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'Your Woman is a Very Bad Woman': Revisiting Female Deviance in Colonial Fiji

Margaret Mishra¹

Abstract

This article sets out to retrieve two accounts of female deviance in colonial Fiji. It will posit rule-breaking behavior as a reaction to colonial and patriarchal efforts to regulate female behavior and sexuality. The article simultaneously aims to undo rigid categorizations of female deviance by relating such acts to historical circumstance. Police records, court proceedings and news items from The National Archives of Fiji are cited to show how indigenous Fijian woman, Davilo, and indentured Indian woman, Sukhrania, transgressed socially constructed paradigms of morality by procuring abortions in 1884 and engaging in prostitution in 1909, respectively. By relabeling these alleged acts of deviance as survival strategies emerging out of women's experiences of 'double colonization', this article will reconstruct two 'minor' anecdotal fragments awkwardly wedged within the realm of 'mainstream history'.

Keywords: Women, Fiji, Deviance, Archival research

Introduction

How is one to deconstruct colonial and patriarchal constructions of female deviance? What apparatus can we use to rouse the subaltern subject who silently sleeps within an oppressive, discursive memory? Is it possible to undo history's spell on 'bad women' by repositioning the focus from moralistic accounts of rule-breaking events to historical circumstance? This article grapples with these questions by relating deviance, 'a matter of interpretative judgment occurring in an established historical, cultural and situational context',² to two anecdotal fragments fleetingly noted in colonial records in Fiji, anecdotes yearning for a fitting context, anecdotes refusing to be dismissed as 'the residuum of a dismembered past'.³ The first one appears as a short entry in a 'Prisons Office Report' reprimanding indigenous Fijian woman, Davilo, for procuring abortion in 1884.⁴ The second anecdote surfaces as a one-line notice in 'The Death Register of 1909' recounting the demise of indentured Indian woman, Sukhrania, the 'very bad woman' shunned for prostituting herself.⁵ These fragments present Davilo and Sukhrania as 'deviant' because they infringed laws and standards instituted by the British Colonial administration, the Native Council, churches and patriarchal society in Fiji. They also disclose the power of records 'to impose control

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² See Henry Stuart and Erdwin Pfuhl, *The Deviance Process* (New York: Walter de Gruyter Inc., 1993). This article examines deviance via historical circumstance. It does not set out to offer a detailed analysis of the sociology of deviance as such.

³ Ranajit Guha, 'Chandra's Death', in *A Subaltern Studies Reader*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p. 136.

⁴ Colonial Secretary's Office Manuscript, (Suva: National Archives of Fiji, No. 733, 1885).

⁵ Colonial Secretary's Office Manuscript, No. 733, 1885.

and order on transactions, events, people and societies through the legal, symbolic, structural and operational power of recorded communication'.⁶ By honing in on the events of abortion and prostitution and the punishment incurred for disobeying societal norms—Davilo's two-year imprisonment in the Suva Gaol⁷ and Sukhrania's horrific murder in the cane fields at Navutoka Estate⁸—the authorities explicitly condemned women who deviated from colonially and patriarchally imposed norms by permanently scarring them in the written records.

Indeed, we could passively accept the murky deviant blot inflicted upon Davilo and Sukhrania and succumb to representations of female subjects as abrupt side events awkwardly sandwiched within the big event of historical scholarship, or we could turn to the convergent trajectories of minor and feminist history for a methodology to 'make the minuscule grain of history visible'.⁹ For instance, the minor historian's fascination with the 'fine details of social existence'¹⁰ can facilitate the resurrection of 'quasi-events that lie half-forgotten in the lower depths and are deemed to be minor because they have failed the test of significance of the major event'.¹¹ In a similar way, feminist history, ethnography and anthropology, positioned outside and often in opposition to 'big' (patriarchal) events, are founded on the 'fiction of restoring lost voices'.¹² With these intersecting methodologies as the backdrop for this article, I set out to recreate Davilo and Sukhrania's lived experiences from severed fragments. The primary intention here is to explore how two very different representations of female deviance can be re-evaluated when they 'relate to a context'.¹³ As Richard Cloward and Frances Fox Piven explain: 'Once we grant that deviance is purposeful behavior, devoid neither of mind nor of motive, the problem in explaining deviance and in explaining particular forms of deviance, is to identify the features of social context which lead people to defy societal norms and which lead people to defy the particular norms they do'.¹⁴ Although we will never really know why Davilo and Sukhrania chose to 'go against the grain', it is possible to conclude that these acts of survival were triggered by the desperate circumstances arising from colonial and patriarchal domination. When such instances of 'female deviance' are closely analyzed using a variety of contemporary theories, one may be able to shift culpability from Davilo and Sukhrania to the enforcers of an oppressive colonial/patriarchal system.

Historicizing Women's Resistances: Colonization and Indenture in Fiji

Although Davilo and Sukhrania engaged in unrelated acts of 'deviance' in an overlapping yet dissimilar social context, marked by differentials in deviance, such as ethnicity, location and

⁶ Joan Schwartz and Terry Cook, 'Archives, Records and Power: The Making of Modern Memory', in *Archival Science* 2 (2002), pp. 1-19.

⁷ Colonial Secretary's Office Manuscript, (Suva: National Archives of Fiji, No. 733, 1885).

⁸ Colonial Secretary's Office Manuscript, (Suva: National Archives of Fiji, No. 7638, 1909).

⁹ Guha, 'Chandra's Death', p. 137.

¹⁰ Guha, 'Chandra's Death', p. 137.

¹¹ Sudesh Mishra, 'Bending Closer to the Ground: Girit as Minor History', in *Australian Humanities Review*, 52 (2012), pp. 5-17, online source, <<http://press.anu.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/sudesh-mishra.pdf>>.

¹² See Kamla Visweswaran, *Fictions of Feminist Ethnography*, (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), p. 6 and Berteke Waaldijk, 'Of Stories and Sources: Feminist Theory', in *Women's Studies and Culture: A Feminist Introduction*, edited by Rosemarie Buikema and Anneke Smelik, (London and New Jersey: Zed Books, 1993), pp. 14-25.

¹³ Guha, 'Chandra's Death', p. 138.

¹⁴ Richard Cloward and Frances Piven Fox, *Poor People's Movements: Why They Succeed, How They Fail*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), p. 651.

employment status, they were similarly pigeonholed as ‘bad’ or ‘immoral’ women. To grasp the nature of their transgressions, it is necessary to nestle their narratives within broad accounts of Fiji’s past. The past opens up a crevice through which one may ‘bend closer to the ground’¹⁵ to restore two subaltern voices otherwise forgotten in time. The trajectories of Davilo and Sukhrania’s ordeals do not converge, yet the two women are unified by a shared geographical and historical setting that contributed to their social, economic and political subordination. Fiji, comprising some three hundred and thirty islands in the South West Pacific, is the common location for these alleged acts of ‘deviance’. Davilo’s tussle with colonialism and patriarchy takes place on the fourth largest island in Fiji, the island of Kadavu. Kadavu, which includes the island of Galoa in the Kadavu group, was a central hub of activity in the 1880s and the home of beche-de-mer traders and whalers. Galoa was renowned for its whaling station and Galoa Harbor was a regular port of call for mail steamers bound for Sydney, Auckland and San Francisco. While Davilo was confined to a village setting, Sukhrania’s brief stay in the Fiji islands was spent in the sugar-cane plantations and the indenture (*coolie*) barracks at Navutoka Estate. This Estate was situated in the western part of Fiji on the main island of Viti Levu. The colonization of the Fiji Islands by the British on October 10, 1874, exposed Davilo and Sukhrania to the simultaneous oppression of colonialism and patriarchy, categorized by postcolonial feminists as ‘double colonization’.¹⁶

Prior to colonization, indigenous Fijian societies were founded upon the principle of ‘patrilineal agnatic descent’.¹⁷ In line with this system of classification, an indigenous Fijian belonged to a *yavusa* or clan, which consisted of a few *mataqali*, family groups. The tribal hierarchy included chiefs and executives of the *mataqali*, masters of ceremony, priests and warriors.¹⁸ The majority of indigenous Fijian women were excluded from this hierarchy, unless they belonged to the elite, minority group of female chiefs or *adis*. Indigenous Fijian women’s patriarchally-defined responsibilities within the village context included collecting wild fruit, plants and medicinal herbs, fishing, minding children and the elderly, and creating handicraft items like pottery and mats.¹⁹ They also contributed to decisions made in the private sphere, particularly those relating to sexuality, procreation and women’s bodies.²⁰ When the colonizers arrived in the late 1800s, the traditional roles of indigenous Fijian women began to change. While it is argued that these changes were necessary to accommodate the pressures of ‘an intensive political and commercial contact’,²¹ indigenous Fijian women did not unquestioningly accept them.²² Although Fiji’s first Governor General, Sir Arthur Gordon, managed to prohibit indigenous Fijians from engaging in plantation work, it was difficult to stop women from seeking employment in saloons and as servants and governesses for white women, for example. During the late 1800s, colonial officials and the Bose argued against indigenous Fijian women’s involvement in waged labor and

¹⁵ Guha, ‘Chandra’s Death’, p. 136.

¹⁶ Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin (eds.), ‘Feminism and Postcolonialism: Introduction’, in *The Postcolonial Studies Reader*, (London: Routledge), p. 250.

¹⁷ Brij Lal, *Broken Waves: A History of the Fiji Islands in the Twentieth Century*, (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1992), p. 4.

¹⁸ Lal, *Broken Waves*, p. 4.

¹⁹ Tauga Vulaono, ‘Profile Study of Women in Development in Fiji’, (Paper for the Japan International Corporation Agency, 1998), p. 7.

²⁰ Nicole, *Disturbing History*, p. 326.

²¹ Lal, *Broken Waves*, p. 4.

²² Nicole, ‘Women’s Resistance’, p. 326.

particularly their movement to urban areas away from the village.²³ However, ‘in spite of these restrictions, indigenous women continued to run away from their villages’ and oppose colonial and patriarchal attempts to curb their ‘growing immorality’.²⁴

Following Fiji’s cession to Britain, Gordon introduced a system of ‘indirect rule’ that aimed to ‘protect native institutions and develop the capacities of the people for the management of their own affairs’.²⁵ As a consequence of this effort to preserve Fijian communities and village life, indigenous people were restricted from participating in commercial labor. To meet the demand for cheap labor, the colonial government recruited indentured laborers (*giritiyas*) from India. Approximately 54,784 males and 13,696 females²⁶ were transported to Fiji under this agreement (*gimit*) including Sukhrania. The indenture contract was for a period of five years with the possibility of renewal for another term. The majority of the Indians who came to Fiji under this agreement ‘embarked from Calcutta and had been recruited in the United Provinces, especially in the densely populated and very poor north-eastern districts’.²⁷ After a difficult passage across the ‘*kala pani*’ (black water), the reality of indenture set in. The barracks were squalid and without privacy, the cost of living was high and working conditions were extremely harsh. Indentured women were subjected to the additional stress of domestic violence, rape and assault by overseers, long hours of work on the plantations and wage cuts for low attendance during sickness and pregnancy.²⁸ As a response to these exploitative circumstances, indentured women individually and collectively reacted to their dehumanization by male colonialists and Indian men. Their collective contestations were vocal, public and sometimes quite violent. For instance, in the late 1800s and early 1900s, a group of women workers informally known as the ‘Women’s Gang’, led a series of militant protests as a direct response to the physical, sexual and economic exploitation of women in the cane belts of Fiji. Indentured women also headed strikes and riots in Suva, Rewa and Navua in the 1920s to voice their disapproval against the low wages and high cost of living.²⁹ This brief summary of indigenous Fijian and indentured Indian women’s collective resistances during this period presents us with a specific context to theorize Davilo and Sukhrania’s agitations.

Davilo: Wainikoka and Reproductive Autonomy

Davilo brusquely enters colonial history on March 16, 1885, as a convict.³⁰ She inhabits one line in a handwritten report from the Prisons Office in Suva, wedged in among six other

²³ Lal, *Broken Waves*, p. 173.

²⁴ Nicole, *Disturbing History*, p. 352.

²⁵ Lal, *Broken Waves*, p. 13.

²⁶ Lal, *Broken Waves*, p. 16.

²⁷ Kenneth Gillian, *Fiji’s Indian Migrants: A History to the End of Indenture in 1920*, (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 4.

²⁸ Brij Lal, ‘Kunti’s Cry: Indentured Women on Fiji Plantations’, *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 22, 1 (1985), p. 67.

²⁹ See Margaret Mishra’s articles: ‘Mawlee’s Murder: A Minor Historical Event’, in *Double Dialogues Journal: The Event, The Subject and The Artwork*, 2013, online source, <http://www.doubledialogues.com/issue_sixteen/mishra.html>; ‘Between Women: Indenture, Morality and Health’, *Australian Humanities Review* 52, (2012), pp. 57-70; and ‘Women’s Activism in Fiji: 1900-2010’, *Journal of Women’s History*, 24, (2012), pp. 115-143. Mishra’s writing documents the lived experiences of indentured women in Fiji and their resistance to patriarchal authorities.

³⁰ Colonial Secretary’s Office Manuscript, (Suva: National Archives of Fiji, No. 733, 1885).

unlawful, indigenous Fijian women charged with *butaraki* (assault).³¹ Because the ‘crime’ she was prosecuted for on October 14, 1884 was deemed a ‘serious’ one,³² in comparison to the common occurrence of *butaraki*, the writer of the report, the Acting Colonial Secretary, chooses to name Davilo in this document. Through the shame of exposure, a relationship between the criminal (Davilo), the crime (willful procurement of abortion by drinking the herbal decoction *wainikoka*) and the sentence (two years simple imprisonment for breaching Native Regulation 2, 1877) is verified.³³ By publically naming and shaming Davilo some six months after she is incarcerated, the colonial government sternly cautions women who are ‘potentially guilty’ of performing abortions and alerts them of the consequences that lie ahead. After the warning is issued, Davilo is temporarily removed from the set of mainstream history. Then on July 20, 1886, some fifteen months later, she grazes colonial records again. This time, she is the subject of a three line letter written by the Colonial Secretary. The letter seeks the remission of her sentence on the grounds that ‘the woman’s conduct while under punishment has been exceptionally good’.³⁴ The appeal for remission is accepted and Davilo is finally dismissed from history’s gaze—as a reformed woman, she is no longer a threat to colonial and patriarchal authorities. However, her past continues to linger within the biased realm of hegemonic masculine history—she remains ‘doubly deviant, doubly damned’³⁵ for violating the law and confronting colonial and patriarchal standards of morality.

Davilo’s status as a ‘criminal’ is unquestioned in the report above because of the (deliberate) absence of a ‘condition of contextuality’.³⁶ Indeed, its purpose is to register a crime. But if one is told that the procedure of inducing abortion and regulating reproduction through the use of herbal abortifacients like *wainikoka* was not criminalized prior to colonialization in Fiji,³⁷ a somewhat ambiguous relationship between the newly imposed law, punishment and deviance emerges. When it is understood that the practice of consuming *wainikoka* to expel the fetus from the womb prior to viability was prohibited in 1877, three years after Fiji’s cession to Britain, it becomes possible to interpret Davilo’s ‘deed’ as a reaction to a colonially instituted law which infringed upon a previously accepted reproductive right.³⁸ The arguments of Richard Schaefer could be related to Davilo in the following way: ‘Changing social norms created “crime waves” as people whose behavior was previously acceptable suddenly faced punishment for being deviant’.³⁹ Or, to stipulate further, Davilo’s alleged misdemeanor may be read as a response to the colonial government’s system of indirect rule, which aimed to ‘govern Fijians through their chiefs’.⁴⁰ This approach fostered notions of patriarchal morality that resulted in the Council of Chiefs, *Bose Vakaturaga*, withdrawing privileges and rights indigenous Fijian women were previously accustomed to. The *Bose* would convene with the *Roko Tui* (Native Stipendiary

³¹ See Andrew Capell, *A New Fijian Dictionary*, (Suva: Government Printer, 1973) and Roland Gatty, *Fijian-English Dictionary*, (Suva: Oceania Printers, 2009).

³² Colonial Secretary’s Office Manuscript, (Suva: National Archives of Fiji, No. 733, 1885).

³³ Colonial Secretary’s Office Manuscript, (Suva: National Archives of Fiji, No. 733, 1885).

³⁴ Colonial Secretary’s Office Manuscript, (Suva: National Archives of Fiji, No. 1571, 1886).

³⁵ Ann Lloyed, *Doubly Deviant, Doubly Damned*, (London: Penguin Books, 1995).

³⁶ Guha, ‘Chandra’s Death’, p. 138.

³⁷ Colonial Secretary’s Office Manuscript, (Suva: National Archives of Fiji, No. 42, 1893).

³⁸ Mary Warren, ‘Abortion’, in *A Companion to Ethics*, edited by Peter Singer, (MA, Oxford and Victoria: Blackwell Publishing, 1991), p. 301.

³⁹ Richard Schaefer, *Sociology: A Brief Introduction*, Ninth Edition, (New York: McGraw-Hill Companies Inc., 2010).

⁴⁰ Alumita Durutalo, ‘Fiji: Party Politics in the Post Independence Period’, October 20, 2013, online source, <<http://epress.anu.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2011/05/ch0946.pdf>>.

Magistrates) and selected *Buli* (chiefs) to discuss legislation and advise the governor.⁴¹ Following colonization and the imposition of a system of ‘indirect rule’ in Fiji, ‘women’s participation in the decision-making process of the *Bose* was withdrawn, their freedom to drink *yaqona* was curbed, and their rights to land (which had been variable from place to place) were expropriated and secured for men only’.⁴²

This minor historical recovery proposes that Davilo’s rebellion may have been triggered by the unexpected involvement of male regulators of social control in personal decisions relating to marriage and fertility in Fiji in the 1880s—choices within the private sphere that traditionally did not necessitate the intervention of chiefs, government officials and men. Patriarchal anxieties over the autonomous nature of the young indigenous Fijian woman, for instance, the manner in which she ‘prolonged her liberty as far as possible by showing a disinclination for marriage, which would tie her to one man and transform her life from one of frivolity to drudgery’,⁴³ fostered male resentment towards women’s separation of sex and procreation. Naturally, the authorities frowned upon voluntary childlessness and the decision not to marry and chiefs sometimes imposed compulsory marriages in such cases.⁴⁴ Here we could borrow the words of Raye Rosen and Lois Martindale to argue that: ‘Non-marital sexual activity by women (seen as a threat to marriage) and abortion (seen as a threat to motherhood) are viewed as deviant behavior involving a personally discreditable departure from a group’s normative expectations’.⁴⁵ Therefore, the colonial authorities in Fiji rigorously monitored reproduction to reduce these threats. This is highlighted in a letter S. M. Tripp wrote to the chief of Nasowale in Kadavu on July 18, 1904, some eighteen years after Davilo’s imprisonment. Tripp’s frustration is clear when he states: ‘Although it is impossible to procure evidence sufficient to support legal proceedings, yet there can be little doubt that in every town one or more women practice the art of procuring abortion. In the towns adjoining the hospital I have little difficulty in singling out the woman who according to common opinion carry out these practices, but it is often difficult to get anyone to make a definite charge or to furnish legal evidence that the crime has been committed’.⁴⁶ Despite the introduction of the Native Council Regulation Number 2 of 1877 that imposed a two-year sentence plus flogging for those who performed or assisted in performing abortion and the subsequent increase of this charge to three years imprisonment in 1898, indigenous Fijian women remained undeterred by these penalties and ‘procured abortion again and again in succession’.⁴⁷

Davilo, like other indigenous women, would have had knowledge about and access to, the herbal decoction ‘*wainikoka*’. The term *wainikoka* may be dissected as follows: *wai* refers to water or medicine, *ni* is a preposition signifying possession and *koka* is the name of a java cedar tree, *Bischofia Javanica*.⁴⁸ In his 2009 publication of the *Fijian-English Dictionary*, Roland Gatty offers another description of *wai* as ‘a woman’s genital fluids, which by extension may refer to the vagina’.⁴⁹ The latter definition suggests a more direct relationship between reproduction and the

⁴¹ Victoria Lukere, ‘Mothers of the Taukei: Fijian Women and the Decrease of the Race’, (Doctoral Dissertation, Australian National University, Canberra, 1997).

⁴² Nicole, *Disturbing History*, 2006, p. 327.

⁴³ Colonial Secretary’s Office, ‘Commission Reporting on the Declining Native Population’, (Suva: National Archives of Fiji, 1893), p. 42.

⁴⁴ Colonial Secretary’s Office Manuscript, (Suva: National Archives of Fiji, No. 2, 1904).

⁴⁵ Raye Rosen and Lois Martindale, ‘Abortion as Deviance’, *Social Psychiatry* 15, 2 (1980), pp. 103-108.

⁴⁶ Colonial Secretary’s Office Manuscript, (Suva: National Archives of Fiji, No. 24, 1895).

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Capell, *A New Fijian Dictionary*, 1973, p. 277.

⁴⁹ Gatty, *Fijian English Dictionary*, 2009, p. 309.

koka tree. It is also critical to note that the *koka* or *Bischofia Javanica* tree is native to tropical Asia and the Pacific Islands, including countries like Tonga, Samoa, Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu and Fiji.⁵⁰ Some women from the Pacific would procure abortion by grinding the bark to a pulp, adding some water, filtering the red juice and consuming it for three days.⁵¹ However, this was not the only means used to expel the fetus from the womb. In the indigenous Fijian context, there was a clear differentiation between *lutu dra*, *lutu rove* and *vaka-lutu gone* ‘to cause abortion by introducing an instrument into the womb’,⁵² *sau-gone* ‘to produce abortion by introducing a sharp stick into the womb’⁵³ and *wai-ni-sau-gone* ‘medicine to produce abortion’.⁵⁴ The latter method of abortion was widely practiced and regarded as a natural method of regulating reproduction. Here, Newman’s contention that ‘traditional knowledge relating to women’s health empowers women and undermines male dominance’⁵⁵ could be applied to the process of *wai-ni-sau-gone* in Fiji. It may be argued that as indigenous Fijian women resisted the burden of unwanted pregnancies, they consciously (or sometimes unconsciously) challenged naturalized and essentialist images of mothers and wives. This perception may have been guided by an implicit agreement amongst abortionists, midwives and traditional healers that matters relating to women’s bodies were *taboo* (sacred) and male intervention in such matters was unacceptable.

The vexing question of course is: why did Davilo take such a risk at a time when the *Bose Vakaturaga* publicized the penalties imposed for this ‘crime’? And, why did she endanger her life by consuming *wainikoka*? Surely some risks associated with the consumption of this herb were known to midwives and women who procured abortion, for example, the high risk of liver and kidney damage.⁵⁶ As a general response to these questions, Swiss Anthropologist, Felix Speiser, argued that the motives of the aborting woman in the Pacific included ‘the desire for an easy life, her disinclination to be burdened with many children, and also her wish to disappoint a brutal husband’.⁵⁷ Robert Nicole suggests further that ‘the fear, humiliation and ostracism that mothers of illegitimate children faced from the village pious’⁵⁸ was also a critical factor. While the colonial record keepers did not state why Davilo procured an abortion, the 1885 police records do indicate that the act was ‘willful’.⁵⁹ Unlike other abortion cases in Fiji where male counterparts forced women to consume *wainikoka*⁶⁰ or women procured abortion out of fear or pressure from the church or society, Davilo’s action was decisive and deliberate. The intended end was to terminate the pregnancy. The manner in which Davilo exercised autonomy over her body may be related to

⁵⁰ World Health Organization, ‘Medicinal Plants in Papua New Guinea: Information on 126 Commonly Used Medicinal Plants in PNG Western Pacific Region’, 2009, p. 39, online source, <http://www.wpro.who.int/publications/docs/Part1_MedicinalPlantsinPNG.pdf>. Also see ‘*Bischofia Javanica* Blume, Euphorbiaceae/Spurge Family: Information Factsheet’, 2014, online source, <http://www.fleppc.org/ID_book/bischofia%20javanica.pdf>.

⁵¹ G Bourdy and A Walter, ‘Maternity and Medicinal Plants in Vanuatu: The Cycle of Reproduction’, in *The Journal of Ethnopharmacology*, 37, 3 (1992), pp. 179-196.

⁵² Capell, *A New Fijian Dictionary*, 1973, p. 128.

⁵³ Capell, *A New Fijian Dictionary*, 1973, p. 185.

⁵⁴ Capell, *A New Fijian Dictionary*, 1973, p. 185.

⁵⁵ Newman, Lucile, ‘An Introduction to Population Anthropology’, *Women's Medicine. A Cross-cultural Study of Indigenous Fertility Regulation*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1985), p. 25.

⁵⁶ Bourdy and Walter, ‘Maternity and Medicinal Plants in Vanuatu’, 1992, p. 194.

⁵⁷ Felix Speiser, *Two Years with the Natives in the Western Pacific*, (United Kingdom: Dodo Press, 1923), p. 40.

⁵⁸ Nicole, *Disturbing History*, 2006, p. 347.

⁵⁹ Colonial Secretary’s Office Manuscript, (Suva: National Archives of Fiji, No. 1571, 1886).

⁶⁰ See Colonial Secretary’s Office Manuscript, (Suva: National Archives of Fiji, No. 3788, 1890) and Colonial Secretary’s Office Manuscript, (Suva: National Archives of Fiji, No. 1065, 1885).

the view that the body of the indigenous Fiji woman was considered a site of power prior to colonization and missionary influence. During this period, indigenous Fijian women practiced the right to sexual pleasure outside the realm of reproduction, and often had relationships with multiple partners. With the increasing presence of Christian missionaries in Fiji in the late 1800s, an emphasis was placed on monogamy and sexual relationships outside wedlock were condemned. The missionaries also reiterated that abortion was an act of murder in line with the sanctity of life principle and lobbied fervently for its criminalization. For instance, on May 16, 1875, the Methodist Conference ‘adopted a resolution calling for clarification of the current legal situation regarding abortion, opposition to any legislation which permitted abortion simply on request and the establishment by government agencies of pregnancy counseling services and facilities’.⁶¹ This standpoint echoed the overwhelming pro-life stance advocated in Britain and the rest of the world at the time. In 1803 for instance, ‘Britain passed antiabortion laws, which then became stricter throughout the century’.⁶² In this way, the issue of abortion in Fiji in the late 1800s intersected with the larger global historical context. Therefore, when Davilo intentionally deviated from colonial laws by drinking *wainikoka*, she may be seen as entering the broader global feminist struggle for sexual autonomy by challenging patriarchal and colonial efforts to confine women to traditional, child-bearing roles. The risk she took involved choosing between self-harm through the act of abortion or imprisonment. In a sense, this act may be described today as a contestation of colonial hegemony over the female body, in particular, the view that ‘female individuality should be sacrificed for the benefit of the species’.⁶³

Sukhrania: Sexual Deviance and *Izaat*

Davilo and Sukhrania’s encounters with deviance and social control may be described, in the words of Stephen Pfohl, as ‘battle stories’. He elaborates: ‘Deviants never exist except in relation to those who attempt to control them. Deviants exist in opposition to those whom they threaten and those who have enough power control against such threats’.⁶⁴ Sukhrania’s transgression entailed breaching societal norms that prescribed rules of family obligation and social behavior⁶⁵ when she participated in a form of prostitution, that was, in many ways a specter of *girmit*. This argument is premised on the view that ‘representations of the category prostitution can have historical, social, cultural and political specificities that mediate a range of prostitutions; constructed according to different contexts’.⁶⁶ During the indenture period in Fiji, the exploitation of women was exacerbated by the practice of disproportionately recruiting forty women for every one hundred men as per Indian Emigration Regulations. In the 1917 *Report on Indentured Labor in Fiji*, Reverend Charles Freer Andrews suggested that the disproportionate ratio was the cause

⁶¹ *Canberra Times*, ‘Pacific Islanders Harassed’, (16 May, 1875), p. 7.

⁶² Boston Women’s Health Book Collective, ‘Our Bodies, Ourselves: A Brief History and Reflection’, in *Journal of the American Medical Women’s Association*, 54, 1 (1999), p. 99.

⁶³ Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, ‘Feminist Perspectives on the Body,’ November 2, 2013, online source, <<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminist-body/>>.

⁶⁴ Stephen Pfohl, *Images of Deviance and Social Control: A Sociological History*, (Illinois: Waveland Press Inc., 1994), p. 3.

⁶⁵ Cloward and Fox, *Poor People’s Movements*, 1979, p. 651.

⁶⁶ Linnet Pike, ‘Innocence, Danger and Desire: Representations of Sex Workers in Nepal,’ *Reproductions*, 2, 18 (1999), online source, <www.hshp.harvard.edu/organizations/healthnet/SAsia/repro2/LINNET_edited.html>.

of 'a strange unaccountable epidemic of vice' in the coolie plantations.⁶⁷ Questions relating to morality, particularly the alleged immorality of indentured women, were broached during this period. Colonial officials and Indian men hastily categorized indentured Indian women as 'bad' and 'immoral' for failing to uphold virtues like chastity, honor (*izaat*), discipline and devotion associated with the image ideal of the middle-class Indian woman. Thus, it becomes possible to argue that: 'deviance is not the quality of the act the person commits, but rather a consequence of the application by others of rules and sanctions to an "offender"'. The deviant is one to whom that label has successfully been applied'.⁶⁸ It is, therefore, no surprise that indentured Indian women in Fiji reacted to the way they were positioned outside the boundaries of the image ideal for contesting essentialist images of mothers and wives that were naturalized by patriarchal society. Sukhrania's desire for freedom and autonomy involved departing further from the category of the already deviant Indian woman to the multiply deviant woman, wife, plantation laborer and sex worker.

Sukhrania navigates her way into indenture history as a twenty-year-old Brahman woman from Benares. She is five feet, two inches tall and has a distinctive tear on her right knee.⁶⁹ Her existence is authenticated by the blurry thumbprint on the one page document that grants her entry into Fiji—the Emigration Pass (E-Pass). This record, recovered from the Fiji National Archives, was sent to Fiji in the custody of the Surgeon Superintendent of the ship she was travelling on. The E-Pass offers us a glimpse into Sukhrania's past as it verifies demographical information such as name, caste, father's name, marital status, district and village of origin. It also enables us to track down the name of the ship Sukhrania came to Fiji on, the departure and arrival dates and the depot number. After she is allocated a unique number (39205), Sukhrania boards the SS Sangola at Garden Reach in Calcutta in December 1808.⁷⁰ Unlike other indentured women who came to Fiji 'to escape from domestic quarrels, economic hardships, or the social stigma attached to young widows and brides',⁷¹ Sukhrania was married prior to her departure from Depot Number 490 at Garden Reach.⁷² In fact, it is her record that leads us to her husband, Lachminarian, through the inclusion of his E-Pass number 38577. Lachminarian, son of one Ram Pargas, was from the village of Bahuti in Mirzapane in Uttar Pradesh. He was twenty-two years old and five feet, one and a half inches tall. The distinctive mark recorded for him was a tear on his left thigh.⁷³ Lachminarian's E-Pass states that he was a cultivator by occupation and like Sukhrania was also from the Brahman caste.⁷⁴ On board the same ship was Lachminarain's friend, twenty-seven-year-old, Ramsewuk.⁷⁵ Ramsewuk was an unmarried man with a pock-marked face from the Kando caste (grain parchers). He hailed from the district of Basti in the village of Saondih.⁷⁶

⁶⁷ Charles Andrews and William Pearson, 'Report on Indentured Labor in Fiji,' (Unofficial Report for the Indian Government, 1916), p. 10.

⁶⁸ Howard Becker, *Outsiders*, (London: Collier-Macmillan, 1963).

⁶⁹ 'Emigration Pass: Sukhrania,' Colonial Secretary's Office Manuscript, (Suva: National Archives of Fiji, No. 39205, 1908).

⁷⁰ 'Emigration Pass: Sukhrania', No. 39205, 1908.

⁷¹ Lal, Kunti's Cry,' 1985, p. 67.

⁷² 'Emigration Pass: Sukhrania,' No. 39205, 1908.

⁷³ 'Emigration Pass: Lachminarain,' Colonial Secretary's Office Manuscript, (Suva: National Archives of Fiji, No. 38577, 1908).

⁷⁴ 'Emigration Pass: Lachminarain', No. 38577, 1908.

⁷⁵ 'Emigration Pass: Ramsewuk,' Colonial Secretary's Office Manuscript, (Suva: National Archives of Fiji, No. 38749, 1908).

⁷⁶ 'Emigration Pass: Ramsewuk,' No. 38749, 1908.

After spending several weeks at the holding depot at Garden Reach in Calcutta, the SS Sangola departed for Fiji. This ship, owned by the British India Steam Navigation Company, made six voyages from Calcutta to Fiji between 1908 and 1910 carrying passengers from Madras and Calcutta. Sukhrania, Lachminarian and Ramsewuk traveled to Fiji on the SS Sangola's third voyage and arrived in Fiji on 1 February 1909. After the ship docked in Levuka (the old capital of Fiji), the couple and Ramsewuk were transferred to Navutoka Estate where they worked and resided.⁷⁷ Some weeks following their arrival in Fiji and their subjection to the harsh experience of plantation labor, Sukhrania began prostituting herself to indentured men at Navutoka Estate. While some indentured women had multiple sexual partners (as a consequence of the disproportionate ratio of women to men), the sexual 'connections'⁷⁸ Sukhrania had with indentured laborers were not 'gifts'; they were services. Indentured men made prior arrangements with Sukhrania before they had sexual intercourse with her in the cane fields.⁷⁹ Court witness, Rup Singh confirmed: 'I know Sukhrania. She was a prostitute. Anybody who went to her and paid her money, she would lend herself to'.⁸⁰ The use of the word 'lend'—'to let another use or have (a thing) temporarily and on condition that it, or the equivalent, be returned'⁸¹—is fitting here because for Sukhrania the act of granting the use of her body to Indian men was a temporary transaction. She retained ownership of her body and chose to 'barter' sexual intercourse in exchange for returns that would improve the quality of her life. Witness, Satya, stated that Sukhrania sometimes performed sexual acts on the basis of a verbal agreement that male workers would complete her tasks in the plantation. On a number of occasions, her clients did not maintain their side of the agreement. For instance, at 8pm on June 9, 1909, a few hours before she was murdered, Satya observed Sukhrania arguing with one of her sexual partners (or clients), Gherau: 'My work is unfinished and nobody has come to and help me'.⁸² She confronted Gherau and verbally assaulted him by saying '*Dahija ka put*' (You are born of a father who has burned beards).⁸³ When Sukhrania and Gherau saw Satya, they shut the door.

Sukhrania's decision to sell her sexual labor time, involved consciously choosing sexual labor over plantation labor. While sexual labor involves the exploitation and objectification of women, indentured women workers were paid a meager wage (five pennies a day) for grueling work in the sugar-cane plantations.⁸⁴ In this sense, when Sukhrania opted for the former alternative, she made a specific decision about the manner in which her body would be commoditized for money and simultaneously questioned the structural characteristics of a social framework⁸⁵ that oppressed her as a woman, a wife and a laborer. 'Sex and her ability to bargain with it'⁸⁶ is central to her quest for economic gain. In fact, Sukhrania's act of 'deviance' was really an act of 'survival'—an undertaking that was spurned by patriarchal society. Within the context of indenture, there was an expectation by Indian men that female values would remain unchanged

⁷⁷ Emigration Pass: Sukhrania,' No. 39205, 1908; Emigration Pass: Lachminarain,' No. 38577, 1908, and Emigration Pass: Ramsewuk,' No. 38749, 1908.

⁷⁸ Colonial Secretary's Office Manuscript, (Suva: National Archives of Fiji, No. 6738, 1909).

⁷⁹ Colonial Secretary's Office Manuscript, No. 6738, 1909.

⁸⁰ Colonial Secretary's Office Manuscript, No. 6738, 1909.

⁸¹ The Oxford Online Dictionary, online source, <<http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/lend>> retrieved on 04/06/14>.

⁸² Colonial Secretary's Office Manuscript, No. 6738, 1909.

⁸³ Colonial Secretary's Office Manuscript, No. 6738, 1909.

⁸⁴ Brij Lal, *Girmitiyas: The Origins of the Fiji Indians*, (Lautoka: Fiji Institute of Applied Sciences, 2000), p. 135.

⁸⁵ Frances Heidenson, 'The Deviance of Women: A Critique and an Enquiry,' *The British Journal of Sociology*, 19, 2 (1968), pp. 160-175.

⁸⁶ *Ibid*, p. 165.

despite a drastic shift in geographical context, social markers and lived experiences. As a poor, indentured, Indian, female laborer, Sukhrania's oppressed status in colonial Fiji was the result of various interlocking variables (caste, ethnicity, employment status and gender). This status was aggravated by the disproportionate ratio of women to men, thus contributing to unnatural gender relations. Sukhrania's choice to prostitute herself was a direct result of the social and historical circumstance in Fiji at the time. By engaging in the 'victimless crime' of prostitution, she deviated from patriarchal idealizations of the middle-class Indian woman and simultaneously rejected the informal social control imposed by Indian men in colonial Fiji. Karen Rosenblum's statement: 'Though the claim to independence from men is rather tenuous, the desire for independence does stand as a motivating factor for entrance into prostitution'⁸⁷ could be applied to Sukhrania's plight.

Sukhrania's context-specific act of resistance to a harsh, unjust system created by the British government—a system that doubly oppressed women—can also be read as a rejection of binary oppositions like honor/shame. Her refusal to conform to patriarchal conceptions of womanhood comes across clearly in her response to Lachminarain during a quarrel. She retorted: 'You are nothing to me. I can do as I like and please myself'.⁸⁸ In this way, her assertive and autonomous (particularly sexually autonomous) nature contrasted directly with Lachminarain's (patriarchal) conceptions of femininity and submission. The quarrel ensued after Sukhrania announced that she would leave Lachminarain for another laborer, Gherau. Sukhrania's refusal to adhere to the patriarchally sanctioned virtue of chastity (within marriage) was highlighted when Ramsewuk said to Lachminarain: 'Your woman is a very bad woman, she is a prostitute'.⁸⁹ Although Lachminarain's reply at the time was: 'I am too weak to kill her',⁹⁰ his decision to murder Sukhrania on June 9, 1909, may have been motivated by the need to publically vindicate his *izzat*. In a letter to the Agent General, colonial official, C. Koster wrote: 'she has been most brutally chopped to death'.⁹¹ On July 1, 1909, Lachminarain was hanged for Sukhrania's murder.

The court proceedings allow us to deduce that Lachminarain killed Sukhrania because she challenged patriarchal conceptions of female gender roles within the institution of marriage by engaging in acts of prostitution and adultery. Ramsewuk, Lachminarain's *jahjibhai* (shipmate) appears to be complicit in Sukhrania's murder although he was not actually charged for his alleged involvement. Court witness, Dhanakdari Singh, spotted Lachminarain and Ramsewuk carrying a knife and a blanket each, at around 3 am on June 9, 1909. The witness was passing through Navutoka Estate on his way to Nabulu. One hour later, he met them again 'at the bridge near Mr. Koster's house. They were bathing in the creek' (after Sukhrania was murdered).⁹² Half an hour earlier, Gherau went to stool in the cane with indentured laborer, Mangray. Gherau saw Sukhrania near the cane but did not go towards her. He said: 'I did not intend to have connection with Sukhrania that morning. I had made no arrangements with her for that morning'.⁹³ After they had passed about five chains, they heard Lachminarian say to Sukhrania: 'Whore! Where are you going now? Stand there!'⁹⁴ Gherau and Mangray proceeded to walk back to the lines. Sukhrania's body was found by Budhu, the *sardar* at Navutoka Estate on June 10, 1909, at 3pm. 'She was covered

⁸⁷ Karen Rosenblum, 'Female Deviance and The Female Sex Role: A Preliminary Investigation', *The British Journal of Sociology*, 26, 2, (1975), pp. 169-185.

⁸⁸ Colonial Secretary's Office Manuscript, No. 6738, 1909.

⁸⁹ Colonial Secretary's Office Manuscript, No. 6738, 1909.

⁹⁰ Colonial Secretary's Office Manuscript, No. 6738, 1909.

⁹¹ Colonial Secretary's Office Manuscript, No. 6738, 1909.

⁹² Colonial Secretary's Office Manuscript, No. 6738, 1909.

⁹³ Colonial Secretary's Office Manuscript, No. 6738, 1909.

⁹⁴ Colonial Secretary's Office Manuscript, No. 6738, 1909.

in trash in the middle of a row of cane'.⁹⁵ Sukhrania's deviation from the mores laid down for sexual relations by Indian men (for example, monogamy, fidelity, affection and desire) resulted in her horrific mutilation and murder. She was silenced for defying patriarchal standards that were a direct product of a repressive historical, socio-cultural and economic context—a colonially constructed circumstance. It thus becomes necessary to situate Sukhrania's act of resistance within experiences of colonialism-as-indenture.

Recovering Lost Voices

This minor historical recovery has attempted to release two doubly colonized subaltern subjects from the shackles of Fiji's colonial history. The broader quest behind this recovery has been to subvert the power of the archives from a tool used to marginalize women to a tool of empowerment. Joan Schwartz and Terry Cook sum up this standpoint: 'Archives have the power to privilege and to marginalize. They can be a tool of hegemony; they can be a tool of resistance. They both reflect and constitute power relations...They are the basis for and validation of the stories we tell ourselves, the story-telling narratives that give cohesion and meaning to individuals, groups, and societies'.⁹⁶ The anecdotal fragments uncovered to reconstruct Davilo and Sukhrania's past were remnants of a colonial and patriarchal legacy. Through a process of rereading these fragments and situating them within an appropriate historical context, two women's experiences of 'the politics of oppression and repression'⁹⁷ (deemed insignificant and perceived simply as 'deviant' or unethical behavior) may be understood in a different light. In addition to recovering women's lost voices and repositioning 'quasi-events' as main events, this article has simultaneously attempted to undo colonial representations of Davilo and Sukhrania as 'bad' or 'deviant' women as per colonial records. If alleged acts of deviance (the procurement of abortion by an indigenous Fijian woman in 1884 and prostitution by an indentured Indian woman in 1909) are related to an established historical, cultural, economic and situational context, indeed they may be emptied of negative connotations. Following this line of thought, this article has aimed to invert binaries of good/bad, moral/immoral, active/passive, honor/shame by asserting that Davilo and Sukhrania should be remembered and celebrated as women who dared to battle against colonial and patriarchal authorities for suppressing their freedom and restricting the choices they made about their bodies. It is this pursuit of sexual and reproductive freedom that history should not forget.

⁹⁵ Colonial Secretary's Office Manuscript, No. 6738, 1909.

⁹⁶ Schwartz and Cook, 'Archives, Records and Power,' 2002, p. 15.

⁹⁷ Ashcroft, *The Postcolonial Studies Reader*, p. 250.