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Recommended Citation
Mooneeram, Roshni, Prospera's Island Revisited: Dev Virahsawmy's Toufann (In memory of my beloved mother, Nirmal Virahsawmy Mooneeram), Kunapipi, 21(1), 1999.
Available at:https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol21/iss1/7
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Abstract

Dev Virahsawmy is the first post-colorual Mauritian playwright to use Creole as dramatic expression and remains the figurehead of the theatre in Creole. This article focuses on Toufann (1991) and the fascinating cultural and literary productions that have stemmed from the ‘unexpected transfers’ of this translation/adaptation of The Tempest into Creole. In the post-colonial context, rewriting often begins as a specifically political project, out to challenge and overturn the ideological assumptions of Eurocentric canonical works. However, to see all post-colonial rewriting as a constant process of writing back to the centre is a limited view. In this article, I examine some of the strategies that make of Toufann an adaptation of The Tempest that opens up possibilities of other aspirations and needs, possibilities of other cultural productions; in other words, clear evidence that the absorption and transformation which Kristeva sees as inherent to all texts is in this instance a self-conscious and dynamic process.

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Prospero’s Island Revisited: Dev Virahsawmy’s Toufann

(In memory of my beloved mother, Nirmal Virahsawmy Mooneeram)

Dev Virahsawmy is the first post-colonial Mauritian playwright to use Creole as dramatic expression and remains the figurehead of the theatre in Creole. This article focuses on Toufann (1991) and the fascinating cultural and literary productions that have stemmed from the ‘unexpected transfers’ of this translation/adaptation of The Tempest into Creole. In the post-colonial context, rewriting often begins as a specifically political project, out to challenge and overturn the ideological assumptions of Eurocentric canonical works. However, to see all post-colonial rewriting as a constant process of writing back to the centre is a limited view. In this article, I examine some of the strategies that make of Toufann an adaptation of The Tempest that opens up possibilities of other aspirations and needs, possibilities of other cultural productions; in other words, clear evidence that the absorption and transformation which Kristeva sees as inherent to all texts is in this instance a self-conscious and dynamic process.

Mauritius, an ex-French and British colony (1721-1810 and 1810-1968 respectively), independent since 1968 and proclaimed a Republic in 1992, is a multi-ethnic and multilingual island. While Mauritius stands at present at the crossroads of the Commonwealth and the Francophonia, it remains, above all, Creolophone. If English and French have the monopoly of institutional diffusion, Creole is the mother tongue of an overwhelming majority of the population. Originating from early French colonization, Creole was seen as the slaves’ deformed imitation of their masters’ language, a corrupt form of French. Today with over a million speakers, and only second to Haitian as the most spoken French-based Creole, Mauritian Creole has proved itself essential enough to the sociolinguistic make-up of Mauritius to maintain its popularly recognized position. Despite its lack of official status, Creole has moved on considerably since independence both in terms of people’s perception of it and in terms of the extension of the fields where it now functions. The use of Creole has been extended to literary productions, and with particular success, to the theatre.

Whereas until independence the dramatic culture in Mauritius was heavily dominated by English and French, the militant post-independence climate raised the awareness that Creole could be the means of a cultural and political liberation. With the pioneering work of Dev Virahsawmy and other
playwrights, such as Azize Asgarally and Henri Favory, Creole has emerged as a new form of literary expression, defying the prejudice directed against it. In a sociolinguistic situation where English and French have unparalleled prestige, the playwrights sought to put Creole on an equal footing with the two colonial languages. Creole became the privileged space where an authenticity previously denied could be reclaimed, and evolved into an increasingly potent symbol. The historian Decotter concludes that, by the mid-1980s, the growing popularity of plays in Creole constituted a turning-point in the history of the theatre in Mauritius.

Virahsawmy’s later plays move away from the often stilted and didactic discourse of an earlier theatre of protest to explore a more dynamic vision. In a context where there is a growing confidence in the potential of Creole as the language of daily communication and culture, the promotion of the national language and literature no longer entails a rejection of English and French cultures. *Zeneral Makbef* (1981), which echoes Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, is the first play where Virahsawmy seeks inspiration from both local and foreign cultures, transcending — but not shunning — a Mauritian reality. In *Toufann*, he chooses a form of theatre which makes of Creole the meeting-point of foreign and local cultural currents, enhancing thereby ‘the propensity of performance to achieve different meanings/readings according to the context in which it occurs’. ³

*Toufann* is a Hindustani and Bhojpuri word for cyclone, a familiar natural occurrence in Mauritius. Bhojpuri, widely spoken in Mauritius, is of Indian origin but, having undergone changes in the course of translation over time and space, it has evolved into a different language from the Bhojpuri spoken in India. Not only is Mauritian Bhojpuri increasingly influenced by the Creole language it also feeds back into Creole which has appropriated several of its lexical items. The word ‘Toufann’ becoming itself text — manifold, diffuse — the title starts an intertextual argument that situates the play within a specific history and society. The adoption of a strategy of intertextuality, in its widest sense, does not imply movement across literary texts alone but includes symbolic texts, spoken language, social, cultural and historical resources. In other words, instead of focusing on a single model, *Toufann* adopts a broader heteroglossic strategy, transposing across one or several systems of signs, creatively adapting from more than one tradition, more than one type of text.

Trinculo and Stephano become ‘Kaspalto’ and ‘Dammarro’, stereotypical Mauritian names connoting a drunkard and a drug addict respectively, who discover abundant whisky-filled coconuts and marijuana fields on the island. Prospero’s island is filled with high-tech computers, and his toufann is virtual reality. Aryel, Prospero’s creation, is a robot with sensitive computer chips, programmed to carry out the three phases of his plan. The cultural productions that stem from the ‘unexpected transfers’ across time and space, across languages and cultures, bring about an island bubbling with dynamic re-creation, and endless possibilities.
Even the characters are self-consciously intertextual. Virahsawmy’s play blurs the boundaries of his Shakespearean sources, as key characters from different works collide in *Toufann*. Prospero’s daughter is ‘Kordelia’, a daughter carried across from *King Lear*, who embodies a new idea of community. Most interestingly, Antonio is turned into a self-conscious ‘Yago’, who expresses exasperation at being considered a villainous stereotype:


[ _Yago:_ I’ve had enough, enough, enough. Each time that things go wrong, everybody looks out for me. Do they need someone to blame it on? It must be Yago. Ever since that damned Shakespeare has used me to wreck Othello and Desdemona, everybody thinks that I am the one responsible for all the problems of the world. (p. 17)]

_Yago:_ Mo esperè ki bann kritchik literèr konpran ki mo pa movèt net.

[ _Yago:_ I hope that the literary critics will understand that I am not completely evil. (p. 21)]

As Yago re-emerges to claim redemption on Prospero’s island, he fights back against his own construction and denies Shakespeare, and three centuries of critics, the final word. Characters become productive of textual meaning, resisting the notion of closure.

If Shakespeare’s dramatic art cannot, as far as Virahsawmy is concerned, contain his characters, Prospero’s high rhetoric cannot diminish the polyphonic voices that confront him. Nothing goes according to Prospero’s plans. Ferdjinan is neither interested in a heterosexual relationship with Kordelia nor in leadership. Rejecting the older generation’s obsession with the marriage-reproduction-inheritance package, he claims instead an alternative relationship with Aryel. Ferdjinan explains that an accident in the past did irretrievable damage to certain parts of his anatomy:

_Ferdjinan:_ Dezir ou plezir sexiel pa enteress mwa. Dan Aryel mo trouv enn konpayon. Sé tou ... Dan zot lozik sa pa posib ... Dan mo lozik, li normal.

[ _Ferdjinan:_ I am not interested in sexual desire or pleasure. In Aryel I see a companion. That’s all ... In your reasoning it’s inconceivable ... In mine, it is normal. (p. 22)]

Aryel, who is both human and robot, is yet another cross-breed who has his computer chips disturbed when given a hug by Ferdjinan. Their alternative relationship in the play destabilizes binary distinctions between conceptions of the natural and the artificial, the normal and the abnormal, male and female.

In *Toufann*, furthermore, Kalibann is no longer the savage other but an intelligent and attractive young man, a ‘metis’ of mixed white and black ancestry, the issue of a white pirate and a black slave. Being a brilliant
technician, he is the only one capable of pursuing Prospero’s scientific work. He has also won the love of Kordelia who is carrying his child. The Shakespearean Caliban’s fantasy of impregnating Prospero’s daughter, thereby populating the island with his progeny and reigning as king, becomes reality with Virahsawmy. In Toufann, Kalibann is the one who marries Prospero’s daughter and takes over his grand project of habitation.

Toufann, however, does not limit its scope to mere parody of the colonial politics of The Tempest. As Arun Mukherjee claims in relation to Indian literature, ‘our cultural productions are created in response to our own needs and we have many more needs than to “parody the imperialists”’. In his rewriting of The Tempest, Virahsawmy exploits social structures and historical realities that successfully connect with the audience’s perception of life. Kalibann, the half-caste, is the concrete expression of the cultural practices that have shaped Mauritian society. His hybridity defies the boundaries that colonial communities create between what is included and what is excluded. The reappropriation of Kalibann is designed to debunk the prejudices against ‘half-castes’, and to overthrow the slave-master relationship that has, in various ways and under different forms, been part of the history of Mauritius. When Prospero loses his temper at Kordelia’s decision to marry Kalibann, he is literally made to shut up. Kordelia assertively stops him from uttering the word ‘bastard’, and refutes his arguments about the superiority of royal blood by asserting her belief in human blood. It is an interesting coincidence that in Creole the word ‘batar’ refers to an illegitimate child as well as a legitimate child of a mixed marriage.

By taking the audience out of the ordinary onto a fantastic island where possibilities are endless and renewal is constant, Toufann creates a space where society’s assumptions are exhibited and tested, where values are powerfully questioned. By pushing private – and often taboo – thoughts and prejudices into a public space, and offering a socio-historical context and rationale to a society which, despite its history, still very often frowns upon miscegenation, Virahsawmy provokes a revaluation of socio-cultural practices.

The Mauritian nation, constituted of migrant communities, cannot claim a common pre-colonial identity; the nation stands instead at the crossroads of various Eastern and Western influences. With Kalibann and Kordelia taking over, we have a renewed concept of community based on biological and cultural hybridity, a community revitalized on account of the prowess and resources of these symbolic figures, and which in turn gives them meaning and identity. By rewriting The Tempest within a Mauritian context, Virahsawmy then reads this society and history as texts, into which he inscribes himself and Toufann.

Finally, while Toufann continually arouses the possibility of a dominant pattern of meaning from a revisioning of The Tempest, this remains, nevertheless, only a possibility. Just as Virahsawmy’s Prospero cannot cling to the ways of an old continuous tradition, and must accept the process of change and renewal, so Toufann, incorporating Shakespeare and Mauritian
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Creole, traditional and modern popular theatres, becomes a perpetual movement of searching, creation and recreation, of boundary crossings, in terms of content as well as form.

Characteristically, at the conclusion of Toufann, there are signs that the new order is itself to be challenged. When all the characters are on board and ready to sail off, Dammarro and Kaspalto stir up a mutiny. In exasperation, Kordelia asks if they do not realize that the story is over. Dammarro complains that if a nobody, that is, Kalibann, can become king, why is it that he, the representative of the common people, cannot be crowned. Aryel informs him that he will ask the ‘master’ – it remains ambiguous whom Aryel is referring to: Prospero or the narrator or even the dramatist – to write a new story where they would eventually become king. The play refuses to establish a hierarchy between plot and subplot as it ends with the possibility that the subplot of Dammarro and Kaspalto might become the main plot in another dramatic version. Toufann seeks to consume its own biases by opening up the possibility of the future rule of the marginals.

Rather than run the risk of propagating an influence by contesting it, Toufann lays the emphasis on creative adaptation from more than one tradition. The movements of renewal through the integration of heterogeneous elements at the centre of the play are symbolic of the historical process that led to linguistic and cultural creolization in Mauritius. The play, like the character Kalibann, asserts its identity, not as a process of bastardization, or the static confrontation of cultures, or the mimicking of a foreign dramatic tradition but as a productive activity of ceaseless change.6 Toufann does not merely provide an insight into yet another post-colonial rewriting of Shakespeare, but gives a glimpse of the dynamic possibilities of literary and cultural productions of Mauritius through its Creole literary voice.

NOTES

2. Mauritius has retained English as the official language. English is, however, strictly speaking, nobody’s mother tongue and its use is mainly confined to the written medium, to education, Parliament and the judiciary. Occupying a semi-official status and sometimes seen as a rival to English is French, which is acceptable in Parliamentary debates and is the privileged language of the media.
6. From an English Tempest to a Creole Toufann, from a Creole Toufann to an English one, the story must necessarily continue somewhere else – Toufann is being translated into English and is due to be produced by Michael Walling in London in 1999.