the first volume of its kind by a Fijian-Australasian writer of Indian indenture heritage. It is his complete works of poetry spanning five decades of being a literary mastermind. Nandan's ability to connect words and emotions to real situations is utterly unimaginable. He does it with such ease and eloquence, while gripping the reader's attention profusely.

This monumental volume of over 200 poems captured in 600 pages is the legacy of Nandan's five decades of active creative practice. Makes one wonder, can there be another of his stature? Without any objections, he is to be recognised as the Father of Fiji poetry. The foreword of the book written by former Professor of English, Harish Trivedi, University of Delhi, beautifully weaves it together for us "Satendra as a person is all of a piece, though his cultural inheritance is fragmented and kaleidoscopic, ranging over Fiji, India, England and Australia. Likewise, his

literary versatility comes from the same integrated sensibility. All his books in various genres are cut from the same experiential and imaginative cloth” (Nandan, 2025, p. xi)

Before one delves into the *rich* collection of poems, there is a line that caught my attention in the chapter titled “Origins”. The author writes “to be truly human you need a bit of humanity, spiced with humour, with a dash of humility” (Nandan, 2025, p. xiv). The readers need to acknowledge that these lines come from someone who has lived an extraordinary life as an author, politician, an academic, a student, and a family man. To seek his advice on what it means to be a human is simply to empower one on their life’s journey. His humility emerges in the personal dedications that grace nearly all the poems in the book, extending gratitude to family, friends, fellow scholars, colleagues, and beyond.

Getting into reading the poems, one is taken in by the feeling of being well acquainted with the themes—the events can seem like déjà vu. The poem *Another Shadow* compels one to think of their own grandfather-grandson bond in the days of one's childhood:

You want to touch it in the shadow-lands
As you hold the little one in your hands.
Now who is holding whom?
You or your little grandson?
Or your grandfather’s little finger
To take you on that pathless world
On which we’ll all walk, sooner than later (Nandan, 2025, p. 37).

The lines “to take you on the pathless world, on which we’ll all walk, sooner than later” (Nandan, 2025, p. 37) shed light to the inevitability of aging. It is a fact of life that Nandan hints the readers to.

Similarly, some of the central themes of the poems relate to the relationship between mother and daughter, father and son, being in love, unspoken journeys, loss and pondering over the past but continuing to live on with hope. In *A Cup of Coffee*, the poet leads readers to an overflow of emotions with these lines:

Why should the old woman
Make you think of your mother?
Perhaps somewhere there’s a link

A bond invisible in-between
Life-in-age, that breathless scene (Nandan, 2025, p. 92).

Having lost my mother to cancer in 2020, I could easily relate to many incidents that have occurred in the last five years which resonate, not only to me, but others who have lost their parents. How many times do we see strangers trying to find our loved ones among those faces?

Two Waves echoes the patriotic sentiments of someone who is proud of their origins and heritage. This is evident from the opening of the poem:

This little village is my second womb
This little island will be my only tomb;
That formed-deformed my father's breath
This is the country of my life and death! (Nandan, 2025, p. 135).

Nandan, as we know, is from the jewel of the South Pacific—Fiji. He prides himself on this which is vividly conveyed throughout the book. In one of the longest poems included in this collection, *Votualevu Junction*, he gives another example of this:

I flew to other shores, fell in love,
Was exiled by a gun, but still beloved
Of those who knew me in my childhood.
When I returned, the world had changed
Or was it me? (Nandan, 2025, p. 210).

Nandan is an unapologetic writer, I categorically say this because he writes without the fear of being judged for his vocabulary choice. In *Bhola Sadhu*, he did not shy away from what exactly ought to be felt:

We grew in hurricanes and floods
And ate what we'd planted
And bought food cheated by many:
The *sirdars*, the shopkeepers, the *coolumbers*,
The native *zamindars*, many racial prisoners.
But we grew (Nandan, 2025, p. 177).

Similarly, in *Votualevu Junction*, he describes an individual, Gosai. The way Nandan portrays this character in the poem, it may be a reference to people in the readers lives. There are people

who out of spite might let something go to a waste. But they will not think of giving it to someone who could make use of it such as Gosai:

We played in the rain, the mud was thick,
With wild girls and wanton boys
And stole Gosai mahajan's oranges:
Such a rascal—he'd rather let the fruit rot (Nandan, 2025, p. 194).

A few lines in the poem *Nadi Airport* subtly take a dig at present generations. The poet shares about families from his childhood to how they function today.

But we grew with our grandparents
Nani cooked: the old were always welcome
The houses were small, but hearts were big
Bigger than the oceans.
We played where the airport is now
How we loved and lived
In strange houses, and strangers' homes
Became ours (Nandan, 2025, p. 214).

For those not familiar with the poet's background, Nandan helped found the Labour Party of Fiji and was Fiji's first Labour Member of Parliament, elected to the Fiji Parliament twice: 1982 and 1987. He was appointed Minister for Health, Social Welfare and Women's Affairs in the Labour Government of Prime Minister Dr Timoci Bavadra in 1987. This was short-lived due to the military coup that took place on 14 May 1987. Nandan captures these pivotal moments in Fiji's history through the poem *The Coup: A Day in May*:

Then there were ten of them, masked,
They entered the naked parliament
Thrusting guns at Doc's breast
The doctor must have missed a beat or two
As the mongrels looked on
For they knew what it really was (Nandan, 2025, p. 219).

The poem creates a vivid picture of how individuals holding the highest office of the land were treated "they pushed us out, loaded us on rusty trucks, guns closed to their cowards' masked faces" (Nandan, 2025, p. 219). The poet goes on to challenge this act, he puts forward apt questions of their behaviour:

Was this courage or absolute cowardice?
Were these warriors? Traitors?
They drove us towards their barracks.
It rained and people were going
About their work; just another ordinary day.
We rode together, we thought separately:
How easily life could be taken
Or vows broken, a nation beaten (Nandan, 2025, p. 219).

Nandan uses simple words but impactful ones that depict his bravery as a writer. The book can be used in several ways apart from reading for pleasure, of course. English teachers in Fiji high schools can use it in their classrooms and assess various components in the examinations. There is a great deal of Fiji's history embedded in these poems, whether it relates to *grimit* days or political upheavals that can be taught in history classes. Undergraduate history courses in Fijian universities should pay close attention to the depth and clarity provided in this book such as in *Lines Across Black Waters* (Nandan, 1997) and easily make history more engaging by using poems for assignments. Beyond Fiji, creative writing and life writing courses can assign the book as part of Pacific Literature or works of eminent South Pacific writers.

It is only fitting that the afterword of the book has been written by the poet's daughter, Kavita Ivy Nandan, also a writer based in Sydney, Australia. In few pages, she provides a background and much crucial details about the poet. However, what is striking in her words is the way they aptly articulate the contribution of such a significant work:

What is the gift of my father's more than 200 poems spanning five decades? It is the words, the forms, the beauty, the wisdom and the gentle understanding of the way life is, that there is loss and grief as well as hope and connectivity. His thoughts and creativity are an inspiration for my own. To keep writing, published or not, in order to give myself the right to have a voice, to keep on keeping on (Nandan, 2025, p. 567).

POEMS - 1975-2025: Waves in the Wounded Sea was launched on Friday 21st November 2025 at The Street Theatre in Canberra, Australia. The event was chaired by Emeritus Professor Peter Putnis, University of Canberra. In his opening remarks, Putnis makes note of a personal observation:

I have found that in conversations with Satendra – and we have had many over coffee – that often, whatever the topic, somehow Mahatma Gandhi comes into it – his example, his comments, anecdotes about him and so on. It seems that Satendra has Gandhi on his mind much of the time. He takes every opportunity to promote his ideas and moral outlook for our benefit. Satendra writes: ‘The oppressed, dispossessed, displaced, discriminated, marginalized everywhere found in him an embracing love.’

Putnis’ words are echoed in a number of poems included in this volume on Gandhi such as *Journeys of the Mahatma* (page 61), *Gandhi and the Girmitya* (page 71), and *The Twice-Bombed, The Twice-Blessed?* (page 83). On a personal note, I had the pleasure of meeting the illustrious Emeritus Professor Satendra Nandan and his wife Dr Jyoti Nandan in Canberra this year. I have written about this once in a lifetime encounter in *The Fiji Times* newspaper titled “In conversation with Satendra Nandan” (Goundar, 2025).

A few weeks after our meeting, Nandan affectionally mailed a copy of this book within which he inscribed “Hope you find a few pages of interest and may my lines give you inspiration to carry on your creative works.” His dedication to writing can be summed up in a few lines from the poem *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening* by Robert Frost: “but I have promises to keep, and miles to go before I sleep, and miles to go before I sleep” (Hamilton, 1969, p. 130).

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DR PRASHNEEL RAVISAN GOUNDAR is a Senior Lecturer and Graduate Research Academic at the University of New England’s Graduate Research School. For a decade, he was a Lecturer at Fiji National University specialising in teaching Academic English and Applied Linguistics courses. Goundar is an Adjunct Research Associate at Charles Sturt University, Australia and

an affiliate of the Asia Pacific Network with the School of Humanities, Arts, and Social Science at UNE. He has published more than two dozen peer-reviewed journal articles alongside four books: *English Language Mediated Settings and Educational Inequalities* (Routledge UK, 2025), *Pursuing Divinity in Paradise* (2020), *In Simple Words* (2017), and the edited collection *Writing and Publishing in Fiji; Narratives from Fijian Writers* (2018). In 2025, the Australian Linguistic Society certified his status as an Accredited Linguist. He achieved the status of Fellow (FHEA) by Advance HE (UK) in recognition of attainment against the Professional Standards Framework for teaching and supporting in higher education also in 2025. Prash's research interests are of interdisciplinary nature that sits across the three, distinct yet interrelated, fields of Applied Linguistics, Sociolinguistics and Educational Linguistics.