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## Multiple Belongings in the Shaping of the Literary Imagination

**ABSTRACT:** This article proposes to explore the nature of multiple imaginative belongings as this is inscribed within various Mauritian literary texts, written in three different languages. The tyranny of the desire for national belonging has known varied fortunes over the last 200 years as nationalism has been simultaneously praised and derided in the construction of the national imaginary. In the context of multicultural Mauritius, the complexity of the nationalist paradigm exists in parallel with numerous transnational narratives of diasporic belonging. Nowhere is this more visible than in the literary output, where writers play with the often overlapping realities of multiple belongings.

**KEY WORDS:** postcolonialism, orality, nation, nationalism

Postcolonial studies values the art of narration as it emerges from the confines of suppression, between the privileging of alterity, either in the reassessment of the silences and paradoxes of colonial representation, or in challenges to dominant hegemonic forms. By working on the rediscovery of the subaltern network of identities, the landscape of postcolonialism opens the way for a re-evaluation of multicultural inheritance. By extrapolation, the Mauritian literary scene — postcolonial *par excellence* — should have been a space for the joyous, exuberant expression of multicultural celebration. However, owing to the paradoxes of history, the literary production in the various languages that exist in Mauritius is rarely studied beyond the confines of the literary traditions to which they respond. In the present paper it is proposed that we go beyond this imaginative segregation of narration to understand the manner in which each of the writers discussed here engages with issues of literary representation of the nation. To Benedict ANDERSON'S (1991) proposal that the nation comes into being through the collective imaginary, we could give a response that the nature of this imaginary should not be projected as exclusive. Therefore the ethnic primordialism of

GELLNER (1983) can easily exist side by side with Anderson's notion of the Collective Imaginary to create overlapping maps of identification, which together create a very complex picture of the Third World nation, thus debunking the simplified colonial-postcolonial relationship. As we shall see in the case of the three writers studied herein, the narrative traditions they write within are varied and they respond to differing narrational expectations, variegated in the overlapping of diasporic consciousness and national belonging, but also in the temporal location of their texts, both in an re-imagined past and in a contemporary local reality. We are tempted to propose that the discourse created between these three texts give an interesting twist to Fredric Jameson's theory that the Third World novel is always an allegory of the nation, as each writer within his distinctive realm of influences, rewritten within the text under study, uncovers a new corner of this paradigm of the nation in the making

Writers exist at the interface of several realities — a notion of writerly identity which is moulded by a literary tradition it has been nurtured in — which therefore constitutes the first horizon of response, independently of the real audience which awaits the novel. Though it is not always easy and possible to effect a Foucauldian approach for the archaeological investigation into the genealogy of a literary text, in the present enterprise we will endeavour to do that, partly in relation to our main argument.

The present article proposes to study the work of three Mauritian writers, each of whom has a different spatio-temporal location as well as having varying relationships to the notion of nationalism and national representation. I will focus specifically on the way orality becomes a major component of narration with those writers, as their work become the record of collective memory of a community, reflecting their preoccupations as well as their aspirations.

I will start this discussion with an overview of Abhimanyu UNNUTH's contribution to the literary scene with his major novel *Lal Pasina*,<sup>1</sup> which was published in Hindi in 1967 and translated and published in French in 2002 as *Sueurs de Sang* by Editions Stock, Paris. This is a novel which deals with the story of the indentured labourers who were shipped to Mauritius after the abolition of slavery in order to work on sugar plantations. The history books are very dry about the official data relating to this group of new inhabitants.

In discussing the problems faced by the sugar industry in the early years of its establishment, the official discourse of history gives a very bland evocation of the way workers were used to replace animals in the transportation of cane to the factory. As Verma (2008) claims, "there was no means to transport sugar-canes to the factories. Many labourers yoked themselves to carts and carried canes to the factories." You will note that the structure of the sentence

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<sup>1</sup> The title literally means "red sweat." However, the novel was entitled *Sueurs de Sang* in French.

squarely places agency for the decision to yoke themselves to the carts and thus substitute themselves for the animals, on the labourers themselves. This was probably far from being the truth. This is what Unnuth has to say about a similar situation:

Mais le jour où il (Kissan) trouva son père attelé à la place des bœufs à la lourde charrette sur laquelle on jetait la canne coupée, toutes ses interrogations firent place à une rage folle. Cette fois encore pourtant il contint sa fureur et sa colère n'exploda pas. Il resta immobile et ne fit aucune remarque, malgré sa peine et sa honte. Les larmes qu'il versa ne put ni diluer ni emporter les questions accumulées dans sa tête, et il comprit qu'elles ne laisseraient jamais en paix.

The day he (Kissan) discovered his father attached in the place of the oxen, to the heavy cart used to transport the cropped cane, all his questions gave way to a terrible anger. But yet again this time he contained his fury and his anger did not explode. He remained motionless and said not a word despite his grief and his shame. The tears he shed could neither dilute nor take away the questions which were pressing against his mind and he understood that they would never allow him peace. [translation mine — NB]

UNNUTH, 2002: 53

The contrast between the tone of these two texts is enough to indicate the perspective from which the novel is written. Unnuth turns himself with this book into a chronicler of the collective memory of the trauma of indenture. Other novelists have attempted to tell this tale of trauma. Some novelists have tried to do it in both the Mauritian and other diasporic contexts, as Miriam Pirbhai explores in her critical study *Mythologies of Migration, Vocabularies of Indenture* (PIRBHAI, 2009). Vijay Mishra, in an early article on the Diasporic Imaginary (MISHRA, 1996) as well as in his more recent study, *The Literature of the Indian Diaspora* (MISHRA, 2007), explores this literary genre. What these critics reveal is the existence of an indenture diasporic consciousness which contrasts with the other diasporas to the New World. Mishra calls it border diaspora, while Miriam Pirbhai proposes the categorization of the novel of indenture as a new genre in contemporary studies.

Mishra calls V.S. NAIPAUL's fiction the foundational discourse which first gives shape to the experience of indenture. A lot of what we might find comic or absurdist in Naipaul's best-known novel, *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961), he relates to the indenture experience. Mishra chronicles the manner in which the voice of diasporic memory emerged from the pages of diasporic history in *A House for Mr. Biswas* (MISHRA, 2007).

However, the tone of Unnuth's narrative is very distant from the Naipaulian semi-detachment that marks the emergence of diasporic consciousness in the English plantation narrative. This may be for the reason that Unnuth writes in

Hindi. Until well into the twentieth century, Hindi remained a marginalized language (RAMYEAD, 1985). This circumstance is substantiated by J. M. G. Le Clézio, who writes the preface to the French translation of Unnuth's novel. Being himself a descendant of the French planters who helped establish the regime of plantation slavery and indenture, it is significant that in his very soulful introduction Le Clézio should highlight the conditions of livelihood for the indentured labourers on the plantation: "Assigné à une plantation, il ne pouvait s'en éloigner... Il lui était interdit de pratiquer sa langue et sa religion et de les enseigner à ses enfants. *Sueurs de Sang*" ("When they were assigned to a plantation they could not move away from it... It was forbidden to them to use their language and practice their religion as well as teach them to the children") (UNNUTH, 2002: 9).

However, Hindi is closer than the language of officialdom in chronicling history from down below — from the perspective of the disempowered subaltern. How does one give voice to those who have no voice? This is where the rise of oral memory becomes of crucial importance. When the Indian immigrants arrived in the course of the nineteenth century, Creole as a lingua franca was already firmly established in Mauritius. It was a French-based language with an admixture of African and Malagasy vocabulary. It was the medium through which the Mauritian planters addressed their slaves and the means of communication amongst the slaves themselves, as well as the language of the streets and the markets. It was the same Creole patois that the French foremen and overseers used in order to communicate with their Indian workers in the fields and factories.

The new language brought in by the immigrants had no place in this scheme of things. Kissan and his friends need to learn to speak in the language of the overseer to be understood. But the preservation of Hindi through daily use among the workers preserves their collective bond made of shared history and collective memory, which can be accessed through songs, proverbs, folk beliefs, and popular sayings.

Unnuth resorts a lot to folkloric and popular narrative patterns in order to create a community ethos for the Indian migrants. According to the work of the subaltern studies collective initiated by Ranajit GUHA (1983), subaltern strategies of disruption from the dominant hegemonic narrative of the nation often take forms such as rioting, gossip, superstitious beliefs, and oral tales. All these are explored as insurgent means of disrupting the narrative of the dominant classes, be it that of the colonialists or the dominant *zamindar*<sup>2</sup> narratives about peasant identity, and exist at the interstices of linguistic invisibility and collective action. It is interesting that the subaltern studies collective identify gossip and

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<sup>2</sup> The *zamindars* were the upper class tyrannical Indian landlords who oppress the peasants almost as much as did the colonialists.

superstition as subversive means of regaining control over the lived reality of the subalterns.

In the preface to *Sueurs de Sang* Le Clézio praises the power of popular folklore. He says: "Il y a une grandeur mythique dans ce roman, dans sa durée, entrecoupé de chants et de proverbes, de longs dialogues à la manière d'un opéra indien" ("There is a mythic grandeur in this novel, in its extent, its being interspersed with songs, proverbs, and extended dialogues, in the manner of Indian opera") (UNNUTH, 2002: 11).

The relationship between orality and written works in postcolonial literature very early became one of the prime subject of focus in postcolonial studies. Orality is mostly seen as a means to confront the hegemonic narratives of empire by producing a voice which comes from the other side of cultural, historical, and political representation. Thus orality is associated with the enterprise of recovering the dominated voice of the colonized within the discourse of empire and, tangentially, it rejects the dominant genres of literary representation. Orality presupposes an alternative world view as well as a cultural evolution which creates its own paradigms of representation. In this view it would not be wrong to say that orality appertains to the revaluation of subalternity, in the Gramscian sense of the term, in textual narrative. Walter J. ONG (1982) makes the observation that oral discourse is aggregate, repetitive, and copious because the audience is dependent upon the aural component of meaning. Chidi OKWONKO (1999) talks about a process of decomplication, through which written narratives retrieve older forms of narrative from the native tradition. The relevance of orality changes with different cultures and over time. The specificity of oral culture is that meaning can only be accessed in the instant of oral delivery, in the specific context of enunciation. It is in that transient moment that the enunciation and performativity of what is said become more important than overall structure or intentions. In oral storytelling the author is less a person than a context of enunciation and performance. If this is applied to the desire to retrieve agency in the postcolonial text, it is important to stress that the individual story is seen as being metonymic of the collective history. Therefore this plays against the urging of the conventional notions of the realist novel to privilege the individual as the central consciousness of the text.

The argument that the postcolonial writer is the vector of representation of collective national identity was specially prominent in the first generation of postcolonial critics. According to BRENNAN (1989) the novel has historically played a crucial role in this construction of the nation because the novel objectified the multiple and unified nature of national life.

Orality in *Sueurs de Sang* takes obvious forms — songs, ritual prayers inherited from India, and explosion of emotions through song and poetry. There is a way of domesticating the unknown world through the prism of mythical words which evoke familiar realities — for instance, the nicknames of the prison

guards derive from the names of the villains in the Indian epics, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*.<sup>3</sup> Kundan calls them Dushashan, Kumbhakaran, Kansha Mama, and Vibishana. All four mythical characters are well-known in the collective imaginary of Indian popular culture as anti-heroes of these two classic works.

But orality exists also in the very structure of the text, in the manner of narrating a collective story through multiple voices represented by the many characters who flit in and out of the text. Any reader will notice that by classic realist standards, there are inconsistencies in the way the text seems to drop some characters, like Kundan, or in the manner in which characters seem to overlap each other's functions without great differentiation. Characters such as Farid flit in and out but there is no follow-up. The bits of their life stories we hear about all serve to buttress the collective remembering of the dominance of colonialism by the colonized subalterns. After all, how does one narrate a life made up of suffering, impoverishment, and disempowerment in a classical manner? The usual oppositions between the individual and society do not exist; rather, here each character is metonymic of a collective social experience. Through the life stories of Kundan, Kissan, and Madhan we see three phases of the collective social uprising that is being chronicled. The awakening of political will comes first through Kundan, who pushes apathetic peasants to rise up against their condition of exploitation. As Kundan gives Kissan the confidence to believe in himself and in their common future, the pair succeed in bringing about the first workers' uprising and also secure the loyalty of other villages to their common cause. Finally, structured political organization develops after the death of Kissan, which binds the villagers together as they rally behind Madan, the son and inheritor of the ideology of freedom for which both Kissan and Kundan have fought and died.

The novel ends on an emphatic note when the celebration of Holi becomes a moment of collective self-affirmation. Mohapatra makes a similar point in relation to Hosay in Trinidad (MOHAPATRA, 2006) about the celebration of cultural festivals as a marker of collective ethnic affirmation, in opposition to the colonial state.

The role of songs in the life of indenture has been studied by Sarita BOODHOO (1999) and by SERVAN-SCHREIBER (2013). In this novel songs are of various types; sometimes they are ritual celebrations, sometimes prayers, and popular songs occur along with songs serving to evoke the memory of childhood. There is a point in the text where Kundan is surprised by the content of the song being sung and the attitude of the singer — while the song speaks of heroic valour, the singer is totally dejected and looks defeated as he sings:

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<sup>3</sup> The *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* are the two major classical epics of India.

Allongé sur son lit, sans se soucier des plaies vives qui couvraient son dos, Jatan se mis à fredonner une verset d'*alha*, dont les paroles évoquaient le mariage d'*Udhal*. La voix de cet homme était incroyablement douce, empreinte d'une infinie tristesse. Toutefois le ton mélancolique contrastait étrangement avec les paroles d'un chant qui célébrait le courage et la vigueur, et ce décalage laissa Kundan stupéfait.

As he reclined on his bed, unconcerned by the open wounds on his back, Jatan began to hum a verse from the *alha*.<sup>4</sup> The words of that song evoked the wedding of *Udhal*.<sup>5</sup> The man's voice was incredibly soft, tinted with a melancholy which strangely contrasted with the words of the song, which celebrated strength and courage. This dissociation left Kundan stupefied.

UNNUTH, 2002: 58

This moment of dissociation is indicative of the emotional disturbance which comes with diaspora. It is a marker which highlights the extent to which codes of identity have changed, from the small villages where parameters of identity were known through the family village network, to here where the workers were demoted to the level of beasts of burden, dehumanized, and given neither food nor comfort.

The paradox is that the imagination can still thrive despite such conditions. In the work of the subaltern studies collective it is shown to what extent the networks of gossip and narratives of superstitions were in fact narratives of information and solidarity against the hegemonic dominance of the state. GUHA (1983) says that "rumours, [...] could act as a powerful agent of peasant self-mobilization, whereas religious rites and rituals such as disease propitiation movements and rain-making ceremonies in times of drought could also act as vectors of peasant solidarity and mobilization." It is within the context of subaltern narratives of affirmation that we are to read the gossip of women's tales told in Chapter 2, and the discussion of black magic has to be understood as a means of making sense of the unknown dangers that face the people. Their way of life is presented as almost pastoral but without the idyllic side of pastoralism. They live close to their animals that give them milk, they cultivate their own food and often, in recurring days of starvation, they subsist on rice water and lithi. Unnuth reminds us of memories of food habits which have been forgotten in more prosperous times. Vinesh HOOKOOMSINGH (2003) shows the evolution of the life of the diaspora in his contribution to Biku Parekh's volume entitled *Culture and Economy in the Indian Diaspora*. He shows the stupendous economic and social evolution which the Indo-Mauritian society has witnessed from the standpoint of an ontology of dispossession and subalternisation.

<sup>4</sup> Popular songs inspired by epic narratives of valour in war.

<sup>5</sup> *Udhal* is the hero of the *alha*.

The dominant orality of the text is part of the process of coming into being of subaltern consciousness. Orality is everywhere in the narration of *Lal Pasina/Sueurs de Sang*. Throughout the book, personal memory is recollected from the tales of old as well as through the element of personal life history; the story of Kissan that we are told is the story of Unnuth's *mamou*, his mother's brother.

The circularity of interwoven and overlapping life stories subtend and are multiplied within the text by other village stories. The book which Kissan is supposed to be writing further elaborates on the other kinds of suffering which the peasant subalterns of the plantocracy experienced, such as forced exile and separation from their families.

Throughout the text, the landscape and love for the land remains prominent. The sacredness of the relation to the land is a leitmotif which explains emotionally why the peasants stuck to their land and remained on it despite the many injustices they had to bear. But most of all it is in the subjective experience of exploitation that this novel strikes us as a recollection of the collective memory of the suffering endured by the first generation of indentured workers. Their suffering was so atrociously relentless that it is still painful to describe: starvation, forced labour, double cut, beatings, working on empty stomachs, mutilations, imprisonment, exploitation of the women. The list is very long. Marina Carter's body of work gives us a historical perspective on part of this reality in her historical publications, but rarely has a novel successfully transcribed the memory of suffering and exploitation from the inside circles of the exploited, as Unnuth's novel has done, and it is most probable that he managed to preserve that memory because he was using Hindi as a medium of expression rather than one of the two European languages of officialdom, French and English.

Joseph TSANG MAN KIN's *The Hakka Epic* (2003) is a long ode to the spirit of the Sino-Mauritian Hakka community. The Hakkas are a group of people who came to settle in Mauritius from the Moiyen/Meixian region of China. Anthropological studies of their struggle have been carried out by Huguette Ly Tio Fane (1981) in *La Diaspora Chinoise dans L'Ocean Indien Occidental* (EOI). However, the literary text has the power to make the implied emotional and human experience of the pages of history come alive. And the success of *The Hakka Epic* was such that after its first publication in French, it was subsequently translated into English, and then into Hakka by the diplomat Miao Zarifary and the poet Su Qi Yun and issued in Hakka in September 2002 as "Kejicren Zhi Ghe." This is a poem which translates the diasporic consciousness of the Hakka community between its past and its future as it comes into being in the twentieth-century Mauritius. The first part of the text deals with both the mythical origins and the known official history of the Hakkas before they started their diasporic journey. In uncovering this pall on a collective past, the poet acts as a bard of the community and a repository of conscience and collective memory.

The place of those writers who function within the multicultural tapestry of Mauritius shows the great importance of literature as a bulwark of collective memory and national consciousness. If the work of Unnuth, originally written in Hindi and subsequently translated into French, manages to capture the complexities of the subaltern coming into being, Tsang Man Kin's writing also can be seen as a bardic narration to remember, celebrate, and interrogate the collective Hakka consciousness, in relation to their diasporic history, as well as their national and transnational destiny.

The poem functions on the axis of affective memory and intelligibility. Unlike prose, poetry can bridge time spans and focus on the perennial and collective simultaneously.

This is how Pietro Giordan describes the Hakka Epic: "The whole text is a collective act of remembrance, plunging back deep into the roots of both historical and mythical past of the Hakka people" (GIORDAN, 2000). The writing of the poem was inspired by a visit to Moi Yen, the ancestral home of the author, who functions at the dual site of his multiple lineages, between his contemporary citizenship in Mauritius and his inheritance of an ancestral Hakka culture. Throughout the text the poet's country of residence (Mauritius) is the space for exploration of a kind of contemporary individual memory which intersects with the collective memory of the Hakka community. Because of this, one will note that the narration of this poem has the power of orality, as it remains circular, nomadic and polycentric in setting up multiple centres of reference within the text.

The first part of the poem deals with some of the important moments in the history of the Hakka diaspora: the first persecution by Qui Shi Huang Di; the Taiping Uprising, and then British persecution. It then deals with the Hakka migration from Northern China to Guangdong before addressing the Indian Ocean migration from the late nineteenth century.

The second part of the poem is more personal, elegiac and nostalgic. The journey that inspired the poem is actually poetically enacted as the process of a return to the ancestral land — China/Meixian — is staged in this second section. The poet identifies his home town and has an epiphany of identification with the ancestral country, which over the years has changed names but whose spirit remains the same. Pietro Giordan says there is an almost mystical component in the description of the exiled person who is coming back to his home town, enacting one of the great paradigms of return which we often find in diasporic writing:

We took with us our altar to join together with the sky  
We kept our language to live on the ancestors'

TSANG MAN KIN, 2003

The poem keeps the features of orality through the cyclic repetition of the refrain about persecution which returns as a leitmotif again and again. In this circular structure the poem effects a multiple return to both a physical space and a psychical space, and by constantly going back to that memory the poet metaphorically returns again and again to the people's origins. That is especially important in view of the fact that through the double displacement of the Hakkas, "Our people forgot its memory." The leitmotif is repeated: "Our people forgot its memory, / Our humiliated people forgot history." And this is the task that the poet takes upon himself in this poem: that of reviving the historical, mythical and poetic memory of his people

In contrast to the other two texts we have looked at so far, *Made in Mauritius* by Amal SEWTOHUL is firmly placed in the twentieth-century Mauritius. Published in 2013 by Continents Noirs, this is a text which effects the transition both from the diasporic nostalgia of *Le Grand Chant Hakka* and from the obsession with origins that we find in *Sueurs de Sang*. It is a novel that attempts to articulate the paradoxes of belonging and identity on a postcolonial island.

In opposition to the saturation of official discourses about the history of the nation, namely phases of immigrant workers' struggle, pre-independence unrest, and post-independence excitement, the novel proposes an access to history as written from the margins of individualized perception rather than from the mainstream. And its privileged narrator, Laval, is the son of a hapless, doubly displaced and impoverished Chinese shopkeeper who passes on his sense of placelessness and incomprehension to his son.

The latter's journey from the periphery and social invisibility in his container to the state of self-affirmation within the transnational trajectory of dreamtime experience in the Australian outback could represent the coming into being of the nation. However, because narrated from the perspective of Laval, both the personal and the national history are seen to be random occurrences, more governed by chance and coincidences than by a well-thought-out plan. The narrative strategy of replacing the official history by the locus of personal history with its distortions and subjectivism enables a fragmentation of linearity, which also allows the multivocal diglossic evocation of personal history through a series of disruptive strategies which bring in orality as a major feature of *Made in Mauritius*. These disruptive strategies take the form of popular beliefs by which the displaced, socially invisible, and marginalized young Laval first encounters the larger world of the city through his new friend, Feisal. Feisal tempts him with his stories of *Bolhom Sounga* and *Pac Pac*. These are urban legends typical of mid-twentieth-century Mauritius that have phased into collective memory. Bonhomme Sounga was the bogeyman whom parents used to scare children when the latter did not want to sleep, whereas *Pac Pac* was a story associated with La Citadelle, the French-built fortress on the top of a hill which overlooks Port Louis harbour. It was originally a defensive fortress raised between 1834

and 1840, with the official name of Fort Adelaide. In the 1950s a terrible story made the rounds of the capital that an uncle had murdered his nephew and niece there in a sordid story of family revenge. That was a tale which terrorized young children more than the bogeyman Bonhomme Sounga. It is with these two tales that Feisal first tempts Laval to stay by his side in the unknown darkness of the city he is about to start exploring.

Further disruptions to the narrative discourse are introduced in the river scene where the children throw racial invectives at each other upon encountering a Monkey who scares Ayesha:

alle prie to bondié zacko, Hanuman... » «Ta Sinois, pas trop cause Hanuman, Hanuman li conne laguerre, pas couma to Bondié.» «Ki éna ere mo bondié» «Ki éna are to bondié? Li nek assize, enn zourné li manze pistasse boui, gato la cire, gato cravat. Li couma enn gros boudin.

Go pray to your monkey god, Hanuman...” “You Chinese, do not talk like this of Hanuman, Hanuman he can fight, not like your God.” “What is wrong with my god?” “What’s wrong with your god? He just sits down, for days on end, he eats boiled peanuts. Chinese cakes. He is like a big sausage.

SEWTOHUL, 2012: 103

These invectives are given in Creole, the lingua franca of the island, and translated into French in the text. The cruel presupposition of racial inequality and prejudice conveyed by these invectives bespeaks the larger social world within which the children function, a world which for the most part remains physically absent from the text but is nevertheless present through the disciplinary pall through which it slides characters into their social place.

The contrast between the lack of awareness of the social implications of their invectives and their childish understanding is obvious when after the fight they go back together to dry themselves. Had similar invectives been bandied by adults there is no guarantee the adults would have remained friends. The violence of these accusations are such that many of these words are declared politically incorrect nowadays as we yearn for multicultural cohesion and mutual respect.

Capturing the spirit of multicultural Mauritius back from the tourist brochures can only be done through personal experience. The dispossession visible almost everywhere in the novel, through his narrator, perfectly represents the state of poverty most islanders experienced during the mid-twentieth century (TITMUSS, ABEL-SMITH, 1960). That choice of a confused first-person narrator enables the novelist to jumble together problematic and more pleasant realities. For instance, the two boys’ clandestine adventures in the cinema, as well as their long journeys of exploration across the city and into the countryside, represent the more positive aspects of this reality, where dispossession comes

with the power to create experiences and memories, to mark the landscape, so to say. On the other side, a cryptic note on page 106 hints at one of the problematic phases of pre-independence Mauritian history. The text here evokes one of the traumatic moments of that history when through a series of scare tactics each of the colonial powers tried to defer independence by playing upon the fear of the other. BOUDET (2012) is one of the rare critics who explore how the fear of Hindu hegemony was used as a community-building strategy by the Franco-Mauritian community. Boudet gives a sociological overview of the conditions within which these fears were created and entertained in order to push back the looming reality of independence. She describes how the fear of Indians was used as a political strategy to consolidate Franco-Mauritian identity and create a false sense of national threat in the years preceding independence. Particularly, those fears led to a massive migration of the Creole bourgeoisie to Australia, in fear of the onset of Hindu hegemony on the island. Monique DINAN (1985) says that about 12,800 Mauritians moved to Australia in the 1960s. It is this moment in the history of the nation that the uncomprehending narrator evokes.

Une semaine avant notre promenade dans la forêt nous étions partis voir la grande foule, composée surtout de gens de la bourgeoisie créole, assemblée sur les quais de Port Louis, pour dire adieu aux membres de leur famille qui s'embarquait sur le *Patris*, en route vers l'Australie.

One week before our ramble through the forest we had gone to watch the big crowds of middle class creoles who were assembled on the docks in Port Louis, to say goodbye to their family members who were embarking on the *Patris* to make their way to Australia.

SEWTOHUL, 2012: 106

The strategy used here of turning the narrator into an uncomprehending witness of real events in the making of the nation determines the perspective of most of the narration.

As the text dives further into personal memory we have a quaint evocation of the scary bands who ruled Port Louis:

L'homme qui avait parlé à Feisal était Popol, un des chefs du redoutable gang Texas, l'un des deux réseaux qui menaient en ce temps-là une lutte sourde pour contrôler les bas-fonds de Port Louis. Texas était un gang créole, qui opérait dans les quartiers créoles pauvres de Port Louis, comme Roche-Bois et Sainte Croix, et son rival était le gang Istanbul, un gang de musulman de Vallée Pitot, et comme dans toute guerre de gangs, il s'agissait d'assurer la mainmise sur les vices lucratifs de l'homme — le sexe, la drogue et les jeux.

The man who had spoken to Feisal was Popol, one of the leaders of the terrifying Texas gang, one of the two groups which were fighting at the time to control the slums of Port Louis. Texas was a creole gang which operated in the poor creole areas of Port Louis, such as Roche-Bois and Sainte Croix. Their rival was Istanbul, a muslim gang from Vallée Pitot, and as in all gang wars, the issue here was control over the lucrative vices of man — sex, drugs and gaming.

SEWTOHUL, 2012: 83

It is one of the big bosses of a gang who gets Feisal involved in betting at the races. The races themselves as a major form of entertainment were introduced, according to HAZAREESINGH (1973), in the nineteenth century. Hazareesingh says they provided important moments of leisure for the hard-working Indo-Mauritian labourers. The Champ de Mars is a race course which belongs to the Mauritius Turf Club. It remains to this day a major site for public events and political rallies. The proclamation of independence took place there on the March 12, 1968 at 12.00. When the children hide in the container which has providentially become the base of the stage where the official proclamation will take place, they become witnesses from “down under” in both literal and metaphorical manner. The text deliberately plays upon their befuddled consciousness to sideline the official discourse of celebration. Even as they do not understand the import of the scene they have witnessed, Laval’s father can never understand what has changed. In panic after the shooting in the container he turns into a self-appointed fugitive in the city to escape the police. In an instance of the irrational causality which we have come to associate with magic realism, when the city burns it is attributed by the narrator to Feisal’s incessant betting. But in fact the race riots of 1968 had far more pernicious origins, rooted in the conflictual multiculturalism in the making of pre-independence Mauritius. It is significant that independence means nothing to the narrator within his frame of consciousness while the invisible objective consciousness of the text circulates around this theme of nation making in the details of real remembered events and personal deciphering of them. When independence is proclaimed, what matters to the narrator is that Ayesha has entered the container for the first time. This mixture of the personal and the collective memory of real historical events marks the style of narration throughout the text. For instance when Laval comes back from his escapade to Flacq, in his exploration of other worlds, he expects his father to be angry, but the latter lies prone in his chair worrying over an official communication from the Government. The letter announces that he has received *La Petite Bourse*. This government scholarship which sponsored the best performers at the end of the primary cycle was of immense importance in allowing children of the poor access to secondary education before the advent of free education in 1979. In a tragic-comic reaction his father fails to understand the implications of this and thinks that his son is lying to him. This episode captures the elevation of

hope which has enabled the transformation of Mauritius through the educational aspiration of the children of the poor

Construction of the nation remains a permanent concern in the text, even though it is apparently presented on the margins of awareness of its main character, who lives through events without understanding them. In a similar way the great ferment around nation building which followed the ebullient years of hope after independence is captured through the intense debates in Laval's father's shop, until late in the night, by the contemporary heroes of the twentieth-century Mauritius. Laval lies in his container listening uncomprehendingly to the feverish discussions:

*J'entendais chaque nuit, juste de l'autre côté, derrière un Rideau rouge, alors que je faisais mes devoirs, les révolutionnaires de l'île discuter entre eux. Ils étaient tous là, les Jeerooburkun et Paul, et Dev, et les Masson.*

Every night I would hear, just on the other side of the red curtain, behind which I was doing my homework, the revolutionaries of the island talking among themselves. They were all there, the Jeerooburkuns and Paul, and Dev, and the Massons.

SEWTOHUL, 2012: 190

In a similar way he and Ayesha will become involved, unbeknownst to them, in the student riots which affected the whole nation in the 1970s; this is the last episode before the group of friends splits, each going to their own destiny. Here Laval and Ayesha are witnesses to mass processions and violent demands but his memory of it is that they both found themselves in the river as the bus catapulted off the bridge and they had to be rescued.

The novel significantly moves to Australia where the confused narrator of the beginning comes into his own through the transnational reality of migration and through the transcendent experience he undergoes through the Australian dreamwork process. This brings the theme of migration and multiplicity to a skillful end by translating the yearnings of the novel for multiple belonging into a different realm of expectations.

In exploring the nature of orality in the structuring of the Mauritian literary texts discussed herein, I have tried to highlight the multiplicity of cultural references which altogether give a very complex picture of the nation coming into being. It is understood that however complex and successful the endeavour may have been, there is a lot more which yet has to be articulated in relation to orality, agency, and cultural alterities.

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