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Ananda Devi's Narrative Strategies and Subversions.

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ANANDA DEVI'S NARRATIVE STRATEGIES AND SUBVERSIONS

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation proposes a feminist narratological study of texts by Ananda Devi, a contemporary Francophone writer from Mauritius. I examine three principle narrative strategies that allow Devi to challenge the dominant androcentric discourses. These discourses ignore the feminine world of domesticity and impose images of submission on women, thereby curbing feminine expression and quest. Inspired by the efforts of critics such as Alison Case, Robyn Warhol, Susan Lanser to study narrative structures in the context of cultural constructions of gender, I argue that Devi employs narrative strategies that allow her marginalized narrators to intervene in dominant structures of narrative construction and create hybrid magical spaces for feminine expression.

In the first chapter I analyze how Devi subverts the romance plot to bring to the fore alternative models of romance and sexuality that go beyond the binary man-woman opposition. Furthermore, drawing upon Susan Lanser's notion of "plotlessness," I argue that Devi's plotless novels not only valorize feminine space but also allow the narrator to connect with her narratees, creating a sense of feminine solidarity. The second chapter analyses how she questions the Western notion of linear temporality by privileging cyclical narratives that create space for feminine dialogue as her works connect women across time. This chapter also examines Devi's transgression of narrative boundaries by introducing multiple narrators through narrative metalepsis, thus introducing multiple consciousnesses by inviting different voices to construct the narrative. The third chapter probes Devi's non-Western techniques as she merges Western reality with the magic of the Orient and allows her characters accessibility to extra-real and magical spaces that become tools for them. In this section I also examine how Hindu myths and folktales intervene in the reality of Devi's novels, influencing her characters and narrators. In the process, however, Devi also scrutinizes the myths themselves by questioning their

representations of women. In this way Devi has effectively used different strategies to create a hybrid space where the West meets the non-West, the feminine meets the androcentric, the real meets the extra-real and the traditional distinctions between these categories are challenged for alternate and new possibilities.

INTRODUCTION

Ananda Devi belongs to the new generation of Mauritian writers. Although she currently lives in Ferney-Voltaire close to Geneva where she works as a translator, her fiction is set in Mauritius, her native island. She has a substantial body of work to her name, including eight novels, a collection of poems, and several collections of short stories. Her first novel, *Rue la Poudrière*, was published in 1989 and her most recent, *Indian Tango*, appeared in 2007. Devi's works are fascinating not only because of her intense, lyrical, and penetrating style of writing, but also because her texts reveal Mauritian diversity and splendor in a manner that is markedly different from her predecessors. She claims to be the first to present the reality of Mauritius as it is: "Par rapport aux écrivains mauriciens des générations antérieures, je pense que je suis parmi les premiers à avoir écrit Maurice à l'intérieur. A l'époque où j'ai écrit *Rue la Poudrière*, personne n'avait écrit quoique ce soit de ce genre à Maurice, (à part Marie-Thérèse Humbert), mais cela n'a pas été reconnu".[1]

Devi's predecessors such as Léoville L'Homme, Robert Edward Hart, and Malcolm de Chazal from the early and mid-twentieth-century as well as Raymond Chasle[2] from late-twentieth-century glorified the Mauritian land. She, however, presents a realistic view of the island.[3] In their poetry and prose Hart and Chazal celebrate the tropical nature, the scenery, and

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[1] Patrick Sultan, *Ruptures et Héritages; entretien avec Ananda Devi.*

[2] In *L'altérance des solstices* (1975) Raymond Chasle states, "Mon poème est une sonde lancée de l'île au cœur des nébuleuses." Pointing out Chasle's love and reverance for the island that resonate with Hart and Chazal, Jean-Louis Joubert notes about his writings: "L'île est vécue comme une réduction parfaite du cosmos, un temple où s'opère la mise en communication de l'âme et de la vie universelle. Ce qui est parfaitement conforme à l'imaginaire traditionnelle de l'insularité" (*Littératures de l'Océan Indien* 159).

[3] I emphasize Robert Edward Hart and Malcolm de Chazal because both are considered influential figures in Mauritian literary world of the early-twentieth-century. Léoville L'Homme, the father of Mauritian poetry, along with the first novelists such as Savinien Mérédac, Clément Charoux, and Arthur Martial were all "francotropistes." They were highly influenced by French masters such as Maupassant and Daudet and were unable to detach themselves from the hexagon. Although Clément Charoux's novel *Ameenah* (1935) focuses on an Indo-Mauritian character, it describes the failure of the alliance between a French man and the eponymous Indo-Mauritian heroine.

the landscape of Mauritius, thereby presenting a harmonious image. In the poetry of Robert

Edward Hart, for example, Port-Louis is a city of possibilities filled with enormous charm. It is a

mother, a protector of the protagonist. Devi's novels, on the contrary, present the dark reality of

the post-colonial city whose infrastructure is on the verge of collapse and whose residents strive

to come to terms with their poverty and misery. Her protagonists are not at ease with the torpor

and destitution that marks their world and thus seek a way out. Françoise Lionnet notes: "In

Devi's work, the city of Port-Louis loses its romantic aura to become a more troubling,

problematic, and ambiguously engaging site. For the first time in the literature of Mauritius, the

city and its infernal elements are revealed, brought to light" (*Postcolonial Representations* 52).

In order to break away from typical colonial writings marked by exoticism, Devi's

predecessors made Mauritius the principal focus of their literary projects, constructing a number

of myths based on that of Lemuria.[4] Both Hart and Chazal used this myth in literature to provide

a sense of identity for the people of Mauritius. They gave the current population of this island a

heritage that was more ancient and primordial. Instead of a painful past marked by slavery and

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Instead, the novel is seen as an outsider's account of Indo-Mauritian culture. Hart and Chazal were then the first writers who had the ability to write as Mauritians. With regard to Hart and Chazal's writings Jean-Louis Joubert notes: " le ton est plus intériorisé, la recherche plus spirituelle. Et pourtant, on peut y reconnaître un non moins vif désir d'écrire mauricien" (*Littératures de l'Océan Indien* 127).

[4] Certain 19th century geologists and zoologists imagined Lemuria to be the first home of humanity. Geological theories on Lemuria asserted the existence of a continent named Gondawana, constituted by the Indian peninsula, Africa, Madagascar, South America and Antarctica. It is believed that the continent later sank into the Indian Ocean. The existence of native people in Madagascar before the arrival of the colonial explorers is attributed to this myth. Although the myth has little scientific relevance in today's world, it has nevertheless been used by several intellectuals from Madagascar, Mauritius, Reunion and other small islands in the Indian Ocean, who have exploited this hypothesis of the origin of prehistory. The works of early and mid-twentieth century Mauritian writers such as Edward Hart and Malcolm de Chazal, for example, are highly influenced by it. For more information, see Jean-Louis Joubert, *Littératures de l'Océan Indien: histoire littéraire de la francophonie* (Vanves: EDICEF, 1991) and Sumathi Ramaswamy, *The Lost Land of Lemuria: Fabulous Geographies, Catastrophic Histories*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

racial prejudice, the Lemurian myth made those living on the Mascarene islands[5] the prestigious

ancestors of all civilizations, giving them a common myth that could hold them together as a

people. By proclaiming to be the descendants of the giant Lemurians, the people could assert

their affiliation with the island, become the sons of the soil, and acquire an indigenous identity

rooted in the Mauritian landscape. Hart and Chazal thus propagated an ideology of nostalgia and

a return to the past, glorifying their mother/father lands to assert their identity.

A similar tendency is discernible among Mauritian writers from the mid and late-

twentieth-century such as Jean Erenne, Édouard Maunick, and Pierre Renaud who affiliated

themselves with the movement of *négritude*. In order to fight for the independence of this island,

they asserted an ideology of return to the past and affirmed their identity through territory and

history. Jean-Louis Joubert explains their attraction to *négritude*, "Dans les années 1960 et 1970,

la négritude offre un exemple exaltant. Jean Erenne, comme on l'a vu, Édouard Maunick, dans

son exil itinérant, Pierre Renaud, journaliste très attentif à l'évolution des jeunes nations

indépendantes d'Afrique, ont prêté leur voix à cette négritude mauricienne" (155). [6]

Devi's work marks a significant departure from her predecessors as she privileges the

principle of universality that allows her to create a notion of identity based on multiplicity,

exploding the insularity of Mauritius, and challenging the binary division between center and

margin. She introduces a sense of belonging that is not confined to a single territory, not based

on a certain history, nor enclosed in a unitary culture. She celebrates the hybrid fabric of

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[5]The Mascarene Islands constitutes a group of islands in the Indian Ocean, east of Madagascar and comprise Mauritius, Réunion, Rodrigues, Cargados Carajos shoals, in addition to the former islands of the Saya de Malha, Nazareth and Soudan banks (*Indian Ocean: Five Island Countries* 32).

[6] Pierre Renaud's poem "Frère d'Afrique" from his anthology *Les Balises de la nuit* (1974) celebrates the African roots he rediscovers. Édouard Maunick's attraction to *négritude* is evident from his famous quotation , " Je suis nègre de préférence, mais Métis est mon état civil" (*Les Manèges de la mer*).

Mauritian society that was long suppressed by her predecessors.[7] Born to Indian parents in

Mauritius, Devi has spent her life at the crossroads of various cultures. Since early childhood she

was exposed to many diverse languages--Telugu, her mother's native language, Creole,

Bhojpuri,[8] English and French. Devi's exposure to different cultures allows her access to many

diverse worlds, enabling an intersection of several great cultures such as the Indian and the

European in her works. Véronique Bragard observes this multicultural aspect in Devi's writings:

"Ananda Devi's work is marked by numerous multicultural elements that illustrate the grand

diversity and the convergence of cultures" ("Eaux obscures" 188). Devi herself explains in an

interview with Patrick Sultan how her readers often encounter difficulties in pinning down her

identity due to the multi-cultural nature of her novels:

> On ne pouvait ni me définir en tant qu'écrivain indien, ni en tant qu'écrivain
> créole. Cela m'a posé des difficultés de définition personnelle jusqu'à ce que je
> me rende compte qu'être mauricien, c'est précisément cela: faire partie de tous
> ces mondes, et, à travers un processus de synthèse et de syncrétisme, en extraire
> quelque chose de neuf et d'authentique. (*Ruptures*)

Through the confluence of different cultures that mark her life and work, Devi thus seeks to

surpass differences of culture, class, caste, region or nation.

Devi's works also demonstrate an evolution in Mauritian literary discourse because she

is one of the pioneers along with Kissoonsingh Hazareesingh[9] who have written about the Indo-

Mauritian culture from an insider's perspective. Many Indian Ocean writers of the twentieth-

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[7] See my "Rethinking Identity and Belongingness: 'Mauritianness' in Ananda Devi's Works," in *Writing from the Postcolonial Islands: Postcolonial Theory and Practice* (forthcoming from Routledge).

[8] Bhojpuri is a regional language spoken in parts of north-central and eastern India including the western part of state of Bihar, the northwestern part of Jharkhand, and the Purvanchal region of Uttar Pradesh, as well as an adjoining area of southern plains of Nepal. Bhojpuri is also spoken in Guyana, Suriname, Fiji, Trinidad and Tobago and Mauritius.

[9] Kissoonsingh Hazareesingh is a historian who provided a historical account of the Indian reality in Mauritius in his book *Histoires des Indiens à l' île Maurice* (1950).

century who were highly influenced by the movement of *négritude* identified themselves with African writers. Joubert observes: "Une imagerie africaine imprègne volontiers la littérature mauricienne: elle a été plaisamment recensée par la *Mauritius Anthology of Literature in the African Context* (1977), préparée par Jean-Georges Prosper pour le compte du Ministère de l'Éducation er des Affaires Culturelles de l'île Maurice" (*Littératures de l'Océan Indien* 155). During this period the Indian aspect of Mauritius was largely suppressed. However, Ananda Devi, through her fiction, has been instrumental in bringing awareness about the Indo-Mauritian presence on the island in the literary world.[10]

As Devi grew up in a Hindu family listening to tales from the two great Indian epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, these stories became an integral part of her life and allowed her to internalize Hindu mythology. The Hindu epics influenced her writings both in content and form. This influence is reflected not only in the choice of her characters but also in the structure of her novels, demonstrating a deep-seated familiarity with the Hindu culture and religion. As Devi's connection with Hinduism and Hindu concepts such as metamorphosis, reincarnation, and karma is direct, her use of these notions differs from those of her predecessors. Many Mauritian writers have exploited the Indian connection by writing stories or novels based on Indo-Mauritian characters including the national poet Léoville L'Homme and Marcel Cabon. They were influenced by Hinduism and incorporated Hindu concepts into their works. Robert Edward Hart and Malcolm de Chazal, for example, were seduced by Hindu spirituality and Indian philosophy. In his poetry[11] Hart uses the images of Maya[12] from the Indian Vedas to explain his

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[10] More recently an article by a celebrated Mauritian poet Khal Torabully on Coolitude (1996) has focused world's attention on the condition of Indo-Mauritians in Mauritius and the descendants of Coolies across the world. For more information, see "Coolitude" *Notre Librairie* (octobre 1996): 59-71.

[11] In the poem "Aube" taken from his anthology *Poèmes védiques* (1941), Hart celebrates dawn, lucidity, and the notion of detachment, viewing them in opposition to Maya, the illusion. He says:

own ideas. Joubert notices the Vedic influence on Hart's works: " Dans ses vers, l'image hellénique se mêle d'inspiration védique. Les philosophies de l'Inde, par lesquelles il se sent attiré et qui sont présentes dans le donné culturel mauricien, le confirment dans son idéal de dépouillement" (*Littératures de l'Océan Indien* 129). One, however, fails to discern an internalization of Hindu concepts in his works as is evident in those of Devi's.

Ananda Devi is unique also because she is one of the few Mauritian women writers along with Marie Thérèse Humbert who are interested in exposing the pitiable state of women since independence. As Michel Beniamino observes:

> Avant l'émergence d'écrivaines comme Ananda Devi et Natacha Appanah cette littérature était confinée dans le sentimentalisme et les souffrances de l'"âme féminine." C'était une littérature de l'excès: mièvrerie, désir de plaire, ton moralisateur et narcissisme. Mais des voix novatrices s'élèvent, jeunes et postcoloniales, qui prennent la réalité sociale à bras le corps et imposent la place des femmes dans une société violemment patriarcale, sous des dehors avenants pour le touriste de passage. Mais ce sont aussi des voix en exil volontaire: Ananda Devi est le prototype d'une nouvelle génération littéraire revendiquant la désaffiliation de l'individu qui est désormais sans attaches, libre de toute détermination extérieure directe, et libre dans cette mesure même d'assumer à volonté de nouvelles identités, obligeant ainsi à repenser les cadres de lecture de la littérature mauricienne. (149).

 O Maya, fée universelle
 Et dont la baguette magique
 Tôt ou tard nous transperce le cœur,
 Trompeuse, c'est mon tour de te leurrer.
 Amour, gloire, soif de plaisir,
 Enfants de l'éternel Désir,
 Le souffle de l'aube a passé
 et nous voici tout effeuillés
 comme des roses vénéneuses.

[12] Maya is a Sanskrit word that is roughly translated as "illusion". In Advaita Vedanta philosophy, Maya is the limited, purely physical and mental reality in which our everyday consciousness has become entangled. Maya is held to be an illusion, a veiling of the true, unitary Self -- the Cosmic Spirit also known as Brahman. The concept of Maya was expounded in the Hindu scriptures known as the *Upanishads*. Many philosophies or religions seek to "pierce the veil" of Maya in order to glimpse the transcendent truth, from which the illusion of a physical reality springs, drawing from the idea that first came to life in the Hindu stream of Vedanta. For more information, see Paul David Devanandan, *The Concept of Maya* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1954).

He rightly describes Devi as the prototype of the new generation writers. Some young female journalists such as Shenaz Patel and Nathacha Appanah have recently begun writing novels and short stories that deal with the condition of women in Mauritius. Ananda Devi, however, would be considered a pioneer in bringing the condition of Indo-Mauritian women to the fore through her writings.

Ananda Devi's novels, such as *Pagli, La vie de Joséphin le fou*, *Ève de ses décombres, L'Arbre fouet*, and *Rue la Poudrière,* introduce the reader to a mysterious world of despair, destitution, madness, putrefaction, destruction, and violence. All her protagonists, mostly women, are in some way mad, deformed, mute, abnormal, or deviant. They live in complete or partial isolation, recounting tales of pain, suffering, and despair. *Pagli's* protagonist Daya is mad and ostracized by society. Mouna in *Moi, l'interdite* is deformed and dumb. In *Joséphin le fou* the eponymous protagonist is rejected by his prostitute mother. Society's rejection of these protagonists is so extreme that they are no longer perceived as human beings, but rather as shadows.

Yet, all of these characters play the crucial role of narrator in Devi's novels. The narratives produced by them are intriguing as they are unusual in their style and form. What is implied then by Devi's choice of according narrative authority to these story-tellers? Is Devi giving them an agency denied to them in reality? Is she constructing an interstitial space from where they can voice their experiences? What can one make of the extra-ordinary style of these narratives? A close examination of the narratives produced by these voices might offer answers to some of these key questions. First, however, it is essential to understand how narratologists define narrative as well as determine the point of conjunction between narrative and the reality it represents.

According to Porter Abbott, narrative entails the telling of a story. He defines it as a "representation of an event or a series of events" (3). However, the mere presence of events does not constitute a narrative; it is simply a story. A story becomes a narrative only when its events are put together, told, or represented by a mediator, the narrator. As Gerald Prince states, "[Narrative is] the recounting of one or more real or fictitious events communicated by one, two, or several (more or less overt) narrators to one, two, or several (more or less overt) narratees" (58). Hence, representation is an important task of narration. Narrative may represent both real and fictive events and by extension real and fictive worlds. It cannot operate as an independent entity, as it is closely related to the world it represents. Like any other literary convention, narrative is an instrument that not only represents experience but also interprets it. In her book *Writing beyond the Ending,* Rachel Blau Duplessis explains the close link between narrative and ideology:

> Narrative in the most general terms is a version of, or a special expression of ideology: representations by which we construct and accept values and institutions [...]. Narrative structures are like working apparatuses of ideology, factories for the 'natural' and 'fantastic' meanings by which we live […]. Indeed narratives may function on a small scale the way that ideology functions on a large scale--as a system of representations by which we imagine the world as it is. (3)

According to this definition, narratives are closely related to our ideas and perceptions of reality. In fact, they contribute enormously to construct and reinforce our socio-cultural beliefs.

Duplessis further argues that most fictional works reflect ideology and express dominant attitudes toward women, family, sexuality, and gender, imposing, for example, an image of passivity and submission on women. They also reflect how woman is perceived in the society described by these works. Duplessis terms such narratives as androcentric, as they represent women in a manner that entraps them in definitions, forcing them to adhere to specific roles

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assigned to them by the society, and thereby depriving them of agency. They not only misrepresent women, she asserts, but also reinforce this passive image and constantly suppress women's expression and experience.

Duplessis proposes that a complete rupture from this dominant/androcentric narrative is the only way to liberate the feminine voice. For her, women writers cannot express themselves within the framework of dominant narrative, as it is this very narrative that controls and suppresses their voices. The only way their voices can be heard is by breaking this structure. She proposes a narrative that breaks away from the androcentric approach, a narrative that accords space and agency to women, a narrative that is sensitive to the cultural process of gender construction. Writing beyond the ending, according to her, is "the transgressive invention of narrative strategies that express critical dissent from dominant narrative" (5). It entails finding new words and creating new methods instead of repeating old narratives by "rupturing language and tradition sufficiently to invite a female slant, emphasis, or approach" (32). To break the dominant structure is to reject not only grammar but also rhythm, pace, flow, expression, the structuring of the female voice by the male voice, female tone and manner by male expectations, female writing by male emphasis, female writing by existing conventions of gender, in short, any way in which dominant structures shape muted ones. She proposes that a woman writer must experiment with different strategies until she finds one that takes the natural shape of her thought without crushing or distorting it (33).

Several feminist critics such as Alison Case, Susan Lanser, Robyn Warhol, Kathy Mezei and others agree with Duplessis and are contributing to this analysis. Robyn Warhol has even made attempts to formalize this study by coining the term feminist narratology that she defines in her article "The Look, the Body" as a "study of narrative structures and strategies in the context of cultural constructions of gender" (21). She believes that narratology and the precise

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vocabulary it has developed for talking about how stories are told or understood not only makes it easier to talk about particular features of texts but also can go a long way in enabling feminist critics to analyze the textual construction of gender. Susan Lanser's work is foundational in establishing a relationship between rhetorical narratology[13] and the emergence of feminist narratology.[14] It laid the groundwork for reading gender as a significant factor in narration. According to her, both feminist criticism and particularly the study of narratives by women can benefit from the methods and insights of narratology. Narratology, in turn, can also be altered and enriched by "the understandings of feminist criticism and the experience of women's texts" ("Towards" 342). Alison Case sums up feminist narratology as "a practice that, by merging feminist criticism's attention to the politics of representation with the formalist analytic tools and terminological precision of narratology, seeks to reveal the ways gender is woven into the dynamic of novelistic narrative itself, and into our responses to it as narrative" (10). In bringing narratology together with feminist criticism, these theorists wish to acquire tools that allow them to better understand the texts and articulate their analyses.

Inspired by the works of these critics, most particularly by their efforts to use narratives and the process of narrative construction as a means to demonstrate the alienation of feminine voice, I read Devi's texts to understand her strategies that question and challenge androcentric Western narratives. In this dissertation I argue that Devi proposes various narrative strategies that allow her marginalized characters/narrators to intervene in the dominant structures of narrative

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[13] The Rhetorical strain of narratology is associated with theorists such as Wayne Booth, James Phelan, Peter Rabinowitz, and David Richter (Case 7).

[14] Both Warhol and Lanser present themselves--quite rightly--as pioneers of a new field they term *feminist narratology*. Lanser's work takes her "Toward a feminist narratology"--words she used as the title of a 1986 article; and Warhol, in the title of her opening chapter, asks, "Why Don't Feminists 'Do' Narratology?" Few years after that question was posed, Kathy Mezei's *Ambiguous Discourse: Feminist Narratology and British Women Writers* appeared. It contains thirteen essays identified as works of feminist narratology.

construction, and thereby liberate narrative from the shackles of "master's tools".[15] I identify

three approaches that distinguish Devi's texts from dominant narratives and function as tools,

allowing Devi's narrators to create their own niche. This niche then becomes the interstitial

space from where Devi's narrators tell their experiences. As I emphasize more the "how" rather

than the "what" of narrative presentation in Devi's texts, my work tends to align with the

emerging field of feminist narratology. In this study I closely examine narrative structures from

Devi's eight novels.

   This dissertation is divided into three chapters outlining three different approaches that

disrupt notions of traditional narrative. The first chapter examines women in relation with their

husbands and contests the romance plot[16] narratives of the Victorian era. As Rachel Blau

Duplessis, Alison Case, and Robyn Warhol have pointed out, this plot aimed to define

womanhood in a manner that prevented women from having an identity or individuality of their

own, separate from their husbands or fathers. Devi's married narrators reject their husbands and

liberate themselves from the conjugal plots. As they begin their personal quests, they find ways

of asserting their identity and being. Devi's resistance, however, is not limited to a mere

subversion of marriage but goes beyond as it questions the importance accorded to heterosexual

couples in Victorian plots that directed feminine sexuality in a manner beneficial to man. Devi

proposes relationships that challenge heterosexuality as the only possibility and presents other

alternatives for women. This chapter also examines these relationships to understand how Devi

questions accepted notions of the masculine and the feminine to subvert a binary man-woman

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[15] A term borrowed from Audre Lorde's essay "Master's Tools Cannot Dismantle Master's House."

[16] The Romance plot is a master plot that dominated European literary scene for ages. Rachel Blau Duplessis, in her book *Writing beyond the Ending,* explains that romance has always been an integral part of Western society, but it emerged as a powerful master narrative in European literature as a strategy to control women (2).

opposition. I also investigate Devi's use of Hindu spirituality to replace the erotic and the sexual with the spiritual, a move that adds a new dimension to her novels by presenting love and sex differently, thereby unsettling traditional representations. Devi does not content herself with the scrutiny of notions of romance plot or plot in general. She surpasses tradition by proposing texts in which the feminine world of stasis is valorized. Her works, in fact, tend to align well with what Susan Lanser calls "plotlessness." Chapter one also presents the plotless nature of Devi's texts in which narration is not simply the recounting of a tale but more precisely the narrator's effort to connect with her narratees in a way that allows the narratee to contribute in the construction of the narrative. As a result, the traditional narrator-narratee divide is effectively challenged in favor of new possibilities.

In the second chapter I analyze how ancient Indian texts influence Devi's novels narratologically, allowing her to introduce cyclical narratives. She uses the concept of reincarnation to present web-like structures in her narrative, allowing her characters a possibility to move freely across time and space. In this way she brings together women from different epochs to voice their common experiences. This chapter also examines Devi's transgression of narrative boundaries by introducing multiple narrators through narrative metalepsis, thus making her texts a "meeting place" for narrators and narratees. Her use of metalepsis introduces multiple consciousnesses by inviting different voices to construct the narrative. Narration then becomes a collaborative effort, not simply the recounting of a single protagonist's tale.

The third chapter probes Devi's non-Western techniques as she merges Western reality with the magic of the Orient and allows her characters accessibility to extra-real and magical spaces. In this section I also examine how Hindu myths and folktales intervene in the reality of Devi's novels, influencing her characters and narrators. In the process, however, Devi also scrutinizes the myths themselves by questioning their representations of women. The extra-real

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and the magical become tools for the silenced women who can escape reality to access a world where their voices can be heard and understood.

Although Devi's work is different from her predecessors and intriguing in numerous ways, she did not receive attention from academia until recently. In 1973, at the age of 16, she won Radio France Internationale's short-story prize, and her collection of short stories *Le Poids des êtres* (1987) was singled out for honorable mention by the jury for the Noma Award. Yet, she received only a fleeting mention in earlier works on Indian Ocean Literature such as Camille de Rauville's *Littératures francophones de l'Océan Indien* (1990) and Jean-Georges Prosper's *Histoire de la littérature mauricienne de langue française* (1978). However, she did receive a one page mention in Jean-Louis Joubert's anthology *Littératures francophones de l'Océan Indien* (1993). Some articles have appeared on her works in *Notre Librairie* in a special volume focused on Indian Ocean literature in 1994, but these were mostly reviews of her books. Notable work was done on her by Françoise Lionnet in her article "Evading the Subject: Narration and the City in Ananda Devi's *Rue la Poudrière*" (*Postcolonial Representations* 1995). Two articles by Véronique Bragard appeared later. [17] These articles discuss the pitiable state of Mauritian women in relation to the island and the past. In the first article Bragard demonstrates how Devi uses the fundamental elements such as water, fire, and earth to unveil not only the feminine suffering but also transgression by female characters. The second focuses on memory and past, as it reveals the significance of the quest for past and also the liberation from it. This piece discusses her novels *Le voile de Draupadi* and *L'arbre fouet* as allegories of memory, and how individual and body memory echo a community and ancestral memory. In addition, a study by Julia Waters "Ton continent est noir: Rethinking Feminist Metaphors in

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[17] Véronique Bragard, "Cris des femmes maudites, brûlures du silence: la symbolique des éléments fondamentaux dans l'œuvre d'Ananda Devi" and "Eaux obscures du souvenir; Femme et mémoire dans l'œuvre d'Ananda Devi."

Ananda Devi's *Pagli*" appeared in *Dalhousie French Studies* in 2004. In this article Waters first attempts to read *Pagli* within a Western theoretical frame [18] and then to reconsider this theoretical framework in relation to the non-Western specificities of the novel.

In Spring 2008 *Nouvelles Études Francophones* published a series of articles on Ananda Devi after she received le Certificat d'Honneur Maurice Cagnon du CIÉF at the annual meeting of the Conseil Internationale d' Études Francophones in 2007. In her article[19] on Devi, Jeeveeta Soobarah Agnihotri examines the theme of madness in Ananda Devi's *Pagli* (2001)-- madness of language that leads to a madness of meaning through multiple languages. She demonstrates how Devi creates a "texte métissé" in which Creole, Hindi and French work together to represent the socio-linguistic reality of the island and uses it as a strategy to unveil the monstrosity of characters. Eileen Lohka[20] examines the intimate relationship between Devi's writings and her native island as the island itself becomes a character. She explores the close connection between characters and nature in Devi's writings.

These articles have deftly analyzed major themes in Devi's writings such as insanity, alienation of women in patriarchal society, their resistance and transgression, multilingualism, and the lapse in syntax and punctuation. These scholars have explored the relationship between women and island skillfully presented through Devi's figurative and lyrical language. They have also read and interpreted Devi's writings in relation to Western feminist theory. My study will expand this scholarship by exploring some of these themes through a non-Western approach. As a Hindu who grew up with beliefs and practices described in Devi's writings, I can discern and

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[18] Julia Waters draws in particular on the theoretical writings of Hélène Cixous, from her ground-breaking essay "Le rire de la Méduse" *L'Arc* 61 (1975): 39-54.

[19] Jeeveeta Soobarah Agnihotri, "Folie des sens et folie des langues: Le Plurilinguisme, stratégie d'écriture dans *Pagli* d'Ananda Devi."

[20] Eileen Lohka, "De la terre à la terre, du berceau à la tombe: L'Île d'Ananda Devi."

analyze how Devi uses Hindu concepts of reincarnation, Hindu spirituality, myths, and folktales as feminine tools to subvert the "master's tools."

Whatever critical work has been done on this writer so far is mostly thematic. In examining Devi's texts from a narratological perspective, this study also contributes to feminist narratology. In addition, it introduces non-Western approaches and strategies to counter the androcentric narrative. Since Devi's work is still largely unexplored in American academia,[21] this dissertation could well serve as an introduction of Ananda Devi's work and suggest areas of potential research on other budding women writers from Mauritius such as Shenaz Patel and Nathacha Appanah Mouriquand.

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[21] Notably, the University of California, Los Angeles and the University of Louisiana, Lafayette are exceptions as Dr. Françoise Lionnet and Dr. Bénédicte Maugrière have introduced Indian Ocean Literature to their undergraduate and graduate students.

CHAPTER 1
PLOT AND PLOTLESSNESS: TOWARD FEMININE DESIRE/QUEST

As defined by Peter Brooks, plot is the "principle of interconnectedness and intention which we cannot do without in moving through the discrete elements--incidents, episodes, actions--of a narrative. […] We can make sense of dense and seemingly chaotic texts as dreams because we use interpretive categories that enable us to reconstruct intentions and connections, to replot the dream as narrative" (*Reading for the Plot* 5). In Brooks's opinion, plot provides coherence to the narrative, as it is the "organizing dynamic of a specific mode of human understanding" (5). Plots are not simply organizing structures, but are also intentional structures, goal-oriented and forward-moving.

Brooks's extensive investigations into questions that deal with a plot's function and motivation allow him to conclude that the movement of plot is steered by human desire and its peculiar relation to beginnings and ends. A non-narratable event can be converted into a narratable one by imposing a beginning and an end. Brooks explains how the hero's desire transforms a non- narratable existence into a narratable one:

> The non-narratable existence is stimulated into condition of narratibility through deviance and detour (ambition, quest, the pose of a mask) in which it is maintained for a certain time, through an at least minimally complex extravagance, before returning to the quiescence of the non-narratable. The energy generated by deviance, extravagance, excess--an energy that belongs to the textual hero's career and to the reader's expectation, his desire of and for the text- - maintains the plot in its movement. […] The desire of the text is ultimately the desire for the end, for that recognition which is the moment of the death of the reader in the text. (108)

If Brooks sees the motor of plot in the hero's desires and ambition, for Tzvetan Todorov, the motor lies in "transformation". Todorov elaborates a model of narrative transformation whereby plot is constituted in the tension of two formal categories, difference and resemblance:

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> Rather than a 'coin with two faces,' transformation is an operation in two directions: it affirms at once resemblance and difference; it puts time into motion and suspends it, in a single movement; it allows discourse to acquire a meaning without this meaning becoming pure information; in a word, it makes narrative possible and reveals its very definition. (240)

Although Todorov and Brooks agree that plot provides movement to the narrative, Todorov does not specify what causes the transformation. Brooks's analysis of plot goes further to demonstrate that the hero's desires and ambitions push him into actions that finally lead to the transformation Todorov discusses in his work, thereby constructing the narrative.

Feminist narratologists, such as Susan Lanser and Margaret Homans, however, have often argued against classical notions of plot, as they tend to ignore the feminine world-- a world marked by inaction, waiting, and stasis. They view Todorov's and Brooks's notion of plot as androcentric, because the desire and ambition that drives Brooks's plot is essentially a masculine desire. In an engaging feminist critique of Brooks's "Masterplot" Susan Winnett states, "Brooks's Masterplot occults the woman in such a way that the desire negotiated in the tug-of-war between men is played out, pleasured in, at her expense, without any acknowledgement of what her value outside this circuit of exchange might have been" (512). Discussing the limitations of Brooks's notion of plot with respect to the feminine world and desire in her article "Toward a Feminist Narratology," Susan Lanser explains: "The theorists of plots assume that the textual actions are based on the intentional deeds of protagonists, they assume a power, a possibility, that may be inconsistent with what women have experienced both historically and textually, and perhaps inconsistent with women's desires" (356). Consequently, the standard narratological notions of plot do not adequately describe some women's texts. Therefore, she proposes a need for a radical revision of plot theories. Similarly, the feminist critic Josephine Donovan explains that women's experiences, when held against the masculine plot, often seem "static, and in a mode of waiting. It is not progressive or oriented toward events happening

sequentially or climactically, as in the traditional masculine story plot" (218-219). Katherine

Rabuzzi agrees with Donovan as she notes, "By and large, most women have known a non-

storied existence" (218). In order to voice feminine expression, these narratologists propose the

notion of "plotless" narrative, a narrative marked by stasis and waiting. It is important to note

that the term plotless should not be read as negative or pejorative. Its objective is to counter old

definitions of plot that tend to be androcentric.

In this chapter I will examine Ananda Devi's narratives and narratological strategies that

not only question plots and master plots driven by "masculine" desire, but also those plots that

allow women to express desire and ambition. The first part of this chapter will explore how

Devi's narratives resist notions of love and marriage valorized in the romance plot that typically

imprisons women in stereotypical roles as wives and lovers. Devi not only replaces the erotic

with the spiritual, but also incorporates relationships other than the heterosexual coupling

emphasized in the romance plot. I will also study alternative ties of love and friendship that

challenge gender stereotypes and question the binary man-woman opposition. In addition to

challenging the androcentric narratives based on "masculine" desire, Devi proposes what Lanser

calls plotless/feminine texts. In the second part of this chapter, I will analyze the plotless nature

of Devi's narratives that describe the feminine world of domesticity and stasis as opposed to the

action and adventure of androcentric narratives. Additionally, I will explore the narrator's

urgency to connect with her narratees in order to relay her message, as communication becomes

not only the means but also the objective of narration.

1.1 Subverting Marriage and the Romance Plot: Redefining Love

The romance plot is a master plot that dominated the European literary scene during the

eighteenth- and nineteenth- century. This master narrative not only valorized marriage in fiction,

but also represented romance and wedlock in a manner that limited women characters by

imposing an image of passivity on them. It can be defined as a narrative that tells the story of courtship and betrothal of one or more heroines. Deborah Chappel identifies its basic structure as "the central conflict about the love relationship between the hero and the heroine in which they always end up together, leading to a happy ending" (7-8).

In his work *Tradition Counter Tradition*, Joseph Boone explains that marriage became extremely significant and came to assume an increasingly central ideological function in the rising middle-class cultures and bourgeois society of the West in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-centuries because it was able to provide a definite and contained structure to society. He discusses the significance of marriage in maintaining social order. For Boone, in fictional works "the marital ideal serves as a metonymy for proper social order" (7). He also affirms the dominance of romance plots and their inevitable tie to marriage in fiction:

> From Austen to Eliot and Hardy, from Hawthorne to Howells and Wharton, the novel's recurring obsession with the nature of romantic relationship and its possible outcome is clear. It has long been a critical commonplace to cite the predominance of a marriage tradition in English and American fiction. But the deeper significance of marriage as a primary shaping influence and potent symbol of order in the novel has only recently begun to receive the scrutiny it has always deserved. (5)

Similarly, Tony Tanner believes that the bourgeois novelist had no choice but to engage the subject of marriage because "for bourgeois society marriage is the all--subsuming, all organizing, all containing contract. It is the structure that maintains the Structure" (15). Marriage thus acquired a significant place amongst the eighteenth- and nineteenth- century Western bourgeoisie due to its ability to ensure a stable structure. It is therefore essential to understand novelistic representations of marriage and love and how they succeeded in maintaining and reinforcing a structure that ensured not only narrative order but also social stability.

Several feminist theorists are critical of these representations, as they believe that the social stability ensured by the celebrated marital structure came at the expense of women characters that were often pushed into roles of submission and passivity. Critical rejection of the romance plot emanated from the wave of feminism that arose in the 1960s. Germaine Greer, one of the leaders of that movement, states that the common theme of all romance novels is enslavement of women. Criticizing these plots, Tania Modleski states, "The heroine in the romance plot can achieve happiness only by undergoing a complex process of self-subversion, during which she sacrifices her aggressive instincts" (37). Rachel Blau Duplessis, in her book, *Writing beyond the Ending,* explains that romance has always been an integral part of Western society, but it emerged as a powerful master narrative in European literature as a strategy to control women. She states:

> Romance plots of various kinds, the iconography of love, the postures of yearning, pleasing, choosing, slipping, falling, and failing are, evidently, some of the deep, shared structures of our culture. […] Romance as a mode may be historically activated when middle-class women lose economic power in the transition from pre-capitalist economies and are dispossessed of certain functions, the romance script may be a compensatory social and narrative practice. (2)

Although romance developed as a compensatory narrative for women, it is essential to understand the place accorded to women in these romance plots.

Duplessis demonstrates that the treatment meted out to women characters in Victorian novels that privilege the romance plot is undesirable. The only significant role they play in such plots is that of a wife or a lover. Such stories are incapable of representing women outside the framework of marriage or courtship. Since the only manner of asserting feminine identity in a marriage is the woman's liaison with her husband, these plots valorize heterosexual coupling and

family values. Such a coupling controls all feminine potential and directs it in a manner beneficial to man, as Duplessis explains:

> As a narrative pattern, the romance plot muffles the main female character, represses quest, valorizes heterosexual as opposed to homosexual ties, and incorporates individuals within couples as a sign of their personal and narrative success. The romance plot separates love and quest, values sexual asymmetry, including the division of labor by gender, is based on extremes of sexual difference, and evokes an aura around the couple itself. (5)

The notion of wedlock aligns the sexes in a hierarchical pattern that is itself derived from cultural assumptions about gender. Hence, the distribution of power between the sexes is far from egalitarian, as Boone states: "As much feminist criticism has demonstrated, the entitlements to power that Marxists have traditionally associated with class hegemony can logically be extended to include those operations of male dominance and female submission encoded in the relation of the sexes" (12). The unequal distribution of power leads to sexual asymmetry that has resulted, in Mary Jacobus's words, in the "ultimately conservative and doom-ridden concept of [sexual] difference as opposition" (12). Man and woman define themselves as entities completely opposed to each other. "Man and woman were made for, and not like one another," states the Victorian writer Dinah Mulock Craik, summing up the antagonistic logic that underlies sexual identity.

The biological difference that is a pretext for the power that upholds the "patriarchal" sexual order, also becomes the basis for construction of sexual differences that, in turn, accord sexual identity to genders. Woman in this system is defined in opposition to man, as the negative "other" of man. The eighteenth- and nineteenth- century romance novels contribute in enforcing this gender stereotype by naturalizing this socially constructed gender difference. As Boone states, "Sexual constructions of identity function in a manner analogous to ideological and narrative modes of signification, positing as natural a set of potentialities […] never unmediated

by human reality" (9). The contrast between genders in novelistic representations has reinforced the contemporary ideologies of sexual polarity and resulted in several gender stereotypes. It has also resulted in the dismissal of nonsexual differences in taste and perception that can help create a degree of healthy reciprocity in man-woman relationships.

In this section I will analyze how Devi's narratives resist the traditional notions of love and romance that perpetuated in eighteenth- and nineteenth- century fiction. Additionally I will examine how Devi's narratives are critical of elements such as marriage and happy endings that constitute important ingredients of the romance plot. I will first investigate Devi's treatment of marriage before examining her attempts to redefine love in a manner that allows more space and agency to the women of her novels. Subsequently, I will study how Devi traces a "likeness" between the two genders, opposing accepted hierarchical and dichotomized notions of sexual identity that allow and reinforce the existence of complex differences between men and women. Devi's narratives also present a spectrum of human relationships that construct a character's life, instead of according undue importance to a single relation between a man and his wife. Hence, her works explore ties outside marriage, homosexual relationships, and platonic alliances. I will also analyze how Devi's depictions of human relationships other than marriage allow her to question accepted gender stereotypes. Furthermore, I will show that Devi's depictions liberates her women characters from the undue expectations imposed by gender stereotypes.

1.1.1 Marriage and Love in Devi's Works

Marriage figures as a significant theme in *Le voile de Draupadi* and *Pagli*, as these works trace the lives of married women. In both novels, marriage is not the one and only paradise every woman seeks, but a helpless state that annihilates her individuality in favor of her identity as a wife. However, it is through resistance to victimization in marriage that the protagonists of these novels offer possibilities of self-discovery.

1.1.1.1 Marriage in *Le voile de Draupadi*

Le voile de Draupadi is not only a mother's desperate quest to save her ailing son, but also a critical statement about a deteriorating marriage. The family's suffering, resulting from the son's ailment, makes way for the female protagonist, Anjali, to examine herself, her marital relationship, and her past. The plot tracing the life of a married couple also allows the protagonist to analyze her pre-marital romance. By allowing the protagonist to reflect on her romance, Devi strategically equips Anjali with a necessary distance, enabling her to look at those incontestably romantic moments from a critical perspective. She also forces Anjali to question some socially constructed myths around romance that we inherit culturally, as Joseph Boone observes in his discussion of wedlock and romance:

> The Anglo-American novel's promotion of the wedlock ideal as a natural, rather than socially constructed, phenomenon has incorporated several age old verities that we may yet recognize as constitutive of our own private romantic fantasies, even in face of a reality that often speaks otherwise: each desiring subject is destined to meet the one perfect love-object "made" for him or her; the perfect end of love is everlasting union with that individual; love will strike at first sight; sexual love transcends all material concerns; emotions are more valuable than reason in matters of the heart. (14)

Anjali believed she was in love with her husband Dev since their first meeting at a cousin's wedding: "J'avais cru l'aimer, depuis notre première rencontre au mariage d'une cousine" (20). Anjali's falling for Dev could then be read as typical love at first sight. However, as Anjali looks back at those romantic moments after her marriage, she realizes for the first time that she was never sure of her feelings toward her husband, and circumstances other than her own desire actually led to their union. She states: "Une vie qui se déroulait en paliers successifs et presque anormalement logiques. Tout y était attendu, tout y était prévisible. Je prenais pour le destin ce qui n'était en fait qu'une absence de choix. Les circonstances nous accordaient parfaitement, Dev et moi, et il n'y avait nulle raison pour nous d'aller à leur encontre" (20). In fact, according

to Anjali, their premarital romance, much like their marriage, was devoid of two essential ingredients for a conjugal union, tenderness and love. She observes: "Notre mariage serait une chose tellement naturelle qu'elle semblerait suivre une loi organique. Mais au fond il n'y avait pas eu de tendresse à proprement parler, pas de sa part en tout cas, et même la mienne était peut-être un peu forcée, factice; rien que cette formelle 'réunion', de part et d'autre, les deux familles assises, s'observant, se regardant, se 'mutualisant' et 'énumérant' mentalement les avantages du mariage" (20).

Consequently, their relationship was facilitated more by family and circumstances rather than by love, contrary to what she thought initially. She made herself believe that she was in love with Dev, because circumstances and the two families pushed them toward each other. It is only after her son's illness, which led to the widening of the abyss between the couple, that Anjali notices the gaps in her relationship with her husband; as she observes: "Il n'était pas le Dieu solaire que je m'imaginais avoir épousé"(9). Although these gaps persisted from the very beginning, they somehow remained invisible, making her believe that her union with Dev was perfect. Anjali's retrospection is thus revelatory, as it exposes the illusory nature of her pre-marital romance and the deteriorating state of her marriage.

While describing the ceremony of marriage, Anjali explains how it was marked by boredom and a deep sense of isolation for her, whereas Dev, her husband, was preoccupied with his own dreams of power and prosperity:

> Dev regardait avec ennui par la fenêtre, perdu dans ses rêves de puissance et moi, sans rêves, attelée à l'ordre des choses, je le regardais en imaginant l'espace carré de notre vie future. A cause de tout cela, nous n'avions pas connu de prise de possession véritable, chacun s'appartenait à soi-même, un vague lien entre nous, creux, vide, intangible. En croyant faire notre propre choix, nous avions été guidés, de manière occulte, par la famille. (20)

Devi skillfully demonstrates how there existed an illusion of love between the couple nurtured by the family. In reality, there was a complete lack of affection and understanding between the two. They never belonged to each other. Looking back at her past, Anjali understands that she accepted Dev not because she loved him, but because it was the most obvious thing to do, as it was convenient to both families.

In analyzing her premarital romance and separating fact from illusion, Anjali is indeed undoing, rewriting, and recreating it. In this recreation, she is no more the innocent, insane lover carried away by emotions and blinded by passion like any character in a love story. On the contrary, she is the narrator, the reader, and the interpreter of her own love story. By reinterpreting it, she is regaining possession of herself, her emotions, and her being, which were earlier influenced by her family and society. Therefore, in revisiting the premarital romantic adventures from the perspective of a female lover, Anjali's narrative is in fact rewriting the romance plot.

While examining her marital life, Anjali realizes that it is her husband's self- absorbed nature and masculine ego that lead to conflicts between the two. She describes Dev as a very successful lawyer, proud of his financial success, even though he defends a murderer in court. She dislikes his hypocrisy and the fake world that surrounds him, which adds to his sense of masculine pride. It is this pride that creates conflicts between the couple and prevents Dev from understanding his wife, whom he considers inferior. Consequently, Dev expects complete obedience, fidelity, and flexibility from his wife. Anjali condemns this pride when she says, "Non, je ne pourrais jamais lui expliquer, et il ne comprendra pas. Il y a trop de l'homme en lui, cet homme qui attend de la femme une obéissance inconditionnelle, cet homme qui exige que la femme suive, coûte que coûte, même les pieds ensanglantés, même l'âme irrémédiablement meurtrie, qu'elle abandonne à jamais tout libre-arbitre" (27).

According to Anjali, it is this masculine pride that prevents Dev from being a good husband and from providing her with conjugal happiness. What is lacking in their relationship, she feels, is a sense of equality. According to her, an ideal couple is one in which both the partners respect each other as equals: "Il est à présent trop tard pour lui de réclamer ces choses qui me sont nécessaires : le partage égalitaire, une tendresse intuitive, une association parfois amicale, le don d'une main tendue, pleine d'une muette complicité" (27). Dev fails to provide any of these to Anjali.

Furthermore, Dev's masculine pride takes a ferocious form when his son Wynn is diagnosed with meningitis. Faced with complete helplessness, Dev feels emasculated and devises a means to push the blame of his son's condition on Anjali, in order to unburden himself. Anjali remarks:

> Ce n'est qu'après, à sa première rechute grave, que Dev a proféré son accusation. Il s'est transformé, avec une violence inouïe et sans appel, en justicier: j'étais responsable de la vie de notre enfant. J'étais coupable de sa maladie. […] J'ai compris qu'il déversait sur moi toute la charge de la maladie de l'enfant. Cela lui permettait de moins souffrir, de se délester d'un fardeau de honte qu'il trouvait insupportable. (9)

Finally, Dev asks Anjali to make an offering to the deities for their son's recovery. The sacrifice is to be made by undertaking a task that involves suffering. She has to walk on fire, a traditional way of making a sacrifice amongst the Indo-Mauritian community. Anjali does not believe in superstitions and refuses at first, thinking it to be futile. Although Dev tells her that she is free to make her own decision, he continues to accuse her of being a bad mother until she accepts to make the offering. Dev tortures her psychologically by making her feel guilty, even though she has committed no crime: "Je reste là, alourdie par une terrible culpabilité. Une culpabilité de femme inconditionnelle" (28). Dev's accusing looks turn her into a monster: "Dev m'oblige à faire face à un miroir déformant, qui me confère un visage de monstre" (41). Dev

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even takes away Anjali's right to be a mother; when he states, "Une mère qui refuse de faire une offrande pour son fils n'est pas une mère" (24), and threatens to leave her if Wynn dies of his ailment.

In the protagonist's cries resound the agonies of other women who meet a similar fate, as Anjali extends Dev's criticism to that of the entire male community by replacing the subject of her enunciation from Dev to "homme": "Homme jusqu'au bout, il essaie de s'occuper. […]. Le harnais est bien installé, l'animal obéit à son propre conditionnement. Peu importe s'il souffre, saigne à l'intérieur, là où la chair est molle et sensible, et l'esprit vulnérable" (28). Anjali accuses the entire male community of robbing mothers of their supernatural powers that can heal their children: "Mais d'autres dieux règnent sur la mère. Il y avait un temps peut-être, où nous avions possédé certains pouvoirs-- celui de soulager, celui de guérir, celui de consoler. Mais d'autres dieux sont venus, avec leurs mains brutales et leurs désirs d'abîme, qui nous ont imposé une autre servitude" (27). She thus transforms her personal experience into a general criticism of marriage and the subjugation it imposes on women. At the religious ceremony where Anjali has to walk on fire, she looks at the married women and remarks, "leur 'tikka' rouge au front et au milieu de la raie comme une traînée de sang qui les asservit au mariage, leur regard semble définitivement mort" (78).[22] At these instances, Anjali voices not only her individual concerns as a married woman, but also expresses the collective agonies and sufferings experienced by women who are treated similarly.

Anjali's resistance to Dev's false pride and masculine superiority surfaces not only through her critical comments on marriage but in numerous other ways. She reacts in a manner that offends Dev at a client's party. She uses the pretext of her ailing son not only to avoid her

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[22] The red "tikka" on the forehead is a round mark that distinguishes a married woman from a single woman or a widow. It symbolizes that the woman is married and that her husband is still alive. Traditionally, when a married Hindu woman loses her husband, she has to remove the "tikka" from her forehead, marking her status as a widow.

husband, but also to deny his existence completely: "Ma chambre à coucher est la moins familière de toutes, et Dev, qui y prend un bref sommeil est un corps vivant qui n'appartient plus à ma réalité" (12). Her life revolves only around her son, as she makes him her universe: "Cela fait longtemps que Dev n'est plus mon univers. A présent, c'est lui, c'est l'enfant endormi là, qui détient le secret de ma vie" (26). This revelation, brought on her by her domineering husband's demand that she walk on fire, merely presages Anjali's final and devastating blow to Dev's pride.

At the end of the novel Anjali asks Dev to leave the house and contemplates inviting her friend, Fatmah, to live with her. Anjali's actions imply a rejection of her relationship with Dev, and signify a new beginning: "Parce qu'elle [Fatmah] est bonne, et qu'elle me donne le sentiment d'une trêve, d'un passage hors du temps, et, plus tard peut-être, d'un recommencement. Au matin, j'irai chercher Fatmah" (175). Anjali's choice also represents an end to her existence solely as Dev's wife and opens a door for a new life in which she can be "herself" and discover her individuality. In choosing to invite Fatmah and contemplating a new beginning with her, Anjali privileges women's relationships over heterosexual coupling. Although Anjali does conform to her husband's wish by walking on fire, her final act of abandoning her husband extricates her from the marriage plot and prepares the ground for alternate possibilities.

1.1.1.2 Marriage in *Pagli*

In *Pagli*,[23] too, Devi scrutinizes the value of marriage. This novel problematizes the romance plot, as its protagonist is married to a man whom she rejects to take a lover. Hence, the romance implied here is extramarital and outside the framework of conjugal love.

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[23] Pagli is a Creole word meaning mad. In Devi's novel entitled *Pagli*, it refers to the protagonist Daya who is considered crazy by her husband and in-laws.

In this novel Pagli, the protagonist, repeatedly refers to her marriage as "la Cérémonie." While the capitalized 'C' accords some significance to the event, use of an indifferent term such as "ceremony" for one's own marriage reduces it to a simple event, depriving it of all sense of intimacy, affection, pride, or contentment. Pagli's description of her marriage is such that it skillfully reduces the ceremony to a meaningless ritual. For Pagli, the ceremony of marriage was, indeed, meaningless, as its sacredness has already been violated by the act of sexual abuse carried out on her body by her husband when she was fourteen. In fact, Pagli enters this marriage in order to avenge the abuse. Pagli's action displaces her marriage from its function of imposing order and stability in family and society. Pagli's marriage endangers all stability and structure. Pagli's choice to triumphantly rewrite her marriage vows and seek a lover surpasses Anjali's resistance to marriage. Anjali conformed to socio-cultural conventions by walking on fire against her own wishes before breaking her matrimonial bonds, and, as I will show, Pagli's resistance to marriage is far more serious and revolutionary.

On her wedding night, every bride desires to look beautiful. Pagli, by contrast, rejoices in the fact that she is ugly, and no amount of jewelry or cosmetics can make her physically pleasing that night. She walks awkwardly in her sari and feels that she is not her real self: "Ils ont voulu me rendre belle. […] Je n'étais pas belle. Le tissu du sari broché était dur contre ma peau. Je marchais maladroitement, empêtrée dans les plis qui traînaient jusqu'à terre. Ce n'était pas moi" (73). At her wedding, she is not the stunning bride dressed to seduce her husband. Instead she states that she is a monster ready to devour him, "J'étais un monstre qui attendait de pouvoir se repaître de l'homme à ses côtés. Je sentais mes incisives qui s'enfonçaient dans sa chair et l'envie de ce goût cru m'a envahie" (74). She denounces the artificial beauty of cosmetics and jewelry as a superficial illusion that hides one's inner ugliness and monstrosity: "M'enivrer de l'amertume de son existence, de sa présence, de sa naissance sur une terre qui s'effritait pour ne

pas voir ses vérités intérieures ni la gangrène qui s'était emparée d'elle. Il fallait cette couche épaisse de peinture- de poudre, de khôl, de rouge à lèvres, de parfum- ou alors ne voir le monde qu'à travers la barrière d'un voile rouge pour en supporter la vision" (75). Pagli does not wish to embellish herself in order to look attractive to a man who massacred her innocence when she was fourteen. On the contrary, she desires to nurture all the ugly memories of pain and disgust she harbors for her husband. Pagli's renunciation of the feminine desire to look beautiful on her wedding night implies not only her personal dislike for the wedding, but also an intense resistance to marital rituals and social customs.

In *Pagli* Devi evokes numerous rituals that constitute an important part of a Hindu wedding, because they are sacred and have their own significance in Hindu mythology. Pagli knows that the sanctity of these rituals has been violated. Devi allows her female protagonist to manipulate these rituals for her own purpose and thereby recreate and rewrite them.

The sacred nuptial fire traditionally plays a significant role in Hindu marriages, sealing the conjugal union of the couple. In this text, however, the fire ignites Pagli's anger and resentment toward her husband. Pagli describes her transition in front of the nuptial fire: "Puis le feu m'a happée. Son grondement est entré en moi, il n'y avait plus de place que pour la colère. Alors qu'il s'élevait des bâtonnets de manguier, nourri par le ghee odorant que le pandit y déversait, j'ai pris la première poignée de riz cru et l'y ai jeté. Le feu qui me demandait mes serments a reçu la promesse de ma vengeance" (74). For the Lajja Homa[24] ritual, Pagli is asked to offer rice to the fire and repeat the marital vows of obedience and fidelity to her husband. Instead, she

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[24] Lajja Homa is the offering of rice into the sacred fire that symbolizes prosperity. The brother of the bride puts rice into the bride's hands, half of which slips into the bridegroom's hands and then into the fire amidst the chanting of mantras. The bride prays to Yama, the god of death, that he grants long life, health, happiness and prosperity to the bridegroom.

makes vows of revenge that surprise everyone including the "pundit"[25] performing the

ceremony. Describing the ceremony, she states:

> Le pandit m'a dit de prononcer le serment de fidélité et d'obéissance de la femme
> au mari: je devais promettre de m'occuper de lui, de le servir, de le garder en
> bonne santé et de lui donner beaucoup d'enfants. Mais en versant le riz dans le
> feu, tête levée bien droite, je me suis mise à prononcer mes propres vœux: J'aurai
> toujours le courage de dire non. Je garderai en mémoire le souvenir de ma
> douleur. Je regarderai cet homme droit dans les yeux avec la certitude de ma
> haine. […]. Aucun enfant ne naîtra de mon ventre qui n'y aura été mis par amour.
> (75)

 The nuptial fire that holds the sanctity of the conjugal union and binds the couple

together becomes the fire that ignites rage in Pagli. In the act of making the nuptial fire the

witness of her abuse and vengeance, she seeks strength from the goddess of fire to fulfill her

personal vows. By pronouncing her own vows instead of those chanted by the pundit, she

denounces traditional customs, reinventing/rewriting them in a manner that enables her to fulfill

her desire.

   Another significant ceremony, the Phera,[26] in which the bride and the bridegroom go

around fire seven times making vows to strengthen and sanctify the bond of marriage, seems

senseless to Pagli:

> Au moment où on nous a attachés l'un à l'autre pour faire le tour du feu, la nuit
> nous a enveloppés. Il n'y avait rien de sacré dans notre union, car il l'avait déjà
> désacralisée. J'ai mis un pied devant l'autre mais c'était comme s'il n'y avait rien
> sous moi. Des gestes, et encore d'autres gestes. Il m'a mis le tikka rouge au front.
> Nous avons échangé des guirlandes de fleurs. La mienne était pleine d'épines et
> ma gorge s'est mise à saigner. [27] (75)

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[25] A pundit is a learned person well versed in the Hindu Holy Scriptures who directs religious ceremonies including
the ceremony of marriage.

[26] The phera ceremony, conducted by a priest in the presence of the nuptial fire, takes place when the bridal couple
goes around the fire seven times.

[27] At a Hindu marriage the groom and the bride exchange garlands ("*var mala*") instead of rings, accepting each
other as husband and wife.

Pagli describes how the garland of flowers becomes a garland of thorns only because the union between the couple cannot be marked by love, as Pagli's hatred for her husband is the foundation of this relationship. Pagli's husband, on the contrary, believes that the rituals of marriage not only give him all rights to Pagli and her body but also nullify his act of rape: "Bien sûr, il pensait que la cérémonie avait annulé tout ce qu'il m'avait fait, et lui avait donné des droits sur l'enfant que j'étais et la femme que je suis devenue" (76). In using the nuptial fire to make vows of vengeance, Pagli uses the ceremony to assert, rather than nullify or erase what has been done to her. In so doing, she rewrites the ceremony in a manner that empowers her and enables her to fulfill her personal desire of vengeance.

Pagli's strongest resistance comes in the last event of the ceremony in which the husband initiates his virgin wife sexually on their first night of marriage. When Pagli's husband enters the room on their wedding night, he is surprised to find her standing in front of him with fire in her eyes. She removes the red "tikka" on her forehead and snatches the garland from her neck to crush it under her feet. In removing the "tikka" from her forehead, Pagli denies the presence of her husband and considers him dead, as the "tikka" is a mark of a woman's marital status. She then removes her saree,[28] throws it away and stands naked in front of her husband prohibiting him all access to her body:

> Regarde ce corps que tu ne toucheras plus jamais.
> Regarde ce qui t'est à présent interdit
> Regarde ces lieux sombres et touffus
> Regarde ces endroits que tu ne visiteras jamais
> Regarde ces formes qui ont bien changé depuis le jour lointain où tu les as massacrées

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[28] A saree is a female garment in India, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka. A saree is a strip of unstitched cloth, ranging from four to nine meters in length that is draped over the body in various styles. The most common style is for the saree to be wrapped around the waist, with one end then draped over the shoulder baring the midriff.

> Regarde ce dont tu vas rêver pour le restant de tous jours et qui ne t'appartiendra
> pas
> Regarde ce ventre qui ne portera pas d'enfant de toi. (77)

By this willful exposure, controlled and manipulated by her, not by her husband, she regains control of her body that had earlier been possessed by her husband through force. By denying sexual involvement with her husband, she reclaims her body, as she does not abandon it to his sexual fantasies. In this way, marriage allows Pagli to repossess her body, self respect, and individuality. While marriage in the Victorian romance plot imprisoned the feminine identity into that of a wife, prohibiting her space to explore her individuality, Pagli uses marriage to liberate herself. She refuses to play the role of a good wife by abstaining from her wifely duties and denying her husband all sexual pleasure. Consequently, she strips her husband's authority as the possessor of her body and the master of her fate.

Pagli also rejoices in the fact that her actions shock and surprise her husband who finds himself lost and unable to react, as she describes:

> Regarde, regarde. Je tourne lentement devant lui, j'exécute une sorte de danse
> lascive et haineuse à la fois, je l'excite et le glace tour à tour, il ne sait pas
> comment réagir, il n'a jamais connu une telle déroute, il croyait connaître les
> femmes, qu'elles étaient toutes soumises aux règles des hommes, toutes pudiques
> et prêtes à être forcées, il ne savait pas que j'existais. Il ne savait pas que
> j'étais. (78)

Pagli places her husband in an unfamiliar situation. He has never known a rebellious woman like Pagli and hopes that this encounter might make him question the way he perceives women. Her husband, on the contrary, believes that eventually Pagli will have no option but to accept him, and things will return to normal because every woman ends up acquiescing to routine, and nurturing a desire for a man and children: "Et il se dit que ce n'est qu'une rage passagère qui m'habite, que je finirai par m'habituer à lui et avoir envie de lui, sa connaissance des femmes l'en persuade, je finirai par avoir envie d'un enfant, c'est normal, on ne se marie que

pour ça et tout rentrera dans l'ordre" (78). The thought process of Pagli's husband reinforces the power of marriage and its unceasing potential to bring things back to order by controlling feminine potential. However, Pagli's resistance to all marital forces that imprison women in the conjugal routine and kill women's desire for vengeance is exemplary. She maintains her vow by never sleeping with her husband and finally falling in love with another man from a lower caste.

Pagli's love for Zil, a Creole fisherman comes as the greatest resistance to her marriage. The caste system practiced in Indo-Mauritian society prohibits individuals from marrying outside their castes, ostracizing those who disobey from society. Creoles occupy a low position in the caste hierarchy. By choosing Zil, Pagli also socially demeans her husband.

Pagli's relationship with Zil is significant not only because it is a subversion of Pagli's marital status and the Indo-Mauritian caste system, but also because it restores her self-respect, and makes her a complete woman. Therefore, in the next section I will examine Pagli's lover, Zil, in opposition to her husband. I will also explore the relationship between Zil and Pagli as an alternate model of love that displaces the erotic and replaces it with the spiritual while valorizing women as individuals, not simply as wives or sexual partners.

1.1.1.3 Comparison between Zil and Pagli's Husband

Pagli, written in the form of a love letter by a married woman to her male lover, sets the stage for a comparison between Zil, the protagonist's lover, and her husband. Devi exploits this situation by placing the narrator in a position where she can compare the two male characters. By doing so, Devi gives her narrator the authority to look at both the men from the perspective of an abused woman, and thereby respond to the masculine gaze that often objectifies women.

As a character, Pagli is both objectified and adored by the men who look at her, depending on who does the looking, but as a narrator she has the privilege to scrutinize both these men. This allows her to distinguish between a gaze that respects her and accepts her as she is, and the one

that objectifies her, demeans her, and imprisons her in social definitions of a "good girl." Pagli dislikes the way her husband looks at her: "[…] mais dans son regard, je me vois comme quelque chose de complet et de brutal, je vois en moi un corps à convoiter, je suis autre et je n'aime pas ce que je suis. Je m'enveloppe dans des chandails trop larges mais j'ai l'impression qu'il voit au travers et que mes jupes sont trop [...] courtes. A chaque fois qu'il vient, j'entre dans la haine de moi. Je ne veux pas être femme si c'est ainsi que je dois être vue" (52).

Her husband's gaze makes her feel uncomfortable about her body and her femininity, pushing her into shame and self-hatred. In this manner, her husband dispossesses her of her own body and detaches her from her own being. Susan Lanser discusses the feminine response to the masculine gaze that leaves women no choice but to disown it: "The harassed women is forced into a schizophrenic response: either she can remain identified with her body which has been objectified as a tool for male purposes, in which case she denies her mind and her spiritual self; or she can deny the body and consider the mind the real self" ("Toward" 34). The gaze of Pagli's husband objectifies her body in a way that robs Pagli of her own body and being and places possession in the hands of the onlooker.

Furthermore, her husband's act of sexual abuse plunges Pagli into "mauvaise folie" and absolute darkness. Pagli explains, "Il fut le premier à semer en moi les germes de la mauvaise folie, celle qui ne pardonne pas et qui est sans issue. Il est celui qui m'a appris le noir" (51). His act fills her with suffering and pain and leads to the birth of a new Pagli, bitter and violent: "Mais ce jour-là, lorsqu'enfin il m'a laissée, lui, je n'étais plus qu'un minuscule tas de noir broyé dans un coin de la pièce [...] lui, il est parti et je suis entrée dans cet autre lieu où je ne me retrouvais plus" (54). Pagli deliberately holds on to the bitter memory of this act so that she has enough hatred to keep the fire of vengeance alive.

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While Pagli's husband is a man who plunges her into complete darkness and an uneasy emptiness from where she sees no return, Zil is the angel who listens to her story and cradles her out of that darkness and suffering. Zil is the savior who restores her back to herself, gives her a desire to live and love, as Pagli observes:

> Toi, un jour, quand je te l'ai dit, quand les mots sont sortis avec toute la brûlure et la crasse restée en moi depuis ce temps, tu m'as prise contre toi et tu m'as bercée longuement. C'était cela qu'il te fallait à ce moment-là pour exorciser ta douleur, as-tu dit. […]. Pour cet instant-là, tu as été mon frère. Tu m'as bercée, tu m'as exorcisée. Nous sommes restés ainsi pendant toute une nuit, […] j'ai compris que le noir pouvait être quelque chose d'autre et de différent. (55)

Zil teaches her a new meaning of darkness, demonstrating that darkness can be good, giving her a new perspective on life. Pagli is introduced to a new world that is different from the world inhabited by her husband, a world that does not bind her, does not imprison her, but provides a space that allows her to respect herself.

Whereas in her husband's house Pagli felt restricted and imprisoned by the need to conform to the definitions of a good woman and a good wife, with Zil, she can laugh, cry, and be herself, as she is never judged for her actions, never rejected as a mad woman. Thus, with him, she finds her true liberty: "J'ai eu envie de rire à cette pensée et l'instant d'après j'ai su qu'avec toi cela m'était permis, que cela ne te semblerait pas de la folie et que cela ne te ferait pas peur, tu n'es pas de ceux qui construisent un carcan autour des femmes et qui les bâillonnent pour ne pas entendre leur rire ni voir trembler leur corps, et j'ai ri" (37). Zil's gaze, unlike that of Pagli's husband, is not charged with lust and does not aim at imprisoning the feminine body in notions of modesty. His gaze of respect and love allows Pagli to regain her lost body. As she states, "Je n'en sais rien du tout: être femme, c'est être vue comme tu me vois, avec adoration et révérence" (52). By presenting Zil as a man whose respect and admiration for Pagli bring her back to the state before rape, Devi evokes a relationship based on reverence that restores Pagli's femininity.

Moreover, Devi's representation of Zil as a man who resembles Pagli is of particular interest here as it privileges "likeness" over "difference" in typical man-woman relationships.

Pagli's attraction toward Zil is not inspired by differences. On the contrary, Devi emphasizes the similarity between the two. While describing Zil, Pagli's look is different from a masculine gaze that aims at highlighting gender differences. She does not look for the typical masculine traits in him but rather rejoices at discovering what the two of them have in common. She observes Zil's disheveled appearance not to be critical, but with comprehension and compassion: "Tu portes un chandail déformé, comme quand on enfile un vêtement en l'étirant dans tous les sens sans aucune précaution. Le pantalon est un peu trop court pour toi. Tes chaussures sont couvertes de boue séchée. Toi aussi tu as l'air mal assuré sur tes jambes" (38). She compares Zil's awkwardness to her own: "Je ne portais pas de robe rouge. Je crois que ce que j'avais sur moi était un tissu grisâtre et souillé, un sari d'épouse moisie, comme pour mieux te dire ce qui t'attendait. Mes cheveux étaient sans doute défaits par l'habitude. Je n'avais rien de beau" (36). She does not wish to look beautiful or possess a fair complexion.[29] Instead, she desires brown skin resembling Zil's: "Ma main n'est pas de la même couleur que sa peau. Je la voudrais du même brun fort et masculin pour que nous soyons totalement en harmonie" (38). It is also important to note that Zil is a Creole, and the color of his skin distinguishes him from Pagli. In desiring to have a skin like his, Pagli is obliterating the racial difference that distances them.

Pagli is not fascinated by Zil's rough skin of a fisherman, but rather by his childlike nature that makes him resemble a woman: "Et au-dessous de cette rugosité, la douceur enfantine qui y reste caché. […] J'examine ce visage d'homme qui pleure comme une chose extraordinaire.

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[29] In Indo-Mauritian society, people belonging to higher castes have a fetish for fair complexions. Possessing a fair complexion is a sign of beauty. In desiring to look as dark as Zil, Pagli is transgressing this social fetish.

L'eau étrange qui coule de toi. D'où vient-elle? " (88) Thus, it is not Zil's manliness that attracts

Pagli. On the contrary, it is the resemblance between the two that Pagli cherishes and celebrates.

Pagli's gaze does not objectify Zil by reducing him to an object, as it is not aimed at excavating

the socially defined masculine aspects of his personality. Instead her gaze provides a realistic

depiction of his being which transcends his gender.

Similarly, Zil's first gaze at Pagli is not judgmental. On the contrary, it is filled with

compassion and love; as she describes, "[…] et puis tes yeux m'ont vue, et ces yeux si noirs

m'ont parlé de fin et d'aboutissement [...] Il y avait surtout leur vaste compréhension de moi,

comme si d'un seul coup ils m'avaient vue, prise, comprise, aimée, quittée et qu'ils m'étaient au

bout d'innombrables années de partage et de lutte et de folie revenus" (38). This gaze does not

highlight any of Pagli's feminine traits. There is no element of surprise to indicate that Zil is

looking at Pagli for the first time. On the contrary, the look is characterized by comprehension

and compassion as if they already knew each other. It does not evoke attraction or seduction, but

rather glorifies their understanding and togetherness. Thus, the love that grows between Zil and

Pagli is marked by a sense of freedom, liberating them from the traditionally gendered roles of

man and woman.

1.1.1.4 Displacement of the Erotic (Love) by the Spiritual

Zil makes his first formal appearance in the chapter entitled "Rencontre," a description of

his first meeting with Pagli. In this chapter, Devi emphasizes the fact that even before the two

could actually see each other, Pagli perceives Zil in her body, as she asserts the knowledge of

Zil's presence before she can see him: "Je t'ai su avant de te voir. Je t'ai rencontré comme un

éblouissement sans but. Je t'ai senti dans mes seins avant de savoir que tu étais. Ils sont devenus

tout d'un coup durs et douloureux" (30). Zil's introduction to the novel is like an

"éblouissement" felt only by Pagli. Hence, Zil's arrival is announced not by sight but through a sensation in the protagonist's body.

Devi demonstrates how this love distinguishes itself from love at first sight in which the physical appearance of the other is the determining factor. Socially constructed notions of a "perfect" man or woman not only influence the decisions of the couple but are also reinforced in romantic depictions where sight precludes feeling. In obliterating sight by feeling, Devi detaches Pagli's love for Zil from all superficial physicality, making it internalized and grounded. Pagli realizes that she is in love with Zil, even before he makes a physical appearance: "Je suis sortie sans savoir que je te cherchais, je ne savais pas où tu étais ni qui tu étais mais je savais que je t'aimais comme un cœur reconnaît sa souffrance sans nul doute dans sa vérité blanche et son inévitable…" (84). There is a certainty in Pagli's love for Zil even though she does not know if she is looking for him or if he will arrive one day, contrary to other kinds of affections where the presence of the lover precedes all sentiment of love.

In addition to challenging notions of love inspired by physical attraction and valorizing sentiments over sex, Devi represents the male and the female bodies in a way that disrupts the conventional representations often seen in romance novels. Pagli describes Zil's arrival as an opening: "Rien d'autre qu'un trou ouvert, dans l'air épais, une fenêtre par où on entre" (34). For her, Zil's presence symbolizes an opening to a new world of freedom and liberty. In describing Zil as an opening, Devi reverses the conventional notion of opening always used in reference to a woman's vagina by attaching it to the image of Zil. At several instances Pagli talks about entering Zil metaphorically. For example, she states, **"**j'entrais dans ta tête et j'écoutais ta vie doucement coulée et tes yeux troublés me disaient que tu étais entré dans la mienne et que tu entendais le combat le fracas le naufrage de mes pensées contre mes rochers intimes" (117). There are several moments in the novel when she says she finds herself "inside" Zil: "Ce soir-là,

elles m'ont réveillée au milieu de ma nuit sans rêve. J'étais loin à l'intérieur de toi, recroquevillé de désirs. Elles m'ont arrachée de ton corps invisible" (42).

Pagli's metaphorical penetrations into Zil are indeed significant, as they challenge the male prerogative as the penetrator, an active partner in sexual act as opposed to the feminine vagina, a passive receptor. The erotic scenes of this novel displace the power attached to the phallus and its importance, and therefore merit a close examination to understand how Devi's narrative challenges sexual hierarchy based on sexual acts.

In the novel's erotic scenes, Pagli expresses her sexuality with ease. Describing a sexual encounter with Zil, Pagli states, "[…] et c'était comme une explosion. […] ce n'était pas toi qui as exprimé la première passion, c'était moi"(12). She explains how she is completely active in erotic encounters, as she guides Zil's hands: "Je t'ai serré dans mes bras et j'ai guidé tes mains là où je voulais qu'elles aillent sans innocence et sans pudeur"(42). Her openings become active spaces ready to absorb and devour the object penetrating them, emphasizing the vast and dynamic feminine vaginal space that can be active in its consumption of the objects penetrating it and can make them its own.

Pagli describes her desire to completely absorb her lover: "J'ai su que les trous noirs qui absentaient ma pensée dès l'enfance étaient les espaces clos qui t'attendaient. Je ne les gardais vides que pour toi. Et même là, il n'est pas sûr qu'il y en ait eu suffisamment pour tout absorber de toi" (35). In evoking Pagli's desire to absorb and contain her lover Zil, Devi makes absorption an active act, alluding to the immense feminine potential of taking in/consuming/protecting. Such a representation destabilizes the hierarchical relation between the commonly accepted notions that the act of penetration is the only active act in sexual involvements.

Pagli and Zil's chemistry of love destabilizes these notions, as they both enter and receive each other. Pagli describes how they touch and discover one another: "[…] et je fais de même je

visite ton corps comme un inconnu une œuvre d'art un monument je touche" (35). The use of the term "œuvre d'art" to describe a masculine body reverses the accepted cliché that it is only the feminine body, curvy and admirable, that is the work of art as opposed to the masculine body, strong and muscular. This description then creates a similarity between the two bodies, the masculine and the feminine, often understood as antagonistic and defined in opposition to each other.

Furthermore, the body is not central to love in *Pagli*, as Pagli's love for Zil is beyond carnal pleasures. It transcends all sexual and physical boundaries as the two bodies become one, implying not only physical union, but also the union of minds and thoughts. Pagli explains: "[…] plus qu'une communion, on devenait l'autre, j'entrais dans ta tête et j'écoutais ta vie doucement coulée et tes yeux troublés me disaient que tu étais entré dans la mienne et que tu entendais le combat le fracas le naufrage de mes pensées contre mes rochers intimes" (117). In this love the two bodies dissolve into each other and reach a union that allows complete accessibility to the other. The difference between the self and the other is obliterated, as one becomes the other. As a result, a different kind of possession is evoked in which, one has to become the other by giving up oneself. As they become one, Pagli and Zil, feel the other inside their being: "il n'était pas nécessaire de nous attacher l'un à l'autre nous le sommes déjà […]. Cette chose qui m'espace sous ma peau, qui la détend et la respire et y glisse de l'intérieur, c'est toi, Zil" (35). The egos of the two lovers disintegrate completely as they offer themselves to the other without any fear: "Devant toi agenouillée parce que mon offrande ne contenait aucun orgueil. Parce que je voulais m'offrir toute, sans retenue et sans masque et sans peur de blessure. Et parce que, dans ton regard, il n'y avait que l'amour" (126).

They seek union and togetherness not only in their physical form but also in their deformity and their death, as Pagli wishes to accompany Zil until his final disintegration: "Et je

te rejoindrai sur ton lit de sable pour mêler ma pourriture à la tienne et ainsi faire partie de toi jusque dans nos particules désintégrées, jusque dans notre lente disparition en fragments d'absence et de chair morte, jusque dans notre absorption dans les jus de la terre, dans l'oubli et le miracle de ce repos définitif, jusque [...] dans la finalité de toutes les fins. Je t'aime" (63). It is important to note the stream of consciousness writing that characterizes Pagli's discussions of her sexual encounters with Zil. This mode of writing is even more significant in Pagli's musings on her spiritual connection with Zil, for this extraordinary style allows Devi to transcend rules of grammar through leaps in syntax and punctuation. This narrative mode allows Pagli's thoughts to flow freely and clearly, establishes a deep connection between what she feels and describes, emphasizing the intensity of her love for Zil.

These lovers seek a continuation of their lives beyond death through the life of the other. They see beauty and grandeur even in rottenness and death. Therefore, this love grants immortality to the lovers. Pagli explains, "Ce que tu ferais d'un cadavre? Tu l'enterrerais ou tu le brûlerais ou tu le jetterais à la mer, cela m'importe peu, les rituels n'ont aucune importance, mais tu me garderais vivante dans tes narines et dans ta bouche et dans tes yeux et dans tes oreilles et sur ta peau. Tous tes sens me recréeraient en toi. Renaître à l'intérieur de toi, un petit fragment de toi, que pourrais-je demander de plus?" (72). Pagli's love for Zil makes her fearless because it assures immortality through her lover. She perceives death as a passing stage that provides her an opportunity to be reborn through her lover.

In their love, therefore, Pagli and Zil are so united that they are willing to give away a part of their being in order to be recreated through the other. In fact, Pagli alludes to this recreation through Zil when she states that it is Zil who brings her to life through his touch: "Je suis déjà ta femme qui t'attend. Lui dis-je. Ne sais-tu pas que je t'ai épousé une nuit de nouvelle lune quand pour la première fois tu m'as touchée? Je suis née et je t'ai épousé au même moment. Et j'aurais

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pu mourir" (34). Zil's love and the manner in which he touches Pagli make her a complete woman and give her another life. While the touch of Pagli's husband was such that it repressed the woman and child in her, that of Zil rejuvenates that woman in her: "Je suis née dans ce regard ancien qui me crée ma chair. Je suis femme sous ses mains qui sculptent ma chair et la modèlent en parcourant chaque centimètre de sa surface. Et je saisis ma mort, ensevelie dans la joie qui jaillit de toi, parce qu'il n'y a plus rien à attendre" (88).

It is not only Pagli, who is reborn in Zil's arms. Zil also feels incomplete without her and is recreated as a man inside her: "[…] car avec toi, en toi, J'ai été le plus grave et le plus fort des hommes […] C'était comme si au fur et à mesure que te connaissais je devenais. Je découvrais en moi des choses indevinées, des facettes inconnues, des visages révélés. J'étais un autre homme, parce que je n'étais complet qu'avec toi" (145).

Both Pagli and Zil are incomplete without each other and achieve their completeness through each other. As Pagli states, "une femme seule qui cherchait un lien où elle aurait pu se rassembler et redevenir entière et une, ce lieu bien sur c'était toi" (153). Their sexual acts are not simply a means to reach carnal orgasm, but principally a means to achieve a higher objective, a sense of wholeness and an eternal union that leads to self-discovery and freedom.

Thus, Devi brings man and woman to parity by alluding to the fact that both are complementary.[30] They are born and reborn in each other's arms. It is inside each other or

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[30] Zil and Pagli are born in and through each other. They are inseparable as they are defined through each other. Such a representation of the couple alludes to a complementarity viewed in the mythical figure of "ardhnarishwar" literally meaning half-woman. According to Hindu Mythology, Lord Shiva merges with his wife Parvati in an eternal union to form "ardhnarishwar," a god that is half man and half woman, symbolizing the union of "Purush" (power) and "Prakriti" (nature/creation). This is viewed as the sacred fusion of masculine and feminine energies. This myth holds that feminine energy is as important as masculine for the creation of life, thereby valorizing the feminine potential. A version of the myth believes that Parvati in this union is "Annapurna," the mother full of food. This form is neither erotic nor productive of erotic possibilities. The popular version of the myth, however, takes this form of the lord as a symbol of conjugal bliss (Doniger 310).

through each other that they discover their true selves. Their identities are, therefore, collective. They cannot exist as single or separate beings. It is through the disintegration of their individual self and ego that they construct themselves in togetherness, and it is this togetherness that liberates them and allows them to attain their nascent state.

Zil's and Pagli's love ties them in a complementarity where separation means annihilation. Existence is possible only with the other, as one is defined through the other. Devi's depiction of love thus disrupts the male-female dichotomy by evading gender difference and celebrating the state in which one is not conditioned by any such differences. In this manner Devi challenges the hierarchy established by the patriarchal system that privileges male over female. Pagli and Zil are not the only couple whose love is exemplary. In the next section I will analyze the love between another, Sad and Ève, in Devi's novel *Ève de ses décombres*.

1.1.2 Love Between Sad and Ève

Devi's eighth novel *Ève de ses décombres* set in Troumaron, a small town of Mauritius, is a fascinating story of four teenagers that revolves around the murder of Ève's friend Savita. This text is also an intriguing tale of love and sacrifice. Sad's love for his childhood friend Ève is extraordinary, because she is not the pretty girl next door, admired by all the boys in the town. On the contrary, she is an object of hatred, prostituting herself for small benefits and sometimes even for nothing. While others in Sad's gang dislike her, he not only admires her for her immense courage, but also adores and worships her. He states, "Ève, à la chevelure de nuit écumeuse, quand elle passe dans ses jeans moulants, les autres ricanent et grincent des dents, mais moi, j'ai envie de m'agenouiller. Elle ne nous regarde pas. Elle n'a pas peur de nous. Elle a sa solitude pour armure" (16).

Ève dislikes Sad because he belongs to the local gang. She views him as a conformist who needs to belong to the gang in order to have an identity. Sad, however, is different from the other

boys and, despite their hatred for Ève, continues to love and adore her: "Les autres se moquent de moi. Ils parlent d'elle, l'accablent, chantent des chansons ordurières. Ève se déculotte plus vite que son ombre, disent-ils. Je ne les écoute pas. Ève, je suis le seul à savoir qui elle est" (35). Sad not only resists this peer pressure, denouncing dislike for Ève; he is also certain that he is the only one who understands her. The fact that Ève is a prostitute never discourages him from adoring her. In fact, he believes that others are unable to understand and accept her because they cannot possess her: "Je sais qu'elle n'est pas une gare où tous les bus s'arrêtent. Si les autres parlent d'elle comme cela, c'est pour s'exorciser, parce qu'elle les obsède et qu'ils ne la possèdent pas" (37).

Sad's love for Ève cannot be interpreted as conforming to the romance plot, where possession is valued above everything, as his love does not bind Ève, but allows her the liberty to live her life the way she desires. This love is not centered on the feminine body. In Sad's descriptions of Ève, her body is never at the forefront. As he imagines making love to Ève in a discotheque, her body is not described as a feminine body. In fact, no sexual organ is named: "L'air salé de Grand Baie s'y engouffre, transformant la chambre de putes en petite chambre nuptiale, toute de rouge vêtue. Je remplace les mains du jeans. Je remplace la musique dans ses jambes, sur ses épaules. Je remplace la cigarette entre ses lèvres. Je suis le vent, partout en elle" (35). It is difficult to say if the body in question is feminine or masculine. This erotic scene avoids focusing on the male-female differences that are celebrated in the romance plot.

Like Pagli's love for Zil, Sad's love prioritizes feelings over carnal pleasures and is marked by an unshakable faith, even if Ève does not return his feelings: "Je suis jaloux, mais en même temps, je sais que je suis le seul à l'aimer. Elle m'attend. Je le sais. Je le sens" (66). Ignoring the outer reality of Ève's body, Sad plunges into her troubles, her innocence and her being:

Personne ne sait qu'on peut aimer comme ça, à dix-sept ans. Je baigne dans l'eau nocturne d'Ève. Je plonge dans sa vision trouble. Je me noie dans sa boue, dans son innocence. Je me fous de ce qu'elle est, de ce qu'elle fait. Je suis le clin d'œil noir au-dessus de la ceinture de son jeans. Je suis le talon arrondi de son pied nu dans ses sandales. Je suis le souvenir de son rire rare, de sa force, de son défi. (47)

Like Zil, Sad is not only a lover but also a savior who wishes to give a new life to Ève by erasing all the scars on her body and all her suffering: "J'aime une fille dont on a piétinée le corps. Mais le jour où je serais en elle, j'effacerai toutes ses marques: elle sera neuve" (67). It is his love that has the power to revive Ève.

For Sad, Ève is not just an object of love but much more than that. She is the inspiration behind all his writing. In fact, all Sad's writing is about Ève. Therefore, she is not only an individual whom he loves, but someone who makes him what he is. He asserts that Ève is an essential part of his life: "Moi, je veux les deux choses: l'écriture et Ève. Ève et l'écriture. Pas l'une sans l'autre. Seul, je ne suis rien. Elles sont les fruits qui me remplissent, les grains qui feront germer d'autres graines et multiplier ma voix comme un banian qui sans cesse dévore l'espace" (66).

When Sad describes himself at the very beginning of the novel, he states, "Je suis Sadiq. Tout le monde m'appelle Sad. Entre tristesse et cruauté, la ligne est mince. Ève est ma raison, mais elle prétend ne pas le savoir. Quand elle me croise, son regard me traverse sans s'arrêter. Je disparais" (13). Sad is unable to define himself without Ève, as he exists only when Ève notices him. In defining himself in such a manner, Sad places agency in Ève's hands, and he becomes an object of her gaze.

Devi obliterates all gender differences in her representation of Sad and Ève's relationship, as she did with Pagli and Zil. Their love is such that it ties them in a complementarity in which their existence is possible only with the other and through the other. Apart from the man-woman love analyzed so far, Devi's works bring out another model of love that cannot be categorized as

man-woman relationship, the love between Joséphin, the eponymous hero of Devi's novel *La vie de Joséphin le fou* and two little girls.

1.1.3 Love in *La vie de Joséphin le fou*

In *La vie de Joséphin le fou* Devi narrates the tale of Joséphin's rejection by his prostitute mother and ostracization from a society that ends up treating him as a ghost. Completely abandoned by all sections of society, Joséphin devotes his life to protecting two little girls, Solange and Marlène, from the cruel and monstrous world. Joséphin's love for these girls is beyond the realm of a generic man-woman relationship. It is intriguing and different from the two cases discussed earlier (Pagli-Zil and Sad-Ève), as the little girls he loves are unable to communicate with him. They neither understand nor respond to his feelings. In fact, they take him as a threat and struggle to protect themselves.

After being abandoned by his prostitute mother, Joséphin makes the sea his home. He resides in one of the caves under the sea and feeds on the organisms he finds in water. Eventually, he gets so accustomed to this life that he detaches himself from the human world. Consequently, Joséphin becomes a man outside the civilized world who views human existence from a different perspective. The cruelty and abuse he witnessed toward his mother eventually led to his flight and refuge in the sea and his perception of the human world as savage and violent. His love for the girls, therefore, is directed at protecting their innocence, by distancing them from the human world. As a result, he abducts them from the seashore, and takes them to the cave under the sea where he resides. The two little girls, scared of his weird half-animal, half-man appearance, are unable to understand Joséphin's intentions.

Although neither Joséphin nor the little girls survive in the end,[31] the novel offers a critique of the male community through Joséphin's eyes. At the same time it allows Devi to present an alternate model in Joséphin who is not conditioned by any gender difference and therefore not plagued by masculine pride. As a result, his love for the girls does not conform to the norms of civilized society.

Joséphin, like other narrators in Devi's novels, is conscious of the fact that a man is not only obsessed with masculine pride, but is also capable of immense brutality simply out of his desire to exercise power: "Ils [les hommes] massacreront leurs vies, s'ils le peuvent. Ils déchireront leur chair de coquillage, s'ils le peuvent. Ça elles le savent pas, elles ont jamais vu les chiens qu'ils assommaient sans y penser, petit roquet minuscule nouveau-né qu'un homme qui a trop bu, énervé par tout cet alcool, écrasé d'un soulier indifférent juste pour savoir qu'il est un homme" (64).

Whereas men are self-obsessed brutes, women, in Joséphin's opinion, are heavenly creatures who have captured paradise in their eyes: "Mais quand elles ouvrent les yeux le matin […]. L'instant des yeux flous, lizyé lanwit, je l'appelle, parce qu'il y a un liquide argent sur leur œil noir et ce liquide, cette douceur, ce flou, ce vague, c'est le regard du paradis, en elles" (67). Joséphin longs for the beauty these girls possess, as it can bring peace and happiness to the world: "Toutes les femmes au réveil ont un peu de paradis dans les yeux et c'est ça que je cherche partout, partout, c'est de ça que j'ai soif, Joséphin, envie de boire ce liquide et de faire ce paradis en moi comme ça serai heureux serai plus jamais seul […] et c'est ça que j'ai vu dans leurs yeux à elle" (68). By referring to a feminine paradise, he is alluding to a certain power

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[31] In an ambiguous dream like sequence Joséphin narrates how he is unable to take the rejection by the two girls. In desperation he rapes and kills them. Devi uses metaphorical language to describe the violence and aggression of Joséphin's acts. In order to repent his action, Joséphin abandons himself to the ells that eventually kill him. In this way, Joséphin's actions are contrary to his intentions. He ends up hurting the girls even though he intended to save them from the civilized world.

possessed by women that can make this world better. According to Joséphin, this feminine power

is gradually lost, and women become ordinary as they are subjected to society's violence. He

notices how this power is lost when his mother is subjected to brutality by men and explains that

it is men who rob women of their feminine potential, turning them into monsters:

> Ils seront prêts à gaspiller cela [le paradis], à empêcher leur rire de se balancer entre les branches des filaos, à alourdir tout cela en attachant du plomb à leurs orteils, à en faire des femmes ordinaires, pire que tout, des femmes consumées et rageuses, rugueuses et consommées, des femmes à la bougie éteinte, aux yeux cireux, des femmes aux doigts jaunes de cigarettes et d'on ne sait quelles salissures épouvantables, des femmes abruties de hontes--oui, voilà, voilà ce qu'ils veulent en faire. (63)

Joséphin's analysis then resonates with Anjali's perception that men destroy the

extraordinary healing power that mothers possess and turn them into ordinary helpless creatures.

If Anjali abandons her husband Dev to protect herself, Devi's male narrator Joséphin goes a step

further to protect the feminine power in the little girls. He desires to transfer his knowledge of

nature to the little girls, help them discover the sea, and its innumerable mysteries. He eventually

wants to set the girls free by making them understand the power of nature, its immenseness vis-

à-vis the pettiness of human beings and the futility of masculine ego, thereby offering them an

alternate way of perceiving the world.

Whereas men expect women to conform to society (as is the case with Pagli's and Anjali's

husbands), Joséphin wants them to discover their true selves, to retain their originality. He is

ready to give up everything for these girls and to make them see the truth of the sea: " […] et

porter les petites filles qui menacent d'être fracassées hors du chemin de la vie, les porter toute

ma vie, s'il le faut, sur mes épaules, s'il le faut, serais prêt à le faire, mais pourquoi elles peuvent

pas comprendre tout ce qui en moi est offert est donné est prêt à se couper en deux pour elles prêt

à se taillader les tendons et les chevilles et les poignets, tout ce qu'elles voudraient de moi,

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j'offrirais" (59). In his willingness to offer himself completely in love, Joséphin resembles Zil

and Pagli. Joséphin's love, however, is not centered on a single individual, but rather extends to

the two little girls and through them to the entire female community. In the novel, at some

moments, he replaces Marlène and Solange by elizabeth and isabelle, [32] spelled in the lower

case, thereby transforming the proper nouns into common ones, as if he were alluding to all the

female teenagers who are like Marlène and Solange. Like Zil and Pagli, he sees this love as the

only means of his salvation.

   In his desire to liberate the girls from the social conditioning that can destroy their

feminine potential and power, Joséphin sees his own freedom. Abandoned by his mother, he

longs for the love and affection that he believes he can receive from the little girls. In asserting

that he can set himself free by putting his life in the hands of these girls, he accords agency not

only to the little girls but to the entire female community that has the power to rescue this world

from hatred and bring peace to humanity:

> Cet homme vilain qui croit à la beauté, qui l'adore, seul dieu, voudrait faire
> d'elles les perles de son rêve de nacre, écouter le bruit du large dans leur petit
> ventre ourlé, boire l'eau de sel de large salive et respirer la brise sucrée qui sort de
> leurs poumons, voudrait les sculpter, voudrait les ciseler de son regard, les
> éterniser dans sa mémoire en une forme de corail, voudrait mettre sa vie dans le
> creux de leur paume et l'y refermer, et après, ainsi confié, il serait libre de partir,
> le vilain, le pêcheur nu, le Joséphin-fou, pour aller plus loin que les brisants si
> quelque part, quelque part dans ce vide, Marlyn Moro [la mère de Joséphin] aurait
> pas laissé quelques particules d'amour pour lui. (72)

Thus, Joséphin is searching for love and affection and seeks the kind of reciprocity from the girls

that exists between Zil and Pagli. If he is the savior who has ample knowledge to liberate the

girls, he is also someone seeking togetherness, as he desires to share their paradise and beauty.

Joséphin's love for the girls aims at liberating them from ignorance, helping them discover their

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[32] See page 76-77 for detailed analysis.

power and potential, and it is through this service to the female community that he can find his own liberation.

Joséphin's project is not successful, as the little girls are unable to understand him. His relationship with them, however, presents a different model of love that allows Devi to go beyond the heterosexual couple and take into account numerous other relationships that influence her characters' lives. Instead of focusing on a single principal relationship where a man accords a sense of identity to a woman, as was the case in the Victorian romance novels, Devi's works allow their protagonists a multiplicity of relationships, thereby displacing the significance placed on a single erotic relationship women may have with men.

Moreover, one cannot deny the fact that many of Devi's novels are set in an Indo-Mauritian socio-cultural context where the notion of large, extended families is still prevalent and a woman's relationship with her husband is not the only significant relationship in her life. I will therefore examine alternate relationships such as Anjali's ties with her brother, as well as other significant connections amongst women characters marked by a strong sense of sisterhood that surpass heterosexual coupling.

1.1.4 Alternate Ties

1.1.4.1 Anjali and her Brother

In *Le voile de Draupadi* Anjali describes her relationship with her brother Shyam as intense and intimate: "Nous étions proches l'un de l'autre, il y avait à peine une année de différence entre nous, et nous avions grandi ensemble, férocement solidaires, comme des jumeaux" (19). Until Dev appeared, Shyam was the only male presence in Anjali's life: "De la montagne s'élevait le souffle tumultueux de ma première émotion véritable, le premier sentiment qui me poussât vers un homme autre que Shyam" (21).

Anjali first mentions her brother when she goes hiking in the mountains with Dev, Shyam, and his girl friend, Margaret. Anjali describes this trip as the only romantic encounter between her and Dev, the only moment she felt the two of them were joined in complete union. Yet, as she runs down the mountain, hand in hand with Shyam, she is not sure whether her joy comes from Dev's presence or Shyam's. She explains, "Je ne savais plus si ma joie provenait de la présence de Dev ou celle de Shyam. Je crois qu'ils s'étaient un peu mélangés, tous les deux" (23). As her feelings are ambiguous and she cannot tell the difference between the two, she places her brother Shyam at parity with Dev, her husband.

Siblings, particularly brothers and sisters, share a close relationship in the Indo-Mauritian culture. In a ritual, sisters tie a holy thread around the wrists of their brothers, obliging their brothers to protect them in case of danger. The brothers respond by giving gifts, mostly money, implying financial support. In another ritual, brothers are responsible for giving money to the sister's daughter at her wedding as part of her dowry.

Additionally, Anjali and Shyam share an outstanding affection that increases after their cousin Vasanti's death, as they both feel responsible for it. Anjali consoles Shyam after Vasanti's death and confesses that there was a strange relationship between the two: "l'émotion entre Shyam et moi, très étrange. […] Il y a eu des mains unies, peut-être même les lèvres, je ne sais pas, cela a-t-il quelque importance? Nous étions un seul être, dualisé, une seule chose, fragmentée par le destin [...] Et nous n'avons jamais oublié. Ni le secret, ni les nuits sans sommeil, ni les mains unies" (120). The love between the two is so profound that its physical manifestation is insignificant to Anjali. It does not matter if this love is expressed through the locking of hands or that of the lips. Anjali does not read these instances of physical intimacy as erotic. It is the tenderness and the emotion behind the physical gestures that carry all value. Such

a depiction then displaces these gestures of intimacy from their sexual connotations, emphasizing affection devoid of the erotic.

The attachment between siblings is so strong that time and space cannot weaken it. Even when they meet again after several years, they do not seem detached, but rather rapidly rediscover the togetherness and the intensity of emotion they have for each other: "Je le sens enfin proche de moi, après tant d'années, nous nous sommes aventurés hors de nous-mêmes et nous nous retrouvons tels qu'avant, patients et prisonniers l'un de l'autre. Shyam, mon Shyam. Mon enfant perdu. [...] Il se penche et m'embrasse, hâtivement: Puis, finalement, il a prononcé les mots, il l'a dit, je l'ai entendu: Je t'aime, tu sais" (34). In this meeting Anjali perceives him as her lost child, emphasizing the maternal love she harbors for him that is accentuated by Wynn's illness, underlining the fact that their love cannot be interpreted as incest.

In fact, this love is grounded in the understanding and compassion the siblings have for each other, which gives this relationship its depth and meaning. Anjali explains it through the concept of reincarnation, as she believes that their relationship extends back to their previous lives:

> Oui, je le sais. Il y a entre nous ce qui a existé avant notre naissance dans une lointaine incarnation où rien n'était intervenu pour nous séparer. A présent il y a le nœud gordien du frère et de la sœur, avec sa charge de tendresse et de non-dits, cette énergie accumulée qui se dégage du regard ou des mains jointes, cette compréhension immédiate, vite renouée et renouvelée, et qui en même temps crée en nous le désir d'autre chose, de plus complet et de plus parfait. L'impossible enchaînement de la fraternité. (48)

Devi's use of the concept of reincarnation to explain the bond between the siblings challenges the significance attached to the heterosexual couple. The tenderness and understanding that Anjali seeks from her husband is instead received from her brother. Thus, Devi's narrative skillfully reveals cultural and social specificities to weave a complex system of relationships and

exchanges. The relationship shared among some women characters in Devi's works is equally intriguing in this context, as it establishes a sense of sisterhood that unsettles the heterosexual love between couples.

1.1.5   Alternate Ties: Feminine Solidarity/Maternal Love

1.1.5.1 Anjali-Fatmah

Anjali's unusual relationship with her brother is not the only tie that perturbs the heterosexual model of love. Her companionship with Fatmah turns out to be even more challenging to her marriage. Anjali describes Fatmah as an unfortunate young woman whose father died, leaving her nothing. As a result, she was forced to live at the mercy of a cousin. In order to escape the wrath of her mad aunt who disliked her, she stayed hidden in a room in the basement of a huge house like a prisoner. In Fatmah's solitude and need for compassion and love, Anjali sees the tragedy that binds them together, and unites them into a solid bond:

> J'avais senti et deviné autour d'elle une aura de tragédie que j'avais eu envie de percer. Je l'avais invitée un jour à déjeuner, et me sentant à l'écoute, elle s'était mise à parler, elle avait parlé et pleuré, pleuré et parlé pendant des heures, oubliant le temps, oubliant le pudeur, m'horrifiant de cette cascade de paroles où perçait un tel besoin d'amour, de compagnie, de compréhension, une telle avidité de tendresse que j'en étais moi-même comme meurtrie et bafouée. Je lui avais pris la main. Je ne voulais rien dire, les mots ne pouvaient rien résoudre, mais elle avait senti qu'il y avait quelque chose de plus que de la sympathie dans ce geste, de plus que de l'amitié, il y avait un pacte, il y avait une confraternité. (104)

What binds Anjali and Fatmah together then is the strong bond of sisterhood, as they both lack sources of compassion and tenderness in life. Both need someone to listen to their stories with love and understanding. Fatmah not only listens to Anjali's story but also calms her with her comprehension and inspires Anjali to make the right decisions. Anjali observes, "Elle était solide et véritable. Elle était une maison accueillante au fond de laquelle on aimerait se blottir ou se cacher. Et c'était elle la plus démunie. […] Elle était capable d'éveiller la lumière là où elle se

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trouvait. […] être ailé, c'était elle. Elle me regarda droit dans les yeux, s'efforçant de me communiquer sa propre force, sa propre foi" (107).

Fatmah becomes Anjali's sole source of strength in times of adversity. Although Fatmah herself has no material wealth, she has an undaunted courage to face difficult situations. Both Anjali and Fatmah are tied together in their destiny as women. After abandoning her husband, Anjali contemplates inviting Fatmah to stay with her. In Anjali's decision, we read the rejection of man-woman coupling and a privileging of a relationship of sisterhood. The compassion and comprehension that marks the relation between Anjali and Fatmah resonates in Pagli's ties with Mitsy in *Pagli*.

1.1.5.2 Mitsy-Pagli

Mitsy is introduced at the very beginning of the novel. Pagli notices her at her wedding when Pagli first enters her husband's town, Terre Rouge. Mitsy captures Pagli's gaze, because she looks different from the other people of Terre Rouge. While others in Terre Rouge make Pagli uncomfortable, Mitsy's smile seems familiar and friendly: "[…] ensuite j'ai vu une jeune femme, debout pieds nus dans le caniveau. Elle portrait une robe de fête. Elle aussi riait. Mais son rire était autre" (16).

Pagli feels a sense of attachment at the very first encounter, as Mitsy makes her first gesture of friendship to Pagli: "J'ai continué à regarder la femme jusqu'à ce qu'elle me renvoie mon regard. Il fallait que je l'attache à moi, même par le lien fragile de ce premier regard. En moi il y avait une grande consternation. En elle, un rire qui se moquait bien de mes peines. Elle a levé la main. Un petit signe amical, mais qui aurait aussi bien pu être un avertissement" (17).

This attachment grows into a strong friendship as Pagli seeks refuge with Mitsy after escaping from her husband's house: "Lorsque Mitsy me pousse doucement dans son lit, c'est comme si des bras de sommeil se tendaient vers moi et je dors, d'un coup, comme ça, sans

prévenir, parce que, pour une fois, je suis moi" (31). It is at Mitsy's that Pagli feels she is herself

for the first time after moving to Terre Rouge. She can put herself to sleep as she feels

completely at ease.

Like Anjali and Fatmah, Mitsy and Pagli are bonded in their suffering. If Pagli moves to

Terre Rouge only to avenge the man who raped her when she was a child, Mitsy, too, is not at

ease in this small town. She is a prostitute who is mistreated and looked down upon by the

people. After she aborts a child she had conceived with a client, she is boycotted by the entire

community. Enraged, while cursing the entire village and revealing the secrets of all the men

who visit her, she divulges Pagli's hidden love for Zil, the fisherman. As a result, Pagli is

tortured and locked away by the elderly women of her community. The suffering that Pagli and

Mitsy undergo leads to a strong bonding and a sense of solidarity between the two: "C'est la

même personne et c'est une autre, Mitsy, entre-temps, comme moi, a souffert" (19).

Mitsy is the only person apart from Zil who understands Pagli and comforts her. Their sense

of understanding, compassion, and affection is such that it leads to physical intimacy:

> Je ne sais même pas à quel moment Mitsy a commencé à caresser mon corps. Elle
> a lentement enlevé mes habits usés, déchirés par endroits, et les a jetés par terre
> comme un tas de chiffons répugnants, car ils gardaient l'odeur de ma détresse.
> Puis sa main s'est mis à vaguer sur mon corps, rugueuse et sans but particulier,
> seulement très féminine. Elle m'a caressée comme seules les femmes savent le
> faire, sans heurter, parce qu'elles sont habituées à la fragilité des enfants. Elle le
> faisait sans doute pour que je redevienne moi-même un enfant qui croirait encore
> dans la sécurité de ces mains de femme. (21)

Mitsy's caresses on Pagli's body have the softness of a mother's touch. Devi emphasizes

the feminine aspect of Mitsy's touch that is sensitive to the fragility of infants, thereby evoking

traits of similarity between Pagli and Mitsy. It is under the maternal caress of Mitsy's hands that

Pagli rediscovers her calmness and the innocence of a child. It absorbs all her sorrow, pain, and

unease. It takes her back to her nascent stage and allows her to forget her darkness: "Je redeviens tranquille comme une souche d'arbre mort depuis longtemps, je suis un enfant qui joue avec un bracelet d'écaille, je suis une petite fille qui ne croit pas que le temps lui est compté et qui n'a pas encore connu le noir" (21). In *Pagli* then the reader discerns an evolution in Devi's representation of women's relationships. Consequently, the maternal love between Pagli and Mitsy resonates with the relationship between Ève and Savita in *Ève de ses décombres* and becomes erotic, introducing a desire that is markedly different from the heterosexual desire.

1.1.5.3 Ève-Savita

Ève and Savita are teenage girls who become friends after Savita moves to Troumaron with her parents. Savita dislikes the fact that Ève, who is very poor, prostitutes herself to the schoolboys for small benefits such as notebooks and erasers. Each encounter leaves her weak and fragmented, and it is always Savita who finds her in that state and consoles her. While calming her after one such adventure; Savita states, "Il m'a fallu la consoler, la prendre en moi comme une mère ou un amant, et lui faire oublier, même brièvement, pourquoi, elle tremblait" (64). Savita's gesture of calming Ève in order to make her forget her suffering resonates with Mitsy's caresses that calm Pagli and take her back to a state before her rape, obliterating bad memories. By highlighting the tenderness characterizing these gestures, Devi brings forth the notion of maternal love that pacifies all suffering. This love is selfless and does not desire to possess or control. In emphasizing it repeatedly in her novels, Devi displaces the love based on possession with one between a daughter and her mother that has the power to heal.

Like Mitsy and Pagli, the two girls Ève and Savita share a relationship of complete comprehension and understanding. Savita understands what Ève needs even before Ève asks for help: "Je t'ai accompagnée souvent. Je t'ai souvent ramenée chez toi. On dirait que je suis toujours là au bon moment pour te ramasser. Mais c'est parce que je suis à l'écoute de toi. Tu

n'appelleras jamais. Mais je t'entendrai quand même" (71). Savita's love for Ève is such that she

is willing to sacrifice herself in order to protect her friend, and it is here that this love resonates

with that of Zil or Joséphin: "Je voudrais te protéger. Je voudrais t'empêcher de te perdre. Je

voudrais être celle qui te sauve de toi-même" (72).

The bonding between Savita and Ève results from the fact that they understand each other's

suffering and pain, which cannot be understood by anyone else: "Toi seule sauras ce que j'ai

voulu dire. Ce qu'il y a de miracle et de peine dans ces mots. [...] Ici rien n'est à moi, sauf toi"

(72). Describing their relationship, Sad often states that there is a strange harmony in their

togetherness that is incomprehensible to others: "Il y naît un sourire si lointain et si secret qu'il

faut avoir l'œil pour le voir. Ce sourire des deux filles [...] Presque comme un mélange de

salives, ce sourire-là est une porte vers un endroit qu'elles seules connaissent. Une affaire de

filles; évidemment, on ne connaît rien de tels, nous les coqs bagarreurs" (36).

Savita and Ève's togetherness is such that they do not need a man to make them happy. Sad

observes that this upsets the gang of boys in their town, as it is a threat to the masculine ego:

> Mais elles sont comme les deux mains d'un corps. Elles n'ont pas besoin d'une
> troisième. Elles peuvent faire ce qu'elles veulent, quand elles veulent. Nul besoin
> de garçons dans leur sourire. Leurs yeux les verrouillent l'une à l'autre. Nous
> sommes invisibles. Cela énerve la bande. Je sens quelque chose qui change en
> eux, eux qui ont jusqu'ici toléré les frasques d'Ève, la joliesse distante de Savita
> [...] mais ils n'ont plus envie qu'on pavane ces corps féminins sous leurs nez sans
> leur en offrir un bout. Ève peut passer d'homme en homme, mais quand elle est
> avec Savita, c'est là qu'elle s'évade. Nous ne sommes pas à vous, disent-elles.
> Nous ne le serons jamais. (81)

Ève's prostituting herself does not bother the boys of the gang as it allows men easy access to

her body, enabling them to derive pleasure from it. The togetherness shared between Savita and

Ève, however, is troubling to them as it excludes men and denies them access to her body.

In their physical intimacy, Ève and Savita are complete and do not long for a masculine touch or kiss. In fact, Ève enjoys Savita's touch and kiss much more than any masculine kiss or touch:

> Elle a passé la main sur mon front. Puis elle s'est penchée elle m'a embrassée. Le goût de sa bouche n'était pas du tout pareil à celui des hommes. C'était si doux que j'ai fermé les yeux et que je l'ai savouré comme un gâteau-papaye. Je l'ai aspiré fortement à l'intérieur de ma bouche. Hors de l'emprise des hommes, nous sommes devenues joyeuses, joueuses, pour quelques instants. Un parfum tiède s'évadait de son nombril. Nous avancions sur la pointe des pieds. C'était si étrange. Nous souriions comme des noyées. Nous dansions sur une corde tendue de l'une à l'autre. (49-50)

The scenes of intimacy between Ève and Savita are particularly interesting, as this intimacy celebrates tenderness and togetherness, thereby presenting an alternate model of love and intimacy other than the heterosexual physical encounter that privileges sexual gratification:

> Savita me chatouille les orteils. Je lui lèche la plante des pieds. Nous avons la même peau, parfaitement lisse, sur laquelle la main s'évapore. La partie la plus douce est au creux du dos et à l'intérieur de la cuisse. Quand on se caresse à ses endroits, le temps s'arrête. Je pose la tête sur son ventre et j'écoute le chant de ses organes. Un grouillement de quelque chose, une faim, une envie, je ne sais pas, ou c'est simplement ses intestins qui font leur travail. Nous n'avons pas tellement besoin de parler. Nous savons écouter nos silences. (62)

In the above passage, Devi highlights the sameness of the two female bodies involved in the process of love-making. In fact, it is their resemblance that enhances the pleasure in the sexual act. The desire experienced is different from the one in heterosexual encounters as the bodies that enact sexuality are both feminine. When two women enact positions of desire which are active or passive or both, they unsettle the traditional gender arrangement. The aspects of sameness and identification that Devi evokes in the relationship between Zil and Pagli are taken to a new level in these lesbian relationships where one desires the same-- "[…] wanting to be and wanting to have remain focused on a woman rather than split between a woman and a man" (Juhasz 145).

Suzanne Juhasz explains how this lesbian desire plays with difference and sameness leading to complementary identification in which what one is and what one desires are the same. This kind of arrangement unsettles the Oedipal desire that privileges difference-- one desires what one is not: "Lesbian desire is a fantasy-- a hope, a belief, a longing to be and to have, to share sameness and difference. This form of desire, which finds its origins in the mother-infant relationship, persists in […] eroticizing both attachment and identificatory styles of loving and finds excitement in their overlap. As an adult passion, lesbian desire is sparked by the interchange between gender forms in each lover, the give-and-take of gendered positions between lovers" (145). Adria Schwartz agrees with Juhasz as she asserts that lesbian interactions redefine desire: "Lesbian eroticism is a confluence of multiple identifications and positions of desire" (63). Thus, lesbian desire evokes love that unsettles the stereotypical notions of feminine-masculine, as it extends the "definition of woman to include gender positions that are neither traditionally feminine nor traditionally masculine, erotic positions that are not heterosexual" (Juhasz 145).

In alluding to a love characterized by "partage complet" where the notions of identification and eroticism are different from the heterosexual love, Devi displaces heterosexual desire with the maternal and lesbian and represents carnal pleasure in a new light by privileging comprehension and tenderness. In this way Devi valorizes lesbian/maternal love that is beyond all notions of possession, a love marked by sharing and willingness to sacrifice oneself for the other. She undermines the erotic love of the romance plot, which prioritizes heterosexual desire and possession leading to a hierarchized model of the man-woman relationship in which the man maintains a privileged position.

Devi's texts not only resist plots that are driven by action, adventure, and thrill based on masculine desire, but also attempt to create alternate narratives that represent the feminine world of inaction. These "plotless" texts are not so much preoccupied by the recounting of the tale as

by the narrator's desperate desire to communicate and connect through the process of telling her tale, thereby facilitating women's expression and making space for feminine desire. In the second part of this chapter, I will examine Ananda Devi's novels while drawing upon Susan Lanser's notion of "plotlessness".

1.2 Plotlessness

Susan Lanser explains how narratological definitions of plot are inadequate to express women's experience. They pose several restrictions on the feminine voice, as they take into account only masculine desire as the principle motor of the plot and strategically leave out feminine experience and desire: "For theories of plot assume that textual actions are based on the (intentional) deeds of protagonists; they assume a power, a possibility, that may be inconsistent with what women have experienced both historically and textually, and perhaps inconsistent even with women's desires" (Toward 356). In order to explain her point, she cites Maria Brewer, who suggests that plot has been understood as a "discourse of male desire recounting itself through the narrative of adventure, project, enterprise and conquest, the discourse of desire as separation and mastery" (1151).

Lanser asserts the need to revise traditional theories of plot, as women have led a non-storied existence and "women's experience when held against the masculine plot often seems static and in a mode of waiting" (357). Their stories cannot be called progressive or oriented toward events happening sequentially or climactically, as in the traditional masculine story plot. For feminine desire to assert itself, the only recourse is to break away from the traditional narrative structure based on masculine desire. In order to describe such a feminine narration marked by domesticity, inactivity, and receptivity, Lanser uses the term "plotless."

Lanser's notion of "plotlessness" is characterized by feminine desire and quest. It privileges stasis, polyphony, and multiple consciousnesses instead of a single unified

consciousness of the hero who is the subject of all action. In the feminine world where domesticity, inaction, and despair reign, the only predominant need is the one to communicate, to be able to tell one's story of suffering. According to Lanser this is a dominant desire that marks most feminine texts and becomes the motor of feminine narration.

Lanser's plotless text is one where "the act of writing becomes the fulfillment of desire, telling becomes the single predicated act, as if to tell were in itself to resolve, to provide closure. 'Récit' and 'histoire,' rather than being separate elements, converge, so that telling becomes integral to the working out of the story. Communication, understanding, being understood, become not only the objective of the narration but the act that can transform (some aspect of) the narrated world. In a universe where waiting, inaction, reception, predominate, and action is only minimally possible, the narrative act itself becomes the source of possibility" (357). The principal objective of the act of narration is to build a connection between the narrator and the narratee.

In light of Lanser's notion of plotlessness, I will analyze Devi's novels that do not have climactic endings, but rather have a sense of stasis that dominates the narration. In addition, I will examine the narrator's urgency to find narratees within the text, with whom she communicates and interacts. The narrator seeks her audience within the borders of the narrative and also transgresses textual limits in order to invite all her listeners to join in the narration. These confidantes gradually become active participants in the narration, leading to polyphony and multiple consciousnesses instead of a single unified consciousness of the protagonist who is the subject of all action in traditional plots.

Most narratologists have accepted the terms "narratee"[33] and "implied reader." In order to discuss the concept of plotlessness and understand how it functions in Devi's works, however, one cannot limit oneself to this model. For the purpose of this study, I would like to recognize two kinds of narratees the intradiegetic, who is a character in the novel, and the extradiegetic who is not a character of the novel, yet is repeatedly addressed in the novel by the narrator. The distinction between the extradiegetic narratee and the implied reader is that the latter is never directly addressed in the novel and so remains virtual.

1.2.1 Plotlessness in *Pagli*

The opening sentence of Devi's *Pagli* expresses the narrator's despair as she longs to connect with her lover: "Ce chant qui me vient du bleu des ombres, je ne sais si tu l'entendras. J'ai beau te chercher derrière mes paupières closes, dans le silence de ces veines qui ne battent même plus de désir, je ne te retrouve pas. Il y a trop de murs entre nous. Ils sont venus te prendre jusque dans mon souffle" (3). At the beginning of the novel, the autodiegetic[34] narrator announces her lack of all desire, as she states "ces veines qui ne battent même plus de désir" (3). Yet, the reader can discern her vibrant struggle to access her narratee, thereby unveiling another

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[33] The *narratee* is the character to whom the narrator relates the story. In *first-person narratives*, the *narratee* is the *character* to whom the narrator tells the story. If this character is absent, the *implied reader* may be regarded as the *narratee*: this is especially evident when the *first-person narrator* uses *second person pronouns* to address the *implied reader*. We may mention here that the *implied reader* is a term popularized by Wolfgang Iser, who has in fact written a book *The Implied Reader; Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974) with the term as its title. In *third-person narratives*, the *narratee* exists when there is a *narrator* telling the story to another imaginary character; this imaginary character is, in effect, the *narratee*. In this regard, it can be argued that the *narratee* can be equated to the *implied reader*, as the *narrator* uses second person pronouns to address him/her. Toolan (1988), however, has a more restricted definition of *narratee*: to him, the *narratee* is always addressed by an *intradiegetic narrator*, in the sense that *both* the *narrator* and the character the *narrator* speaks to are at the same *narrative level*. However, Toolan does not regard the *narratee* as belonging to the overall framework of narrative.

[34] Genette (1980) defines three different kinds of narrators. According to him, a homodiegetic narrator is a narrator who is also a character in the story. If the homodiegetic narrator is also the protagonist of the narrative is called an autodiegetic narrator. A narrator who is not a character in the story but is omniscient is a heterodiegetic narrator.

desire-- the one to narrate. What follows is the recounting of the narrator's tale constantly addressed to a narratee, referred to throughout the novel as "you" that makes this novel an epistle, a love letter to be precise. However, the protagonist, not only talks to her lover, but also about him, as the letter ceases to be an intimate conversation with her lover, and opens itself up as a text to the reader, seeking an extradiegetic narratee.

The novel's epistolarity is further challenged at the level of structure, as the novel divides itself into two different sections entitled Pagli and Zil. Thus, Devi persistently plays with genre at the level of content and structure in *Pagli*. For instance, in a chapter entitled "Daya," the narrative "I" of the protagonist, Pagli, is taken over by the intended recipient of the letter, Zil. In this chapter, it is Zil who addresses Pagli and not vice-versa, as the addressee and the addressor exchange roles. The narrator herself describes this novel/letter as a book when she states, "L'écriture dense et dangereuse de ce livre. Je suis chargée de souvenirs qui ne sont pas les miens, alors que j'attends de vivre" (29). The novel, however, does not prioritize either of the genres, but rather creates a space that allows Devi to work with both, permitting Pagli to narrate her story to her lover and at the same time extend her voice to the reader.

At the beginning of the novel, the narrator expresses her inability to make her voice heard by the people of the village. As a result, she resolves to be reincarnated until her mission is accomplished, unveiling her commitment and desire to share her story: "Plus personne ne m'écoute. Je pourrais finir ainsi. Ils ne m'entendraient pas. Mais ce serait dangereux, pour eux, pour nous, car je pourrais revenir. […] je reviendrais pour démembrer leurs mensonges. A ce moment-là, je serais libre de partir" (14). Although the town of Terre Rouge is deaf to Pagli's pleas, she finds an audience in her lover to whom the letter is addressed. As Pagli recounts the episode of her rape to her lover, Zil takes her in his arms. His compassion and love cradle Pagli out of the darkness that haunted her long after the incident. Pagli narrates: "Toi, un jour, quand je

te l'ai dit, quand les mots sont sortis avec toute la brûlure et la crasse restées en moi depuis ce temps, tu m'as prise contre toi et tu m'as bercée longuement. C'était cela qu'il te fallait à ce moment-là pour exorciser ta douleur, as-tu dit" (54). Narrating her tale of suffering is Pagli's means of venting out her pain and exorcising herself from the trauma. Narration, therefore, is therapeutic for Pagli.

In this novel narration is not only a means of expressing one's suffering, but also a strategy to reflect. It is only through the process of narration that Pagli dissolves the hatred she harbored for society throughout the novel. She states:

> J'ai presque disparue, ensevelie jusqu'au cou. Seule ma tête dépasse et regarde ce monde qu'une ancienne colère est en train de noyer. Venait-elle de moi? Je ne reconnais plus en cette autre et en son envie de détruire. Aujourd'hui, je comprends qu'ils ne sont que des enfants qui ont encore tant à apprendre. J'aurais dû leur en laisser le temps. (150)

Pagli's act of narration then allows her to understand that her hatred for the people of Terre Rouge is futile, as they will take their own time to learn and mature. She realizes that she should forgive them, and thereby liberate herself.

Consequently, Pagli finds her liberty at the novel's end, as she states that she has lived her life and does not wish to return. It is the presence of her lover and his willingness to hear her words that allow her to attain peace and liberation: "Plus rien ne m'enserre. Plus de mofines, plus de famille, plus de mari. Je suis libre. Il n'y a pas de retour possible, après cela. J'ai reçu tout ce que je voulais. Ton amour, ton partage, ton enfant. La vie ne peut être vécue davantage. Je n'en demande pas plus" (150). The intradiegetic narratee Zil, hence, becomes her means of liberation. It is the act of narration that liberates her, as she abandons her project of reincarnation.

This intradiegetic narratee does not remain a silent listener throughout the tale. In an unconventional move, breaking away from all traditions and challenging all genres, Devi allows Zil to take up the narrative voice from Pagli and reverses the roles between them. This not only

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leads to polyphony in the narrative voice as the narratee enters the scene of narration to reassure the narrator, but disturbs the traditional narrator-narratee hierarchy. Zil confirms that he not only listens to Pagli, but that he is the only one who understands her: "Personne n'avait compris ton étendue. Je voyais ta transparence, ta fragilité, et en même temps, ta force, je voyais quelque part enfoui au fond de tout ce gris, de tout ce noir, un petit rire gai et coloré et il m'a semblé que je n'avais plus qu'un but: celui d'aller à la rencontre de ce rire, de le déterrer et de l'exposer à la lumière" (144). Zil understands that hidden behind the serious and somber Pagli there is a happy and colorful being that needs to be brought to life again.[35] Zil calls Pagli by her original name, Daya, used only twice in the novel. She is given the name Pagli by the mofines[36] who read her acts of subversion as those of madness.

Pagli detests her original name, which means "pity" in Mauritian Creole. According to her, this name evokes contempt: "Pour moi, ce prénom est une charge et une condamnation. Il m'offre en pâture à la pitié du monde. Et c'est l'autre face du mépris" (39). Zil, on the other hand, provides a new interpretation, explaining that "daya" means compassion to him, as it is Daya who made him a complete man, referring both to Daya, the protagonist and metaphorically to the concept of daya as compassion. He states, "Tu es, Daya, la pitié de la terre. Celle qui comprend et qui reçoit les fibres de sa douleur. Et celle par qui la joie arrive. Car avec toi, en toi, j'ai été le plus fort des hommes. […] J'étais un autre homme, parce que je n'étais complet qu'avec toi" (145).

In reinterpreting Pagli's name, Zil reinterprets and redefines her. She may be Pagli, the mad, for everyone else, but she is Daya, the creator, for him. The narratee enters the scene of

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[35] Pagli had lost herself after her rape at the age of fourteen. Discussed at length in the section on comparison between Zil and Pagli's husband.

[36] Mofines are elderly women in Indo-Mauritian society who consider themselves the custodians of purity and morality.

narration to reassure the narrator that he has been an active participant as a listener, in order to

excavate Daya from Pagli (Pagli is the name given to her by the mofines) and facilitate Pagli's

understanding of herself, as she states towards the end of the novel: "Ce monde était bien trop

étroit et maintenant je le sais, il était sans pitié, je n'y avais pas ma place mon nom m'a mise en

décalage en porte à faux dès ma naissance c'est pour cela que je m'y sentais si mal, si mal, une

femme seule qui cherchait un lieu où elle aurait pu se rassembler et redevenir entière et un de ce

lieu bien sur c'était toi" (153). Zil is not only the lover who gives new life to Pagli, traumatized

by rape, but he is also the narratee who comforts the narrator by listening to her story, and

participates in it. Thus, he contributes in the construction of the narration. If Pagli finds a perfect

narratee in Zil, Mouna, the protagonist of *Moi*, *l'interdite* finds a confidante in Lisa, a servant.

1.2.2 Plotlessness in *Moi, l'interdite*

As Pagli's mark of fire[37] announces her exclusion from society, so does Mouna's cleft lip.

Due to her deformity, Mouna is perceived as a curse, a devil by her family. Her inability to talk

further leads to her detachment from the human world, as it severs all communication with

mankind. Mouna's narration in *Moi l'interdite*, therefore, can be read as her attempt to connect to

mankind, make her world heard and understood by humans. It is this desire to communicate that

is the motor of her narration.

At the beginning of her story, Mouna declares that she aims at presenting her true self to

the narratee:

> A présent, il est temps de me voir. Je dois vous montrer mon visage. Ils disent que
> je porte le signe de Shehtan. Ils détournent les yeux où prononcent des mots
> d'exorcisme. Donnez-moi le nom que vous voulez, rakshas, Shehtan, Satan ou
> autre. Je suis née avec un bec-de-lièvre. Dans les villages, ils n'appellent pas cela
> une difformité; ils l'appellent une malédiction. Mais je ne suis pas une
> malédiction. Vous le verrez en suivant mon histoire. Je suis une mise en garde. (8)

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[37] In order to punish Pagli, the mofines burn her with hot iron.

She uses the second person pronoun, "vous," to address the narratee(s)[38] and engages her/them directly in the narration. She asserts that she has been subjected to an incredible amount of violence due to her deformity. Through her narrative she attempts to exorcise herself from the image of a devil that has been imposed on her by her family and society.

Although she never names her narratee(s), Mouna is in constant communication with her/them, often explaining the weird nature of her story and instructing her/them how to read it. The novel begins with the narrator addressing her narratee(s) with the imperative, advising her/them how to read or understand the story: "laissez-la s'écouler à travers la bonde de l'oubli. N'essayez pas de la saisir […] Ne prenez pas mal ce songe d'épines que je vous offre" (7).

She warns her/them of the stagnancy and stasis that mark her story and make it unreal: "Cette histoire couleur d'eau croupie n'a peut-être aucune réalité. Elle parle de rêves déchus, et aurait un bruit de déchirure si l'on pouvait entendre le bruit secret des cœurs" (7). A little later in the novel she states, "Il vous est difficile de croire à tout cela. Tant de colère, tant de rancune. Mais vous ne connaissez pas la malédiction des campagnes" (35). She also invites her extradiegetic narratee(s) into her narration by asking them questions. This is her way of involving her/them in her story and suggesting that she is struggling as much as they are to understand her own story. At this moment she is not the sole narrative authority hierarchically above the narratee(s) but on par with them, as they all struggle to understand her tale. At the very end, she asks the narratee(s): "un grand parfum vert qui m'allège et me soulève et me donne des ailes. Des ailes! Me serais-je trompée, tout ce temps? Serais-je un ange?" (123).

Through constant questioning, Mouna accords an important place to her narratee(s) whose presence can be persistently discerned in the text, as if she is writing her own story in collaboration with them. In so doing, she relinquishes her authority as the sole narrator. The

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[38] Since the narratee(s) is/are not named the reader can suppose that Mouna refers to extradiegetic narratee(s).

process of narration for Mouna is not simply a recounting of her tale but also a process of constant reflection and understanding of her tale of suffering and pain. Her questions are not mere inquiries, but an attempt to reflect on issues that trouble her. By inviting her narratee(s) to think with her and become a part of her introspection and quest, she allows them to play an important role in the construction of the narrative voice.

In addition to the extradiegetic narratee, addressed several times in the novel, there is also an intradiegetic narratee, who is more intricately woven into the plot of the novel. Lisa, the domestic who brings food to Mouna, is her only human contact with the outside world. One day, she grabs Lisa's hand, eventually forcing her to listen to her story. Thus, throughout the novel, Lisa plays the role of an intradiegetic narratee to Mouna's tale.

Initially, Mouna is anxious and foresees enormous difficulty in recounting her story to Lisa, as the two belong to different worlds: "Elle ne dit plus rien. Ça y est, j'ai encore tué la conversation. Mais comment parler? Je ne sais plus. Je n'ai pas de temps pour les banalités. Ce n'est pas comme j'avais toute la vie devant moi, et que j'avais l'habitude de gens qui me comprennent. Ma vie est derrière. Je n'ai plus rien à dire" (76). Mouna feels a great gap between herself and Lisa, and Mouna believes that Lisa does not understand her. Yet, she decides to tell her tale: "Elle m'écoute respirer. Elle attend, elle ne part pas. Je ne comprends pas les gens comme elle. Finalement, je me décide à parler" (76).

Eventually, a line of communication is established between Lisa and Mouna. Lisa not only becomes an active listener of Mouna's story, but also participates in the narration by correcting Mouna from time to time, as Mouna's facts sometimes seem illogical to Lisa: "Elle me regarde, la douce petite femme que je sens si proche, débordante de compréhension malgré l'horreur que je lui inspire. Elle ne croit peut-être qu'à moitié ce que je lui dis. Elle corrige, avec sa raison. Les choses que je lui révèle. Mais une chose au moins est vraie, et elle le sait: les mains vivantes de

mes minuits" (121). Toward the end of the novel Lisa, who understands Mouna's pain, compassionately decides to set her free. She tells Mouna: "Ecoute, je vais te laisser partir. Ta vie a été terrible, mais ici, c'est encore pire. C'est le mensonge le plus grossier d'un monde qui croit aimer. Pars, et efface-toi du monde, si tu le peux" (121). Mouna is pleasantly surprised by Lisa's compassion toward her and acknowledges the love she has for Lisa: "Elle est si bonne, Lisa, et je l'aime si fort. Voilà qu'elle m'ouvre la porte. Que j'entrevois, au-delà, une lumière salvatrice" (121). Her love towards Lisa develops to an extent that she finally decides to postpone her suicide in order to help Lisa: "Oui, je partirai, oui, je m'effacerai, incinérerai avec moi cet enfer qui menace le monde. Mais une pensée me retient: elle aussi est menacée, elle, ma douce, ma friable amie. Je ne peux pas la laisser ainsi à la merci des mains et de la gueule des hommes carnassiers. Je dois l'aider. Je dois aider Lisa à s'effacer aussi. Je suis si forte, quand je le veux" (122).

During the process of narration, such a bond develops between the narrator and the narratee that they are willing to sacrifice their own goals and lives for each other. What results from this sharing of the story and Mouna's act of recounting the tale is a feeling of sisterhood. In the process of narration, Mouna becomes so attached to Lisa that she forgets her own suffering and abandons her idea of suicide. The narration gives her a perspective and a new goal in life. Instead of a self-centered recounting of her difficult experience, this tale opens Mouna's life to others and that of others to her. Mouna's narration provides her a connection with the life of the narratee, encouraging her to work for the liberation of other women. At the same time, her narrative allows her to understand her sorrows and strengths through connection with another human being. Thus, the act of telling leads her to her "nirvana".[39] Mouna's desperation to seek a

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[39] Nirvana is the state of being free from both suffering and the cycle of rebirth. It is an important concept in Buddhism and Jainism.

narratee resonates with other narrators such as Paule, the protagonist of Devi's first novel *Rue la Poudrière* and Joséphin.

1.2.3 Plotlessness in *Rue la Poudrière*

Devi's first novel, *Rue la Poudrière*, recounts the tale of a prostitute named Paule. She was rejected by her family because she was not a male child. Consequently, she is sold to a pimp with whom she falls in love. As her lover does not respond to her affection, she becomes disillusioned and commits suicide. The narrator Paule's voice continually engages the reader while keeping him or her at a distance, as the "je" demands that the "vous" embark with her in her quest: "Vous me suivez, n'est-ce pas? Maintenant que j'ai pris l'habitude de votre présence sur mes pas, suivant ma pensée comme un mirage […] je ne voudrais pas vous perdre […] vous suivez mes repères ? […] il faut savoir les reconnaître et leur donner une cohérence" (7). Paule invites the reader to "follow her" and journey with her through the narrative. She does not wish to lose her narratee, and her desperation figures in the images of a young street urchin who is willing to accommodate any wishes a tourist might have: "une petite fille qui toisait du regard et du corps un touriste surpris, choqué" (34).

The narrator demonstrates her desperation for a narratee to listen and understand her story: "cette hurlante envie de lancer ma voix […] de dire, de parler en un long flot sans reprendre haleine" (5). It is not so much the content of the testimony, its shape, its origin, or its concrete details that matter, but its destination: "que vous sachiez." It is imperative that this "vous," the narratee, the other, be able to recognize in order to acknowledge and validate the voice itself: "Reconnaissez-moi, dans l'ombre fugitive que vous entrevoyez au coin de la rue" (7). What the narrator seeks from the extradiegetic narratee is a simple recognition of her presence. Françoise Lionnet has examined this presence of the narrator in order to analyze how the feminine voice that usually manifests itself as a shadow seeks validation from the narratee: "The shadow on the

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street corner elicits a very definite and determinate engagement on the part of the interlocutor-reader: 'il y a partout et en tout d'étranges liens de continuité et de complicité, comme des fils entrelacés entre moi et moi, et vous et moi' " (7). To follow the narrator is to recognize her existence, to enter into a pact with her. In making the narratee a companion in her journey, the narrator seeks recognition and assurance that her story is heard.

1.2.4 Plotlessness in *La vie de Joséphin le fou*

Joséphin, the narrator in *La vie de Joséphin le fou*, persistently addresses extradiegetic narratees and even enters into a relationship with them, as he blames them for abandoning him and in a way contributing to his current state. He even believes that one day they will destroy him. These narratees thus play an important role in the life of Joséphin:

> Le complot du rejet, c'est pas Marlyn Moro [La mère de Joséphin] seule, c'est vous tous. Ricanez pas, vous aussi avez fait de Joséphin, dans votre petite tête ordonnée, un fouka qu'il faut rayer des souvenirs. Vous avancez un instant à côté de lui, mais bien vite vous aurez envie de l'abandonner, son odeur d'homme vous fera fuir. Et je sais bien qu'en prenant Solange-Marlène je vous ai donné le droit de me détruire. (40)

From the very beginning of the novel, the presence of the extradiegetic narratee is discernible. The narrator invites this narratee to enter his cave where he has kept the two little girls after abducting them from the seashore: "Elles dorment. Avancer sur la pointe des pieds. Pas autrement. Pas faire de bruit: elles dorment" (9). Devi's ostracized narrator who does not belong to civilized society does not conjugate these verbs in the second-person plural "vous." Devi uses the agrammatical sentences as a strategy to make the narratee's presence ambiguous. Joséphin's use of the infinitive makes it difficult for the reader to determine Joséphin's intended interlocutor-- Is Joséphin instructing the narratee or is this simply a monologue? In the next paragraph, however, Joséphin's use of onomatopoeia such as "chut" and his detailed instructions on how to enter the cave make the reader suspect the presence of a potential narratee: "[…] les

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regarder vite pour pas les perdre […] Chut, pas rire pas pleurer, elles doivent pas entendre, rien

doit déranger le sommeil de mes princesses" (9). Joséphin clearly addresses his narratee with the

second-person pronoun "vous" later in the novel: "Vous raconter maintenant? Oui, peut-être.

Elles dorment. Ou plutôt non, pas maintenant. Plus tard" (15).

   The narratee reappears in the novel and his presence is clearly stated when the autodiegetic

narrator refers to him assuming that he has been present all through the narration enjoying the

narrator's tale: "Si ce bonheur c'est de les contempler chaque seconde tandis qu'elles dorment

[…] si c'est ça mon bonheur qui peut me l'interdire? pas vous, tout de même, pas vous. Car vous

le partagez bien un peu avec moi, en ce moment précis, ce bonheur-là. Non? Sinon, vous seriez

pas là. Vous seriez pas là" (41). The narratee not only listens to Joséphin, but also actively

participates in his story as they both enjoy contemplating the girls. There is no longer a

relationship of hierarchy in which the narrator directs the narratee, but they are both companions

in their actions and are tied together in the pleasure they derive. Hence, the narration is no longer

a passive recounting of a tale, but an action that connects the narratee to the narrator because the

narrator invites him into his world of narration.

   The extradiegetic narratee is not the only narratee in the novel. The two little girls, Marlène

and Solange, Joséphin's mother, and the eels function as the intradiegetic narratees who Joséphin

constantly addresses. His stream of consciousness narration marked by an evident absence of

punctuation is intriguing, as it allows him to confound the intradiegetic narratee with the

extradiegetic one in such a way that they actually become one. For example, Joséphin starts by

addressing the eels or the two little girls and then switches to the extradiegetic narratee, making

it difficult for the reader to understand who is being addressed. This ambiguity opens the text to

multiple interpretations. Consider the passage in which Joséphin addresses the eels using "vous":

> […] on tue les anguilles en tapant sur leur queue, mais on sait pas demander
> pardon aux vivants, pardon à vous qui avez fait un si long voyage dans la
> mémoire, tant de kilomètres […] pardon à vous qui m'avait épargné enfant pour
> que je vous dévore adulte, mais c'est pour devenir comme vous, pour me
> transformer en vous, pour avoir cette mémoire élastique des voyages de vos
> ancêtres, la traversée de tous vos océans pour retrouver vos sources. […] je veux
> faire comme vous […] et cette fois-là souvenez-vous, quand je me suis enfui de
> chez elle pour la dernière fois, souvenez-vous, ses yeux brillaient rouge elle
> m'avait demandé de l'alcool… (49)

The narrator begins by addressing the eels, asking for their forgiveness, as he kills them for food even though they protected him when he had sought refuge in the sea. As the passage continues, it develops into a conversation with the narratee when Joséphin refers to the events he had already narrated to him and asks "souvenez-vous?" The pronoun "vous" used to address the eels in the first part of the passage is later casually used to address the narratee. The narrator makes no effort to distinguish between the "vous" used for the eels and the one used for the narratee, creating a deliberate confusion and chaos in the text. This confusion cannot be read as negative; rather, it is constructive as it allows the narrator to enlarge his audience.

The ambiguity created by the narrator in obscuring the referent of the pronoun "vous" allows the narrator as much accessibility to the extradiegetic narratee as to the intradiegetic one, obliterating the distinctions between the two and bringing them onto the same plane. This permits him to challenge the hierarchy between the intradiegetic narratee who is a character in the novel and the extradiegetic narratee whose identity is not clear in the novel. The narrator also attempts to blur the distinction between the narratee and himself as he desires to "transform" himself into the narratee. Joséphin states, "[…] mais c'est pour devenir comme vous, pour me transformer en vous, pour avoir cette mémoire élastique des voyages de vos ancêtres," as he prepares to make a journey into the past with this narratee that will allow him to understand

himself. The narratee, therefore, becomes the narrator's guide and companion on a journey that enables him to deepen his wisdom and discover himself.

The use of the pronoun "vous" is further complicated by the contextual reference to his killing of the eels that protected the narrator as a mother when he was a child. Joséphin imagines killing his mother twice in the novel. The novel merges reality with imagination, blurring the difference between the killing of the eels, and the murder of his mother. This passage enables the reader to interpret the text as if it is addressed to Joséphin's mother, in which Joséphin asks his mother for forgiveness. In fact, Joséphin states, "mon grand corps d'homme a tant besoin de nourriture, pardon à vous qui m'avez épargné enfant pour que je vous dévore adulte." The reader is under the impression that the "vous" is extended to all mothers and to all the women narratees who give birth and protect the male child that later returns as a man to devour and destroy women and deprive them of their innocence. Through the intradiegetic narratees, his mother and the eels, Joséphin finds a means to weave the extradiegtic narratees, in this case all mothers, into his narration.

In another such passage the narrator seems to address the two little girls he abducted, Marlène and Solange, as he says: "[…] je veux tuer le noir de la vie qui vous surplombe, mes petites fées" (44). He uses the pronoun "vous" to address them, but later, without a change in punctuation or paragraph he replaces "mes petites fées" by "missié-madame," making "vous" ambiguous. It is difficult to say who is designated by "vous"-- the little girls or the extradiegetic narratee or both: "[…] mais de loin, vous deux lui clignant de l'œil comme ceci, ça ressemblait à des invités, et si j'étais le dieu soleil, est-ce que je serais pas accouru tout de suite, je vous demande un peu, tu crois que je serais resté bêtement accroché au ciel pour briller sur un monde imbécile, pas du tout, missié-madame, j'aurais tout laissé tomber" (44), and continues further "je vous empêcherai de disparaître comme l'autre" (45). This usage of "vous" merges the

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extradiegetic narratee with the two little girls, making the narratee an innocent woman who needs protection.

 At another moment in a passage referring to Marlène and Solange, Joséphin suddenly uses the pronoun "elles" to address two other women, elizabeth and isabelle:

> Peut-être sont-elles un peu noyées, pas parce qu'elles sont ici, sous l'eau, avec moi, mais plus tard, là– haut, si elles y retournent, la vie se changera […] tu te souviens, Joséphin, tu les écoutais, caché dans l'herbe haute, et elles s'appelaient isabelle et elizabeth […] et elles se saluaient avec emphase et valsaient l'une avec l'autre jusqu'à ce que gabriel et jonathan arrivent sur leur cheval blanc et les emportent, rêves de petites filles. (42)

 elizabeth and isabelle are spelled in lower case, as if they are common nouns referring to a group of people rather than an individual. Similarly, the names gabriel and jonathan refer collectively to the perfect prince charming of the fairy tale, indicating the narrator's intention to refer to all little girls who dream of their princes. He also addresses each one of them with the pronoun "vous," paying homage to a community of beautiful women when he says, "Que vous êtes belle, isabelle" and acknowledging of ugly women when he says "que vous êtes bête, elizabeth" toward the end of the passage. As he discusses their gradual disappearance or disintegration on the earth, he uses the pronoun "vous" within single quotation marks: "[…] et soudain vous êtes alourdies par votre ventre par les choses accrochées à vos chevilles par les chaînes les liens les sous […] l'absence la disparition, terrible, de 'vous' " (43).

 Joséphin not only merges elizabeth and isabelle with Marlène and Solange but also expands his horizon to protect not only these women but all the women narratees. The "vous" within inverted commas refers not just to the intradiegetic narratees (i.e. the little girls), but allows him to reach out to the extradiegetic narratee as well. This narratee is not only the mother who can take Joséphin with her on a journey to the past to reveal all the ancient wisdom of the ancestors, but also the little girl who needs Joséphin's protection against the evils of society. His relation

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with the narratee is thus two-fold: sometimes he is the one protecting and guiding the narratee, and at other times it is the narratee who protects and guides him. The narratee gets an equal opportunity to play both these roles. Devi skillfully devises a strategy that allows her narrator to play with the second-person pronoun in a manner that facilitates the connection between the narrator and all the possible narratees inside and outside the text. Devi's stream of consciousness writing marked by its lapse in syntax and punctuation is not only a stylistic transgression, but also a narratological one, as it challenges the traditional divide between the narrator and the narratee. Her writing style creates a space that allows her narrator to switch between the intradiegetic and the extradiegetic narratees, allowing the narrator to develop an intimacy with the extradiegetic narratee and permit her to participate in the act of narration.

For Devi's ostracized narrators the act of narration is not only a means to seek a listener, but also an act of solidarity. The narrator and the narratee enter into a pact of companionship where the narratee not only listens to the tale, but also participates in it and pushes the narration further. In sharing the act of narration with their narratees, Devi's ostracized narrators seek recognition and validation of their voices that have been unheard. This sharing of roles leads to polyphony as the narrator abandons his sole authority over the narration in order to share it with the narratee, opening the text to a collective conscious in which the narratee can voice her concerns through the narrator and vice-versa.

Through her novels Devi attacks the romance plot that has represented women only as wives and lovers, denying them an identity of their own. Devi's narrators fight against such representations not only by subverting the institution of marriage as is the case in *Pagli* and *Le voile de Draupadi* but also by emphasizing different kinds of relationships, which undermine the importance of heterosexual coupling. These relationships enable Devi to introduce alternate models of love that free the feminine body from the patriarchal masculine gaze. Using concepts

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from Hindu spirituality, she also introduces the notion of complementarity between man and woman, challenging the image of passivity often associated with women. Her notion of spiritual love presented in the relationships between Zil-Pagli, Sad-Ève attempts to redefine the feminine and the masculine, liberating these terms from the gender stereotypes that bind them in a binary opposition. In addition to exploring these alternate ties she also proposes strong relationships amongst women that lead to a sense of sisterhood and solidarity exemplified in Anjali's relationship with Fatmah, Pagli's with Mitsy, and Ève's relationship with Savita that destabilize the heterosexual couple.

Devi also brings the traditional notion of plot under scrutiny as her narrators recount tales with minimal action valorizing stasis over action, domesticity over adventure in an effort to describe the feminine world. Devi's texts are driven by the feminine desire to be heard and understood. One notices the narrator's desperate attempt to connect with narratees, bridging the hierarchical divide between the two, and allowing narratees to participate in the process of narration. As a result, the reader discerns Pagli's longing for her lover Zil, the only person who understands her, Mouna's desperation to connect with Lisa, and Joséphin's attempts to protect the little girls. In addition to these intradiegetic narratees, Devi's narrators make a persistent attempt to extend their voices to the extradiegetic narratees as well. These "plotless" texts facilitate the connection between the narrator and the narratees, allowing a feminine collective conscious to emerge, and effectively voicing feminine experiences and concerns.

CHAPTER 2
PLURITEMPORALITY/MULTISUBJECTIVITY

Theorists of narrative generally agree that time is one of the most fundamental parameters through which narrative as a genre is organized and understood. Paul Ricœur emphasizes the intimate relation between narration and time when he states, "The world unfolded by every narrative work is always a temporal world. […]. Narrative is meaningful to the extent that it portrays the features of temporal existence" (*Time and Narrative* 3).

The question then arises: how does narrative manifest itself temporally? Gérard Genette defines narrative as "the succession of events, real or fictitious, that are the subjects of this discourse and their several relations of linking, opposition, and repetition" (*Narrative Discourse* 3). According to Genette, narrative time relates to events and incidents, as they shape and dominate our sense of time. By his definition then, the text of a novel is characterized by a certain sequentiality and a linear progression of events that are directly related to each other.

Since Aristotle, many Western philosophers and theorists have focused on linearity in narrative. Aristotle's definition of tragedy in the *Poetics* (cited in *Essentials of the Theory of Fiction*) emphasizes how his notion of plot is coherent with his linear theory of time:

> Tragedy is an imitation of an action that is complete in itself, as a whole of some magnitude; for a whole may be of no magnitude to speak of. Now a whole is that which has a beginning, middle, and end. A beginning is that which is not itself after necessarily anything else, and which has naturally something else after it; an end is that which is naturally after something itself, either as its necessary or usual consequent, and with nothing else after it; and a middle, that which is by nature after one thing and has also another after it. (100)

According to Aristotle then, a narrative is complete only when it is marked by a beginning, middle, and end. The end that logically follows the beginning and the middle (or is derived from them) imposes a sense of closure on the narrative.

It is important, however, to distinguish between the narrated time (le temps de l'histoire) and the time of narration (le temps du récit). Narrated time is the time of actual events lived by the characters determined by months, days, and years. It reflects the duration of plot and the chronology of action. The time of narration refers to the temporal order determined by the narrator to recount a tale. He can prioritize a single event that may not be the first event in the chronology of the narrated time. The narrator uses many devices such as analepsis and prolepsis to narrate the story around the event he considers principal. We can then conclude that it is the narrated time that is chronological and sequential, whereas, the narrating time freely moves back and forth depending on the whims of the narrator.

In his article, "Time and Narrative in *A la recherche du temps perdu*" Genette discusses how Marcel Proust takes this liberty of the narrator to its peak and challenges the traditional chronology of the novel. He explains the relation between the narrated time and the narrating time in Proust to illustrate how Proust plays with the chronology: "*A la recherche du temps perdu* thus begins with a zigzagging movement that could easily be represented by a graph and in which the relationship between the time of events and the time of the narrative could be summarized as follows: $N(\text{arrative})_1 = H(\text{istory})_4$; $N_2=H_2$; $N_3=H_4$; $N_4=H_2$; $N_5=H_4$; $N_6=H_1$(Swann's love); $N_7=H_3$. We are clearly dealing with a highly complex and deliberate transgression of chronological order." (123). It is important to point out that Proust experiments extensively with the narrating time rather than the narrated time, and Genette observes, "the *recherche*-- especially the earlier section of the book-- indicates that Proust made a much more

extensive use than any of his predecessors of his freedom to reorder the temporality of events"

(122).

In her work, Ananda Devi treats time in a manner very different than her Western

counterparts do as she attempts to intervene and disrupt the sequentiality of both the narrated and

the narrating time through cyclical narratives that take her characters from past to present and

future, challenging the chronology of the narrated time itself. In an interview with Patrick Sultan,

Devi acknowledges her deviation from a linear progression of narrative, attributing this deviation

to the influence of Indian epics and folktales:

> Au-delà de cette anecdote, je me suis rendu compte bien plus tard à quel point j'ai
> été influencée par ces textes. Je me suis longtemps demandée pourquoi mes
> romans n'avaient jamais une structure linéaire et chronologique, et que le temps
> était traité comme une boucle plutôt que comme une ligne. Ce n'est que
> récemment que j'ai compris que j'ai été inconsciemment influencée par la
> structure maillée, en réseau, du *Mahabharata*, où chaque récit débouche sur
> d'autres récits.[40]

It is this non-Western influence that sets her apart from others who have challenged linearity

such as *nouveaux romanciers*--Nathalie Sarraute, Alain Robbe-Grillet, Marguerite Duras, and

many others who have experimented extensively with Aristotle's notion of linear temporality.

Many scholars who have studied temporality in literature have overlooked the cultural

aspects that can intervene in the chronological progression of a plot. In Devi's work especially,

the temporality of her narrative is complicated and cannot be understood without the cultural

context, providing a rich field of research that holds potential significance for studies on time and

temporality.

The first section of this chapter will examine how Devi uses the cultural concept of

"reincarnation" to disrupt linearity in her novel, *L'arbre fouet*, by inscribing the text in

cyclicality and eventually introducing the notion of timelessness as a complete transcendence of

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[40] Ruptures et héritage; entretien avec Ananda Devi, http://orees.concordia.ca, 2002.

temporal linearity. I will also explore Devi's interpretation of reincarnation as a rebirth that allows female characters a connection with their pasts, providing them an opportunity to complete the deeds left unfinished in their previous lives. In addition, these connections to past lives and to other women allow the development of a deep sense of feminine solidarity in the struggle against their subjugation by the patriarchal order, represented by "l'arbre fouet" in the novel.

In addition to thematic devices such as reincarnation, Devi also uses numerous narrative devices that allow her to introduce multiple voices in her novels, challenging not only the linearity of the narrative but also the notion of a singular narrative authority, thereby rethinking the narrator-character relationship. In the second section of this chapter I will analyze the strategies that allow Devi to provide more space and agency to her women characters and simultaneously enrich the process of meaning production.

2.1 From Cyclical Temporality to Timelessness

2.1.1 Cyclical Narrative and Reincarnation

As this section analyzes Devi's use of "reincarnation," a thematic tool to introduce cyclical narratives, we will first examine this Hindu/Buddhist concept. The word "reincarnation" literally means to come again in the flesh. As a doctrine or mystical belief, "reincarnation" is the notion that one's spirit or soul returns to the material world after physical death to be reborn in a new body. This is considered a natural process that integrates all experiences from each previous lifetime. A new personality feature, with the associated character, is developed during each life in the physical world, based upon integrated experience from the past and newly acquired experiences.

The idea that the soul reincarnates is intricately linked to *karma*, meaning "deed." Karma is first mentioned in the ancient Hindu books of the *Upanishads*. The idea is that individual

souls, *jiva-atmas,* pass from one plane of existence and carry with them impressions, or *samskaras,* from former states of being. These karmic agglomerations of the soul are taken to the next life and result in a causally-determined state of being. In some schools of Hinduism, liberation from *samsara*, the cycle of death and rebirth, is considered the ultimate goal of earthly existence. It is called *Moksha* or Nirvana. The theory of "reincarnation" that includes rebirth does not follow the linear view of beginning, middle, and end. Each end is perceived as a new beginning until the soul attains nirvana. Life is perceived in cycles of birth and death and the Western notion of linearity is disrupted in favor of cyclical temporality.[41]

In *L'arbre fouet,* reincarnation allows an intertwining of the stories of two female characters, Aeena and Dévika, enabling them to traverse time and circulate between past, present, and future. The protagonist, Aeena, digs into her past in order to understand her present. In this process she discovers that she was Dévika in her previous life and had killed her father. Both stories, that of Aeena and her previous incarnation, focus on a tree, "l'arbre fouet," of the title. This tree has a historical significance as slaves were tied to it and whipped during colonial times. After the abolition of slavery, fathers tied their undutiful daughters to the tree and whipped them for bringing dishonor to the family.

As Aeena's and Dévika's stories develop simultaneously, the two characters slip in and out of each other, blurring the boundaries between past, present, and future, and disrupting any sense of clear chronology. As a result, Devi creates a complex network that blends past and present, imposing a structural circularity on the narrative in which time turns upon itself in a cyclical loop.

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[41] For more information on reincarnation, see Wendy Doniger, *Karma and Rebirth in Classical Indian Traditions* (Berkeley: University of California Press, c1980). Joseph Head, *Reincarnation* (New York, Julian Press, 1961). Christopher Martin Bache, *Lifecycles: Reincarnation and the Web of Life* (New York: Paragon House, 1990).

Aeena the autodiegetic narrator introduces herself as a fragile, old and solitary being who is ill at ease with the living world. She describes herself thus: "Je ne suis que de passage, avec le souffle de mort qui traîne paresseusement à mes pieds, et qui prend tout son temps pour réclamer des victimes" (9). On the one hand, the narrator considers herself a ghost who has lived her life and is awaiting death, thereby making herself a part of the past; on the other, she is fearful of attaching herself to her own past. Describing her childhood at twenty, when she lost her reason and silenced herself completely; she expresses this fear, "Je m'étais tournée face à un mur et au silence pour ne pas entendre le bruit de ma mémoire" (9). As the narrator's past has been excruciatingly painful, she deliberately detaches herself from her childhood by silencing her memory: "A l'hôpital, j'ai appris à éteindre à volonté les souvenirs qui brûlent" (94).

The narrator's sole attempt to recount the painful story of her life to a man she loves meets with disaster, pushing her further into complete silence. Distressed with her life of suffering and solitude, she even attempts suicide. However, it is unsuccessful and does not lead to her death; instead, the act enables her to recall her past in order to reflect upon her life: "Mais après mon expérience, mon 'jeu de mort', il m'a semblé plus facile de penser à ces choses" (24).

What follows is a seemingly incoherent narration in which she tries to recall her past and the painful moments of her childhood. She discusses instances and people without making any attempt to link them in order to make sense for the reader. Furthermore, as the reader grapples with a story easily perceived as incoherent, the narrator embarks upon recounting the tale of another character, Dévika. Having killed her father, Dévika dies with a desire to be reincarnated without the guilt of patricide. In excavating Dévika's story, Aeena begins to believe that she is tied to Dévika, her character, through a past life and that she was, in fact, Dévika in her previous life. Devi thus uses the concept of reincarnation to tie these two stories together in the novel.

At first glance, Dévika's tale seems to be an embedded story woven within Aeena's framing narrative. Dévika's tale, however, encourages Aeena to narrate her own story more lucidly. At various instances she begins by telling events from Dévika's life but ends up narrating her own life.

Aeena retires to her attic in order to unearth Dévika's tale, but in fact it is her own past that she is excavating: "le grenier est à l'écoute de mes souvenirs" (72). As Aeena looks at the photograph of Dévika's family found in her attic, she notices the resemblance between Dévika's father and her own, forcing her to recall her own past. What follows is not only the physical description of Dévika's parents but also a detailed description of Aeena's own parents in conjunction with the narration of several events from her childhood, events filled with immense suffering and pain.

Aeena's father accuses her of patricide in one of her previous lives. As a result, she is made to suffer in order to expiate her sin. Although the reader knows little about Aeena's father from her fragmented narration prior to Dévika's appearance, a detailed and cohesive description of Aeena's family and childhood is introduced in the text through Dévika's tale, as Aeena compares her family and past with that of Dévika. Thus, Dévika's story acts as a catalyst to stimulate Aeena's memory and makes the past buried in her subconscious reemerge.

At another point in the novel, as Aeena imagines Dévika in a sari, she is reminded of the occasion where she wore a red sari for the first time. It was a ceremony celebrating her puberty that turned out to be a horrifying experience for her, as her father purposely demeaned Aeena by inviting men to a ceremony that is usually restricted to women. The entire paragraph describing this ceremony is in parentheses denoting the narrator's unease and embarrassment. The sentences are fragmented and agrammatical: "Non. Pas ce souvenir-là. Trop humiliant. Sari rouge. Prières de mon père qui célèbre à haute voix mon état d'impure" (94). This fragmentary narration

evokes the narrator's suffering. The horrifying memories that were locked away in Aeena's mind are unveiled through Dévika's equally painful story.

Aeena visits Dévika's gravestone that bears an inscription expressing Dévika's desire to be reborn without any guilt of patricide. Aeena immediately associates Dévika's guilt with the sin for which she had been accused as a child: "Son père est mort noyé. 'Drowned in 1930.' Aurait-elle été parricide? Mais non. Elle n'a pas nécessairement eu le même karma que moi" (44). Even before Aeena can recall or excavate Dévika's past the narrator feels connected with Dévika, indicating that a deep sense of sisterhood is already established between the two.

Moreover, in Dévika, Aeena finds a true narratee. Consider this passage in which she addresses Dévika as "tu": "(tu te souviens, Dévika, les plaintes, les gémissements, les entailles que faisaient ces cailloux au bout de deux minutes dans la peau râpeuse du genou, et le père qui souriait, disant, prie, c'est ainsi que tu expieras ton karma ?)" (77). In this passage, Dévika is not only a listener who is willing to comprehend the narrator, but she is also a companion who shares the same memories.

Aeena invites Dévika to recall the memories she has of her own childhood, emphasizing the fact that they both share a similar past. The narrator places this passage within parentheses to distinguish this monologue as her personal communication with Dévika, indicating their togetherness through stylistic and formal intervention in the text. Whereas Jérome, the narrator's lover, misinterprets her desperation to recount her tale of suffering as a means to seduce him, Aeena finds in Dévika a confidante better-equipped to understand her suffering.

In the narrative, Aeena recalls her own father's death only after she finds a bone from the lake where Dévika had pushed her father to his death. Aeena's father had also drowned, as she watched nonchalantly, constructing a sand castle on the shore, and she made no attempt to rescue

him. The narrator musters the courage to recall her act of patricide only after she discovers Dévika's act, which is much more blatant and aggressive.

The two stories therefore are not narrated in isolation but are intricately related, as Aeena reassembles the fragments of her past along with the elements of Dévika's tale. Devi uses this similarity to produce a narrative that progresses through the act of linking an event from one character's life to a similar event from the life of another character. This repetition of similar events slows the temporal progress of the narrative and challenges the linearity of narration as there is no chronological progression. Events are tied to each other, leading to a layering/thickening of time that slows the horizontal movement of the narrative. The narrator alludes to this layering: "le temps devient lourd et lent" (7). As fragments from Aeena's life succeed those from Dévika's, one sees a cyclical pattern in which repetition is favored over progression.

As Devi brings the two stories together through association, she allows the narrative to alternate between two different pasts. Aeena doubles as Dévika and eventually takes the responsibility for Dévika's acts: "J'étais double. Ma culpabilité était double. Il y avait deux meurtres imprimés sur mes mains […]. Au fond de moi, une adolescente s'était mise à hurler. Au fond de moi, une adulte s'était mise à rire. Un curieux dialogue s'ensuivit" (55). The reader then has to deal with two different pasts that are similar in nature but belong to two different time periods. Consequently, the narration can no longer be understood as operating on a singular temporal axis. There is a sense of polytemporality as two temporal zones interact and alternate with each other.

The doubling between the two characters allows for a dialogue between the narrator and Dévika, in which Dévika appears not as a character constructed by Aeena, but as one who intervenes in the narration on her own account. Dévika's direct presence in the text leads to a

multiplicity of narrative voice shared between the two characters through an ambiguity created between their voices. The dialogue between Aeena and Dévika blurs their difference to the extent that it is difficult for the reader to tell who is saying what. The first voice that states, "Qui es-tu? D'où viens-tu?" could logically be associated with Aeena, as she is the narrator. Both the reader and the narrator, however, are surprised by the unexpected arrival of the second voice: "Ne me reconnais-tu pas?" The reader imagines it to be that of Dévika, the adolescent, intervening in the text without the knowledge of the narrator. However, the third statement to come from Aeena, "Je ne sais pas" is accompanied by a remark from the narrator "(la première voix, craintive était celle de l'adolescente)" that refers to Dévika. Although it appears that the narrator intends to explain the two voices through her additional remarks within parentheses, in reality she ends up doing the contrary, thereby casting the reader into further doubt.

It is this ambiguity between the two voices that strips authority from Aeena as a narrator and transfers it to Dévika. The latter seems to steer the conversation, as Aeena struggles with the new voice. As the narrator fumbles and contradicts herself, Dévika the adolescent encourages Aeena to recall her past and revisit her memory: "Remonte plus loin, plus loin. Arrête-toi à la mer, sur une plage où tu faisais un château de sable" (56).

As Dévika asks Aeena to recall the episode of the sand castle, she steps out of her role as part of Aeena's past and enters Aeena's present. The situation thus becomes more complex than a simple case of reincarnation in which only the reincarnated person can recall her past life. Since Dévika directly mentions Aeena's past, Dévika is no longer simply Aeena's past incarnation. Dévika's gesture undermines Aeena's control as absolute narrator, and Dévika frees herself from the bonds of time and death. In this dialogue, Dévika becomes the counterpart who knows Aeena as much as Aeena knows Dévika. As Dévika enters the text, it is not only the past of Aeena's previous life that stages a return but also the past of her present life, thereby altering

the temporality of Aeena's narration. The different pasts that blend together through their similarity and resurface in the present blur the distinction between past and present.

Dévika helps Aeena not only in narrating Aeena's past but also in understanding and interpreting it. Discussing Aeena's act of feigning ignorance as her father drowned in the sea, Dévika states: "Tu as agencé sa mort de toutes tes fibres, elle coulait de tes pores, elle te tordait tes entrailles" (74-75). She makes Aeena understand that in her silence at her father's death, Aeena commits an act of patricide. It is this act of patricide that ties them together in sisterhood. In these two acts, Dévika sees their solidarity against the patriarchal control symbolized by their fathers: "C'est la même chose, nous sommes sœurs. Plus que sœurs. Identiques. Nous sommes les gardiennes de l'orgueil féminin. Nous avons triomphé de nos asservissements" (77).

Dévika's presence in the text becomes more prominent as she takes up the narration from Aeena to tell her own story using the first-person pronoun "je." She thus becomes Aeena's narrative double, as Aeena slips into the role of a character controlled by her double. Dévika states: "Aeena qui est l'autre que j'attendais. […] Aeena a tout simplement été transposée dans le passé pour me revivre" (127). Here Aeena and Dévika exchange roles, not only reversing the narrative authority but also challenging our first premise that the sole purpose of Dévika's story was to facilitate the narration of Aeena's past. Aeena's presence as the principal narrator and the status of her tale as the plot's main story are threatened, as they are now seen as agents encouraging Dévika's return to the novel. Dévika's story, initially recounted as part of Aeena's distant past, becomes the present. In addition to the thematic cyclicality imposed by the concept of reincarnation, one also discerns a diegetic cyclicality in which the narrative "je" circulates between two different narrators from two different time periods. What is significant is not just the mingling of the two voices but also the transformation initiated by this narrative convergence.

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The narrative voice thus undergoes a change, bringing Dévika to the same plane as Aeena and symbolizing the revival of the past as an active present that also participates in shaping the future. Dévika's narrative presence not only allows Aeena to understand her past and her act of patricide but also encourages her to protect Dominique, another adolescent in the novel who is a part of Aeena's present.

Although Dominique is Aeena's contemporary, she does not identify with Aeena. In fact, she resembles Dévika. She is an adolescent, almost the same age as Dévika when Dévika had her first intimate encounter with an untouchable,[42] who works in her father's house. Dévika's transgression results in her being whipped by her father and eventually leads to her father's death. Aeena describes Dominique as a youthful, vibrant young girl: "C'est Dominique. Je la vois venir de loin, avec son abondante chevelure crépue, rouge vif. […] Dominique a une bouche ourlée, des yeux rieurs, moqueurs, elle est le flamboyant de ces lieux" (8).

Aeena views Dominique as a carefree person who can never be possessed or contained, as Dominique tries to claim a liberty that is not permitted to any woman in Indo-Mauritian society: "Elle joue avec la vie, un peu fée, et s'enfuit dès qu'elle décèle dans un regard un désir de possession. […] Elle se jette dans l'herbe, robe soulevée sur ses jambes. […] Une telle liberté ne devrait pas être permise" (9). It is in her nonchalant attitude that Dominique resembles Dévika, a rebel since childhood. Furthermore, Dominique sleeps with a tourist and gets pregnant toward the end of the novel, thereby repeating Dévika's profane act with the untouchable, and subjecting herself to the indignation of the society.

Although, Aeena considers herself very different from Dominique, she finds a strange connection with this girl. Aeena remarks, "Une mémoire atavique qui se tissait entre nous" (9).

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[42] In traditional Indian society there are five castes creating a social stratification that has existed for 1500 years. In this caste system Untouchables are considered as the lowest caste.

Both Aeena and Dévika wish to protect Dominique from the wrath of patriarchy, as they both believe that their acts of patricide were left unfinished and are still awaiting their final act: "Il y a eu ma révolte finale, mais je ne l'ai pas détruit lui. Et quelque chose me dit que Dévika aussi n'y est pas parvenu et c'est pour cela qu'elle attend ainsi, avec une patience souterraine, le moment de sa rédemption" (72). Aeena's and Dévika's presence along with their knowledge of the past is crucial for Dominique to find a future free from patriarchal subjugation.

The complicated temporality of this novel in which the distinction between past and present is radically blurred resonates in the thoughts of the protagonist:

> Plus que jamais, je redoute mon avenir. (Ou est-ce mon passé?) Que ce qu'elle a raconté ne me soit pas encore advenu, et qu'il me reste encore à subir tout cela, qu'il me reste encore à tuer mon père. Je cours, je cours, je ne sais pas si c'est vers le passé ou vers l'avenir ou si je piétine au contraire dans un éternel présent. (116)

Dévika's representation as Aeena's past is followed by her intervention in the novel and into Aeena's present. Aeena's transformation into Dévika clouds the distinction between them. It is in this conflation between past, present, and future that Devi creates a new magical space for women narrators and characters. This cyclicality provides an essential opening for dialogue not only between Aeena and Dévika but also between past and present in order to create a sense of sisterhood that transcends temporal boundaries, bringing Aeena and Dévika together in order to protect their future, symbolized by Dominique.

Aeena alludes several times to Dévika's torture as she was tied to "l'arbre fouet" and whipped by her father. When Dévika's blood magically reappears on the tree, Aeena visualizes an unusual sequence in which Dominique is tied to "l'arbre-fouet," like Dévika. Her clothes are torn and she is bleeding profusely, as she is constantly being whipped by a group of fathers, except her own:

> Ils y sont tous. Dominique y est attachée, violentée. Tous les pères sont là (mais pas le sien). Le swami [le père d'Aeena], Babou [le père de Dévika], d'autres que je ne connais pas, mais qui ne sont que des ombres, et même, peut-être, Jérôme. Tous les pères sont venus du fond des âges exiger le châtiment contre la fille maudite. (170)

In this passage fathers from different chronological frameworks come together, as Aeena creates a fraternity of all the fathers who desire to punish their undutiful daughters, thereby evoking the ongoing power of patriarchy. In order to fight this attack on Dominique by all the fathers and the patriarchal order they metaphorically represent, Devi brings Aeena, Dévika, and Dominique together: "Non, Dominique, la colère des pères n'était pas pour toi. Personne ne l'a méritée, ni Dévika, ni moi, ni toi. Ne l'accepte pas, sinon elle se perpétuera à jamais, et aucune fille ne sera jamais graciée" (171). Aeena urges Dominique to fight in the name of all women who have undergone similar torture by their fathers, placing in her hands all responsibility to save the future of women. This cyclical framework therefore allows for a feminine collectivity to fight against their subjugation.

At the end of the novel, it is Dévika's blood on the tree, metaphorically read as her suffering, that forces the "jardinier-pêcheur," Dominique's father, to cut down "l'arbre fouet." Dévika's suffering therefore paves the way for a future without "l'arbre fouet," the symbol of patriarchy, a future that assures freedom to Dominique and other women from the clutches of a male-dominated society. Dévika thus becomes an active part of Aeena's and Dominique's present world. In allowing Dévika to enter the narration and take over the present, Devi invites the past to interact with the present in order to shape the future.

2.1.2 Multiple Pasts and Timelessness

The cyclicality evoked in the novel is not restricted to Aeena's own past and that of her previous incarnation, Dévika. The narrator also establishes a connection with different pasts: "Le karma me poursuit. Il va me rattraper et m'obliger à me retourner pour faire face à mon passé, et

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plus que mon passé, mes innombrables passés" (56). The notion of a singular past that has

already been questioned by Dévika's presence is further challenged, as the narrator alludes to

numerous pasts. Aeena asserts that as she begins her journey into the past, she steps into a realm

where she connects to other pasts that belong to her in some way:

> Une fois la digue de la mémoire brisée, tout, autour de moi, se rejoint dans le
> ressouvenir qui émane des arcanes terrestres, ces archives historiques qui
> demeurent suspendus dans l'infini jusqu'à ce que, d'aventure, on les rappelle.
> Oui, tous les souvenirs sont là, une manne, une multitude intarissable dont je fais
> aussi partie, qui dégoulinent littéralement des choses à mesure qu'elles subissent
> leur métamorphose. (122)

Aeena is referring not only to a single past when, as Dévika, she was tied to the tree and

beaten up, but her allusion to "tous les souvenirs" also evokes a collective memory attached to

"l'arbre fouet." Through a cyclical movement that allows Aeena to connect with Dévika, her

previous life, she not only excavates her own past and that of Dévika but also an ancient

collective past of slavery in Mauritius when "l'arbre fouet" was used to tie and whip slaves.

Through the reference to the tree, Aeena links the text to different temporal zones and different

collective pasts. Evoking the collective memory attached to the tree and thereby to slavery, she

states:

> Je regarde finalement autour de moi, essayant de reprendre pied dans une réalité
> qui ne ressemble plus à la mienne. Et je vois, là, vis-à-vis de moi, solennel comme
> une tour qui garde depuis des âges un secret que tout le monde a oublié, massif et
> élargi par une formidable puissance qui coule dans ses veines, l'arbre fouet. (117)

In alluding to the tree and its secret, Aeena brings to the fore the history of slavery,

reestablishing continuity with a past that had long been forgotten.

In bringing the ancient past into the same temporal zone as her present, the narrator

establishes an intriguing link between the slaves, her ancestors, and the young girls who

metaphorically continue to be tied to trees and whipped. The complex temporal framework that

makes multiple pasts intersect allows Devi to establish an analogy between the enslavement of people during the colonial period and the present situation of women in Mauritius, as well as to emphasize the fact that women continue to undergo the inhuman treatment that was meted out to slaves in earlier eras.

Using the historical reference to slavery, Devi highlights the fact that women in today's Indo-Mauritian social framework occupy the same position as slaves in colonial times. However, if Mauritians can condemn slavery, why do they choose to ignore the victimization of women in their own society? As Dévika's story enables Aeena to narrate and understand her own past, similarly the ancient past enables the reader to understand and comprehend the present subjugation of women, foregrounding the fact that the past can never be abandoned. Its shadow can always be discerned in the present and the future. It not only shapes the present and the future but also enables us to understand them better. Finally, in bringing the ancient collective memory to the forefront, Aeena creates continuity with a distant past and extends the temporal framework of the text. The notion of the past is enlarged to an extent that it almost becomes infinite, beyond accessibility, creating a temporal chaos that undermines clear distinctions between the past, present, and future and that introduces a certain timelessness in which not only the characters but also the reader are lost, reinforcing the power of Aeena's, Dévika's, and Dominique's tales. Along with the different temporal spaces evoked by the stories of Aeena, Dévika, and Dominique, *L'arbre fouet* also traces a mystical space that is outside time and therefore timeless.

Aeena refers to this timelessness, as she evokes the notion of "circuit mystique" in the following passage: "Ce passage à niveau n'est pas un véritable retour en arrière, mais le prolongement d'un circuit mystique. Il n'est pas délimité par le temps mais le non-lieu du regret et de la nostalgie. L'insidieuse prétention au silence de l'outre monde, alors qu'ici tout est bruit,

tout est lourdeur, tout est futilité" (149). Devi's allusion to an "outre monde" that is outside time

adds a mystical dimension to the temporality of the novel.

Devi's characters constantly refer to a different world, a mystical world that is different

from the world of human existence:

> Je suis ici. Et à la fois là-bas, en ce lieu-temps où rien n'est ce qu'il paraît, où les
> semblances sont une moquerie de la vérité. Mais je n'ai plus de haine. Je me suis
> purgée de mes haines. Les douleurs subies dans l'enfance n'étaient que
> l'apprentissage nécessaire à ma condition d'être humain. (149)

All the suffering that Aeena has to undergo in this life prepares her for the other world. This

"outre monde" or "là-bas" is beyond time, as it is not contained in the distinctions of past,

present, and future. Through this world Devi evokes the mystical cycle of the philosophies of

Hinduism and Buddhism that conceive time differently. Both philosophies converge on the

notions of reincarnation and rebirth, in which time is an infinite entity with no beginning and no

end. It revolves endlessly in a cyclical loop, allowing the soul to be reborn in the world as each

previous life plays an important role in the construction of the present. Thus, the past plays a

determining role in the present life of an individual, and it is the deeds of the present that

construct the future. Devi's temporal dynamics therefore do not attempt to simplify time in order

to narrate the characters' *her/* histories. On the contrary, she makes an honest attempt to present

time in its true complexity through multiple narrators and multiple temporal zones where the

distinctions between the before and the after blur infinitely.

2.1.3 Devi and Eliot

Devi not only uses the concepts of karma and reincarnation to allude to this mystical

timelessness in her text, but she also uses extra-narrative elements such as poems from T.S.

Eliot's *Four Quartets*[43] to begin the novel. Instead of a title, Devi chooses Eliot's poems as

epigraphs to introduce the chapters in her text, as if it is Eliot's poetry that inspires her to write

those chapters. Each epigraph is in a way related to the chapter it introduces, demonstrating that

there is a constant exchange between Devi and Eliot. The reader perceives a similar doubling

between the two great writers from different epochs as between Devi's characters Aeena and

Dévika. The notion of doubling is emphasized in the following epigraph that precedes the

chapter in which Dévika surfaces as Aeena's double:

> So I assumed a double part and cried
> And heard another's voice cry: 'what! Are you here?'
> Although we were not. I was still the same,
> Knowing myself yet being some other.
> (*Little Gidding* from *Four Quartets*)

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[43] *Four Quartets* (1936-1942) is a sequence of four poems that constitutes a Christian's meditation on existence, time and eternity, death, history, tradition, language, and divinity. The titles of the four poems are the names of places related to the poet's personal experiences and to his family's past. These geographical titles come to be understood as symbols of significant stages in the poet's journey of spiritual self-discovery. Voegelin's "Notes" describe the essential theme of each stage in this journey: "*Burnt Norton* presents the individual meditating on the concrete, complex present of actualities and unchosen possibilities, of existence in the flow of time, a temporal existence which is open, however, to unexpected or disciplined apprehensions of timeless reality; *East Coker* broadens the poet's meditation on existence by introducing its temporal layers of family and cultural heritage, social and technological change, and the depths of history; *The Dry Salvages*, the "nature poem," deepens the existential meditation further, shifting the focus from historical community to the individual's consciousness of the pervasive immediacy of death and of a beyond of history; and finally, in *Little Gidding*, a meditative sense of the timeless reveals world, history, and cultural heritage transfigured by the poet's intense consciousness of human existence as the intersection of the timeless with time" (*The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin* 36).

"Again, each of the *Quartets* appears to address a distinct approach to the consideration of time: *Burnt Norton* addresses time from the individual's perspective as past, present, and future, including concern for what might have been and what might come to be; *East Coker* is concerned with time as history and tradition; *The Dry Salvages* focuses on the rhythms of time, in nature and the seasons, in birth and living and dying, in preservation and destruction; and *Little Gidding* portrays time as the medium, you might say, of timelessness, and thus as the place of decision between world and God, between the unproductive fire of worldly desires and the refining fire of *amor Dei*. Eliot has woven the poems together, through his use of a large variety of symbols and ideas, in such a way that they may evoke as fully as possible the natural, historical, and cosmic context of a person's journey toward God" (36).

In this epigraph Eliot echoes Devi's notion of double and multiple consciousness, as he asserts the presence of the self and the other within the same. In the chapter of the novel that follows this epigraph, Devi describes Aeena's transformation into Dévika, illustrating the process of doubling: "[…] chacune de mes particules vivantes et survivantes se désintégrent en rejoignant quelque autre corps matériel, plutôt que de s'agglomérer pour former cette personne marquée et manquée" (65). If Eliot's poem introduces the notion of doubling, Devi fully develops the idea through a dialogue between Aeena and Dévika. Dévika makes Aeena realize that her silence at the beach when her father was drowning and shouting for help was as instrumental in leading to her father's demise as Dévika's act of pushing her father into the lake. In this way, Devi obliterates the difference between the two, as Dévika summarizes the conversation: "C'est la même chose, nous sommes sœurs. Plus que sœurs. Identiques" (75).

Eliot's poems also echo Devi's perception of cyclical time and timelessness. Like Devi, Eliot was intrigued by these notions and treated them extensively in his *Four Quartets*. Eliot was highly influenced by Indian philosophy, particularly Hinduism and Buddhism. At Harvard he became interested in primitive religion and ritual. He studied Sanskrit and Indian philosophy for two years. Buddhism remained a lifelong influence on his work. He was intrigued by the notion of the eternal, the timeless Brahma and the transcendence of the temporal. Although for him Christianity was the path to follow, he was completely at ease with the world of the *Upanishads*[44] and the *Gita.*[45]

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[44] The *Upanishads* are regarded as part of the *Vedas* and as such form part of the Hindu scriptures. They primarily discuss philosophy, meditation, and the nature of God; they form the core spiritual thought of Vedantic Hinduism. Considered as mystic or spiritual contemplations of the Vedas, their putative end and essence, the Upanishads are known as *Vedānta* ("the end/culmination of the Vedas"). The Upanishads do not belong to a particular period of Sanskrit literature. The oldest, such as the *Brhadaranyaka* and *Chandogya Upanishads*, date to the Brahmana period (roughly before the 7th century BC; before the *Gita* was constructed), while the most recent were composed in the medieval or early modern period. For more information, see Sris Chandra Sen, *The Mystic Philosophy of the Upanishads* (New Delhi: General Printers & Publishers, 1937).

The epigraph that introduces the first chapter of the novel resonates with Devi's quest for

beyond time and implies an endless journey where all ends are simply new beginnings, alluding

to cyclicality where nothing ever comes to an end and the exploration goes on indefinitely:

> We shall not cease from our exploration
> And the end of all our exploring
> Will be to arrive where we started
> And know the place for the first time.
>
> At the source of the longest river
> The voice of the hidden waterfall
> And the children in the apple-tree
> Not known because not looked for
> But heard, half-heard in the stillness
> Between two waves of sea.
> (*Little Gidding* from *Four Quartets*)

This epigraph befits the description of Aeena's exploration in which her past ends up

becoming her present. The rhythmic movement of waves in Eliot's *Little Gidding* resonates with

the rhythm of the high and low tide of Souffleur,[46] a place marked by eternity: "Cet endroit n'a

pas d'âge. Des temps d'ardeur et d'anéantissement ont laissé leur trace sur les pierres. Au-delà,

au-dehors, plus rien [...] L'étourdissement de la mer qui donne un rythme-- marée haute, marée

basse-- à mes heures. La même lourdeur habite le verger de letcheyers non loin, où les fruits

mûrissent par inadvertance. Ils sont pris, eux aussi, par leur cycle d'espoir et d'abandon" (7).

The cycle of hope and abandon that dominates the trees, and the waves that revisit the shore

endlessly evoke Eliot's notion of return and re-exploration. The excerpt from Eliot's *Little*

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[45]The *Bhagavad Gita* is a Sanskrit text from the *Bhishma Parva* of the Mahabharata epic, comprising 700 verses. Krishna, as the speaker of the *Bhagavad Gita*, is referred to within as Bhagavan (the divine one). The verses themselves, using the range and style of Sanskrit meter with similes and metaphors, are written in a poetic form that is traditionally chanted; hence the title, which translates to "the Song of the Divine One". The *Bhagavad Gita* is revered as sacred by Hindu traditions, and especially so by Vaishnavas (followers of Vishnu). It is commonly referred to as *the Gita*. For more information, read Annie Besant, "Hints on the study of the Bhagavad-Gita: four lectures delivered at the thirtieth anniversary meeting of the Theosophical society at Adyar, Madras, December 1905" (Benares: Theosophical publishing society, 1906).

[46] A small town where Aeena lives after the death of her parents. This is also the place where Dévika's family had lived after their arrival from India and her father had whipped her on "l'arbre fouet."

Gidding not only provides an apt introduction to Devi's *L'arbre fouet,* emphasizing the importance of circularity and the notion of revisiting, but it also allows Devi to connect with one of the most influential literary presences in the twentieth- century, English-speaking world. By introducing her chapters with Eliot's epigraphs, she allows a new voice to enter the text, that of one of her predecessors, and creates a space that permits the reader not only to understand her work but also to see the continuity of Eliot's voice in Devi's works, as if Devi were the reincarnated version of Eliot.

In the *Four Quartets*, Eliot indicates that typical moderns tend to imagine life's meaning as an accretion of experience and knowledge during the process of growth through linear time, so that the point and purpose of a life is its development in time, heading toward the ripeness of maturity and the wisdom of later years. According to Eliot, these people are misleading themselves if they consider their ultimate aim as persons in terms of progress toward temporal well-being or fulfillment. One's elemental purpose is to continue to strive more fully to realize one's participation in timeless being, because at every point in time we participate in the timeless meaning of the divine ground, and discover that existence is not primarily a matter of temporal fulfillments or of growing toward a rounded or completed meaning in time. He asserts the fact that the divinely intended meaning of our existence is not, in its deepest significance, a journey through the world of time toward its mortal end, but a journey of coming to discover and responding to our participation in the timeless-- a journey toward God, structured from its beginning as a search for God.

In introducing her chapters with Eliot's poems, Devi alludes to the timelessness and spirituality that resonate in her own works and blur the traditional East-West divide. In this way, she reaches out not only to her non-Western readers who might be familiar with the notions of karma and reincarnation but also to the Western readers who can identify with Eliot. If the first

epigraph invites the reader to an endless exploration, the last one deftly summarizes the complex

temporal arrangement that Devi attempts to demonstrate in her novel:

> Time present and time past
> Are both present in time future
> And time future, contained in time past….
> If all time is eternally present
> All time is unredeemable.
> (*Burnt Norton* from *Four Quartets*)

The quotation alludes to a temporality that blurs the difference between the before and the

after in such a way that time is suspended in a loop. By evoking a certain spiritual timelessness,

Devi provides her characters with endless hope to continue their struggle across time and makes

their resistance timeless. *L'arbre fouet* is not only Aeena's and Dévika's attempt to kill their

fathers but also their persistent and ongoing struggle to resist patriarchy represented collectively

by the fathers in the novel.

Thus, in *L'arbre fouet* the thematic device of reincarnation allows for a diegetic

complexity in which the narrator's "I" is shared between Aeena and Dévika. Although Aeena

seems to narrate most of the story, her doubling with Dévika in the text constantly obliterates the

distinction between the two, inscribing the narrative voice in ambiguity. The strategic

interchange of "I" between the two makes space for a multiplicity of the narrative voice. As both

contribute in the telling of each other's tales, the narrator-character relationship undergoes a

change.

Whereas *L'arbre fouet* uses the thematic device of reincarnation to create multiple voices,

other novels in the Devi corpus such as *Soupir*, *Ève de ses décombres,* and *Indian Tango* use

narrative techniques to introduce multiple narrators so that the reader is unable to accord

narrative authority to a single voice. As characters intervene in the narration to voice their

concerns, the narrator-character hierarchy is challenged and their relationship undergoes

dramatic changes. In the next section, I will examine the "extraordinary" narrative structure of these novels that allow several voices to weave numerous complex and intriguing worlds within a single narrative framework. I will also analyze how multiple narrators and fragmented narration allow multisubjectivity and enrich the process of the production of meaning.

2.2 Diegetic Complexity: Multiple Narrators

2.2.1 *Soupir*: Narrative Metalepsis[47]

The structure of *Soupir*, Devi's sixth novel, is intriguing, as it introduces a new character with each chapter. These chapters, titled after the names of the characters they introduce, have little or no obvious connection to each other. Although these characters are from Port-Mathurin, the narrator's home before he moves to Soupir, no obvious link is discernible among them. The first part of the novel, therefore, bewilders the reader with no single coherent plotline. The reader is lost in a long labyrinth of endless stories, as Devi acknowledges in an interview:

> Ce n'est que récemment que j'ai compris que j'ai été inconsciemment influencée par la structure maillée, en réseau, du *Mahabharata*, où chaque récit débouche sur d'autres récits et ainsi de suite, sans que le fil de l'histoire et les relations de cause à effet ne soient perdus pour autant. Ainsi, dans *Soupir*, les personnages se succédant dans les différents chapitres ne semblent avoir que de vagues liens les uns avec les autres, jusqu'à ce qu'on comprenne, vers la fin du roman, comment ils étaient liés.[48]

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[47] Metalepsis, a rhetorical figure described as early as the seventeenth- century by French rhetoricians, refers to the continuation of a trope in one word through a succession of significations, or the union of two or more tropes of a different kind in one word. This term was later used in narratology when Gerard Génette used it in the fifth chapter (on "Voice") of his *Discours du récit*, and defined it as "any intrusion by the extradiegetic narrator or narratee into the diegetic universe (or by diegetic characters into a metadiegetic universe, etc.), or the inverse (as in Cortazar) [...]" (*Narrative Discourse* 234-35; *Figures* III 244). Genette's concept of metalepsis, as explained in the chapter on voice (*Narrative* 234-37; *Figures* III 244-46), is defined as an existential crossing of the boundaries between the extradiegetic and diegetic levels of a narrative or the (intra) diegetic and metadiegetic levels; or, in short, as the move of "existants" or "actants" from any hierarchically ordered level into one above or below (also possibly skipping intermediate levels). It is generally acknowledged that a narrative is the narration of events and that narrative is thus divided into two distinct levels: the level of narration and the level of narrated events. Any contamination of one level by the other would thus seem to run counter to the very nature of narrative.

[48] *Ruptures et héritages*; *entretien avec Ananda Devi*, http://orees.concordia.ca, 2002.

The novel begins with a chapter entitled "Patrice L'Eclairé," after the name of the narrator. He describes Soupir, an insignificant town at the top of a hill, inhabited by an old lady and her rabbits. After her death the narrator along with some other inhabitants of Port-Mathurin moves to Soupir. However, the following chapter entitled "Royal Palm," does not take the narrator's story any further. On the contrary, it describes Royal Palm, another character in the novel, as indicated by the title. This chapter is followed by another entitled "Noëlla" that describes this new character's birth and her mother's relationship with the narrator, demonstrating no evident connection with the preceding chapter.

In this way, the narrator creates a chain of stories with each short text only remotely connected to the others. As each of these stories exists independently, one discerns no sequential or chronological progression of events. Furthermore, the past and the present merge as the narrator randomly narrates his displacement to Soupir, Soupir's past, the story of the old mad lady along with the stories of the characters linked to Soupir. The notion of before and after is challenged and all these events seem to be fragmented pieces floating independently in the narration. In the absence of sequentially arranged events, the reader encounters chaos and all meaning seems suspended, as Devi admits:

> Tout récemment, je me suis rendue compte que la structure non linéaire de mes romans, où le temps n'est jamais vraiment respecté (le temps réel comme le temps grammatical!) est sans doute due aux contes indiens racontés par ma mère: le *Mahabharata*, par exemple, est comme un gigantesque labyrinthe, un réseau qui branche dans toutes les directions, chaque histoire donnant lieu à d'autres histoires et ainsi de suite. Les événements du début annoncent et entraînent des conséquences lointaines dont on ne comprendra le sens que bien plus tard.[49]

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[49] *Ruptures et héritages*; *entretien avec Ananda Devi*, http://orees.concordia.ca, 2002.

Devi thus acknowledges her attempt to create a vast network of stories, as her narrator recounts tale after tale that seem unconnected to each other. There is little sense of progression as the meaning is suspended till the end of the novel when these stories come together. Furthermore, the characters in some of the stories take the narrative "I" from the narrator and begin telling their own tale, leading to multiple interpretations of some events. In this section I will examine the extraordinary narrative structure of this novel that leads to narrative metalepsis, allowing space for not only multiple stories but also for multiple narrators. Devi thus challenges the principal narrative voice, questioning singular narrative authority, and enriching the process of meaning production.

The principal narrator intrigues the reader by the use of the first-person plural pronoun "nous" instead of "je," indicating that his story is the tale of a community or a collective rather than an individual: "La terre est enflée comme une langue qui n'a pas bu depuis longtemps. Les horizons et les regards sont scellés. Au-dessus de nous, le ciel semble ouvert, ici. Nous sommes nés enfermés"(13). Although the first chapter is entitled "Patrice l'Eclairé," after the name of the narrator, the reader finds no personal description of the narrator. Instead, this chapter describes Soupir and the narrator's companion, Ferblanc, who encouraged the narrator and others to move to Soupir.

The narrator does introduce himself later in the chapter but only to emphasize the fact that he is the collective voice of the people of Soupir and Port-Mathurin: "Moi, je suis Patrice l'Eclairé. Je suis celui qui sait lire, qui raconte des histoires, qui lit les journaux et leur transmet les nouvelles. Parfois, j'en invente, quand rien d'intéressant ne se passe et que le désœuvrement nous pèse" (15). In the above quotation, the narrator describes his role as a "raconteur" because he is the only one who can read and therefore the only connection this community has with the

outside world. By extension, he is the only one who can tell their tales, the only voice of the collective. *Soupir,* therefore, presents itself not as the tale of this autodiegetic narrator, as is the case with most autodiegetic narrators, but as the tale of an entire community.

As a result, the narrator embarks on the task of introducing the members of this community. As he introduces each character and tells the character's story one after the other, his narration resembles a *mise en abyme*, in which one story gives way to another. In fact, at various instances the narrator relates stories that are told to him by other characters, thereby giving voice to their stories, not his own. In this way, he is distanced from the stories he is narrating and his narrative authority is somewhat reduced.

Consider the case in which the narrator tells Ferblanc's story and is uncertain if it is authentic, as he places the word "emprunté" within single quotation marks: "Pourtant, il parlait souvent de sa première rencontre avec un marchand, lors d'une visite à Maurice. (Mais je me suis dit ensuite qu'il avait inventé cela, ou qu'il avait 'emprunté' cette histoire à un Mauricien de passage. Je ne crois pas qu'il ait jamais été à Maurice)" (48). The narrator is cognizant of the fact that the story might not be Ferblanc's own tale, but that of some Mauritian traveler and emphasizes the fact that he cannot guarantee if the story is true. He therefore acknowledges the fact that he is narrating a story over which he has little control, thereby willfully compromising his authority over the act of narration.

Narrative authority is further challenged as the characters intervene into the narration to recount their own tales. The diegetic complexity is heightened by the systematic application of what Genette calls "narrative metalepsis," the intrusion of characters from one diegetic level into another. This principle, a stock device in postmodern fiction, is taken to its extreme in this novel insofar as the characters from the embedded stories not only come to populate the frame but actually take over the narration.

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In another chapter the ghost of an old lady enters the text when the narrator and his companions lose their way to Soupir. She not only directs these people but also narrates her tale. The story she narrates is not placed within quotation marks, indicating that the author makes no attempt to distinguish it as direct speech. She takes the narrative authority from the narrator who then becomes one of the characters and consequently, a narratee to the lady's tale of suffering and pain. Narrative metalepsis, therefore, allows her to narrate her story in front of several narratees and gives her the opportunity to communicate.

In another sequence, the ghost of old "folle," Constance, who had committed suicide in Soupir, enters the text, taking the narrator's "I" and challenging his authority. She speaks with the narrator's companion Ferblanc, and her intervention into the text is gradual rather than abrupt, as she eventually overtakes the narrative "I".

> ….et elle m'a dit, je n'ai plus de temps, il ne me reste plus rien, je voulais que vous rachetiez les âmes mortes, c'est pour cela que je t'ai fait venir, Ferblanc, pas pour la ganja, c'était ma ruse, je voulais que quelqu'un les aide à se reposer, ils n'arrêtaient pas de me supplier quand je vivais, leurs yeux caves qui me suppliaient, leurs mains qui me caressaient le corps mais qui ne m'assouvissaient pas-- aide-nous, aide-nous, Constance, disaient-ils, nous les esclaves suppliciés sur notre rosace de refus, enchaînés les uns aux autres à jamais, à demeure, pour crime de révolte tue, à aucun moment on ne nous détachait les uns des autres, vingt siamois rattachés par des cordons ombilicaux jamais coupés. (165)

Constance's speech is not within quotation marks, and there are no obvious signs indicating that the narrator has changed. In this passage, Constance narrates her dialogue with the slave ancestors and gradually transfers her narrative authority to the slaves who begin to address her, asking for her help: "Aide-nous, aide-nous Constance" (166).

Constance's style of narration creates an intriguing ambiguity between the slave ancestors and the twenty people who move to Soupir. Although Constance claims that she is talking only to the slaves who reply using "nous," it is uncertain whether this "nous" refers only to the slaves or to the twenty inhabitants of Soupir. The passage narrated by the ancestors progresses; "vingt

siamois rattachés" or "nos vingt cercueils tous pareils […] qui portaient nos noms: Laborieux, l'Eclairé, Bienvenue, …" (167), citing names of the inhabitants of Soupir implying that they might be the subject of the pronoun "nous" initially used by the slave ancestors, thereby bringing the slaves ancestors and the inhabitants together. Devi does not distinguish between the "nous" used by the slave ancestors and that by the inhabitants as the subject is never named; neither does she divide the text into paragraphs denoting the change in the subject, as the entire episode is presented in a stream of consciousness style of writing.

Devi deftly uses this narrative ambiguity to emphasize the similarities between the situation of the slaves and that of the present inhabitants of Soupir, as Constance becomes the bridge between past and present, allowing Devi to articulate the despair and destitution that mark Soupir:

> […] et les yeux du Maître qui étaient partout, et sa voix qui nous disait le soir, tant que vous n'aurez pas arraché toute l'herbe de la colline, vous ne serez pas libérés de vos chaînes ni les uns des autres, et finalement nous avons compris que cette promesse était fausse puisque l'herbe repoussait après nous, et nous avons compris qu'il nous fallait mourir, puisque c'est ainsi que nous serions libres tous en même temps. (166)

The slave ancestors describe their plight and see the only possible solution to their problems in death, as it is only death that can liberate them. The situation does not seem any better for the present inhabitants of Soupir, who have no choice but to await death: "[…] et nous attendant avec la plus grande patience, nos vingt cercueils tous pareils et aux bras tendrement tendus vers […]. Nous n'avions jamais eu d'alternative. Notre liberté était notre prison finale" (167). Devi thus presents a world of despair, as the inhabitants await death with no possible resolution to their problems, the same way as their ancestors. In such a world where one has little choice, the only possibility then is to be able to articulate one's sorrows and suffering to a narratee, to be able to narrate.

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As the "nous" of the slave ancestors is eventually taken over by the inhabitants of Soupir, Devi skillfully demonstrates the resonance between the past and present to create a collective voice that connects the ancestors of the past with the present. This ambiguity also allows the inhabitants of Soupir a narrative authority initially accorded to the slaves, as Constance along with the principal narrator of the text is relegated to the role of a narratee. In this way, the inhabitants not only get a voice in the text but also find intradiegetic narratees to voice their concerns. As a result, the narrator-character relationship undergoes a change, prioritizing the act of narration over the narrated tale.

Narrative authority is further undermined as some of these inhabitants begin narrating their individual tales in the last part of the novel. Their transformation from characters to narrators occurs in the third part of the novel because it is only there that they find the appropriate narratees who are willing to listen to their concerns. Thus, Bertrand who is the most silent of all the inhabitants speaks for the first time. Bertrand is as much a mystery to the people of Port Mathurin as he is to the reader: "Bertrand Laborieux est de nous le plus silencieux. Le plus idiot, le plus laconique. Lorsqu'il parle, c'est pour jurer" (174). He, however, opens up to Pitié, a prostitute who resembles Bertrand's daughter. She reminds him of his daughter and also of the crime he committed by abandoning her ages ago: "Nous avons tous commis ce crime d'abandon. Quand je t'ai vue, Pitié, j'ai pensé à elle, tu n'es pas elle mais presque, ta bouche est violette et un vent aigre t'entoure et ces marques sur ton visage et sur ton corps, je les reconnais pour les avoir aussi" (187). It is only after coming in contact with Pitié that Bertrand narrates his story, accepts his crime, and repents of it. The presence of a narratee facilitates the act of narration that is therapeutic for the narrator.

Similarly, Pitié recounts her story of repeated rapes and pregnancy only after coming in contact with Royal Palm, her abandoned son: "Ce n'est qu'aujourd'hui que je comprends, Royal

Palm. Tu n'étais ni un ver ni un serpent. Tu étais un enfant et j'étais ta mère. Mais peut-être, dans notre tristesse identique, dans notre vie mal ravaudée qui est sans cesse mise en pièces, sommes-nous frère et sœur" (192). Pitié's act of narration allows her to understand and accept her son by sharing the pain and suffering they both have undergone. It is this pain and suffering that creates a bond between the two. Hence, the act of narration becomes more important than the narrated events, as it brings about a change in the narrators and the narratees.

In the third part of the novel, the characters not only connect with each other but learn to understand and express their own suffering in order to liberate themselves. The narrator remarks, "Pitié bouche ses lèvres qui ont déjà trop parlé. Elle est en même temps libre de sa mémoire et terrassée par la connaissance" (193). By using a narrative framework that isolates the characters in the beginning (the first part of the novel) only to bring them together in the end (the third part of the novel), Devi emphasizes the fact that not only the readers but the characters too are struggling to understand their stories. The characters are able to articulate their concerns and expiate their sins by acknowledging them or exorcise themselves from the memories of crimes committed against them. Thus, the act of narration liberates them. Devi privileges this act of narration rather than a coherent story that can be narrated by a single voice. Her use of narrative metalepsis allows characters in complete despair to communicate their sorrow to their narratees, as communication provides the only possible resolution for the people of Soupir. In focusing on the act of narration rather than the story narrated, Devi's work resonates with Susan Lanser's notion of the feminine text.[50]

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[50] "The act of writing becomes the fulfillment of desire, telling becomes the single predicated act, as if to tell were in itself to resolve, to provide closure. […] telling becomes integral to the working out of the story. Communication, understanding, being understood, becomes not only the objective of the narration but the act that can transform (some aspect of) the narrated world. In a universe where waiting, inaction, reception, predominate, and action is only minimally possible, the narrative act itself becomes the source of possibility"("Toward a Feminist Narratology" 357).

Devi's characters, although not all women, are enclosed in a world of inaction and waiting where no heroic deed seems possible. Thus, Devi produces a narrative that does not envisage the narration of a coherent heroic tale, but a narrative that allows space to voices that have no coherent tales to recount. Devi, however, does not limit narrative metalepsis to raise the concerns of her characters/narrators. She uses the same strategy to present multiple perspectives and bring multiple narrators to debate with each other, creating a mosaic of ideas.

In a chapter that discusses the relationship between Patrice, the narrator, and Marivonne, Noëlla's mother, the narrator deliberately introduces another voice in the text; as he states, "Maintenant, c'est une autre voix qui parle" (198). He distinguishes his voice from that of Noëlla's. Both the voices alternate, thereby presenting two perspectives on a single event. Patrice describes himself as a hero as he once prevented Marivonne from committing suicide: "C'est moi qui t'ai ramenée, Marivonne, et tu ne l'as jamais su. C'est moi qui ai rendu ton corps au sable, arrachant ton souffle de l'haleine de la mer. C'est moi qui ai posé ma bouche sur la tienne pour y faire entrer la vie. Et en même temps, j'ai fécondé la vie en toi" (197).

Although Patrice depicts himself as a hero who saved Marivonne's life, Noëlla's interpretation of the same sequence of events is different. She addresses Patrice and reminds him of the act of rape he committed on Marivonne as she lay unconscious in the sand after he saved her. Noëlla's birth was a result of this sexual encounter between the two. From Noëlla the reader not only learns that Patrice is Noëlla's father but also the fact that Patrice never acknowledged this in front of Marivonne. When people later inquired about Marivonne's state, Patrice kept silent, and never came forward to admit his crime. Noëlla, however, becomes the only witness to Patrice's crime, viewing him from inside her mother's womb:

> Je suis née le jour de ma procréation, Patrice L'Eclairé, et je me souviens de tout.
> Et surtout de cette lâcheté qui t'a fait fuir au moment où ma mère ouvrait les yeux
> et où elle aurait peut-être reconnu en toi son sauveur l'éloignant du naufrage. Tu

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t'es enfui en me léguant ton éternelle dérobade et tes yeux vitreux. C'est tout ce que je retiens de toi. Toi, le fuyard, c'est ainsi que je te vois. […] tu n'étais pas le héros plongeant pour l'arracher aux courants et la ramener à la vie. (199)

Noëlla sees Patrice's act as one of complete cowardice. It is also interesting to note that Patrice attempts to evade the entire act of rape in his narration, only giving it a fleeting mention, while Noëlla analyzes and interprets it with clarity. What Patrice sees as love, Noëlla views as a masculine desire to possess:

> Tu n'as pas retrouvé Marivonne par hasard. Tu l'avais suivie toute la journée, tu avais été son ombre. Et quelque part, une aigreur au goût de rance est entrée en toi alors qu'elle marchait pour tenter de se défaire d'elle-même. Son souffle te parvenait et tu le buvais comme un voleur, tu marchais dans son sillage pour mieux recevoir son odeur, tu aspirais ses poussières et sa sueur parce que c'était là la seule manière de la posséder. (200)

By contrast, Patrice sees the rape as a benign and nonviolent act, as if Marivonne were offering herself willingly. He describes Marivonne's body as one that was completely open to welcome him inside her: "Ses bras son corps son front avaient le même aspect lisse et uni, la même absence de combat. Et même en s'offrant à moi, elle ne luttait pas. […]. J'ai cru attendre un murmure profondément à l'intérieur de sons corps. Un ronflement accueillant, qui me disait de venir. Je suis venu" (203). In this manner, he expiates his sin and excuses himself.

For Noëlla, this act is not only brutal and violent but also one of cowardice, as Patrice never admits having raped Marivonne. Noëlla calls Patrice "le passant," since he is not willing to shoulder his responsibility after impregnating the feminine womb with his lust: "Finalement, le père, comme tous ces hommes inconnus qui passent et qui fermentent le ventre des femmes d'un fragment d'orage pour disparaître ensuite, sûrs de l'anonymat de leur queue, et devenus *enn lepasan*, un passant entre deux ombres, un être de sel et de vent, le seul nom qu'aura mon père" (201). By awarding narrative authority to Noëlla, Devi allows Noëlla's views to come to the

forefront, preparing the text for a confrontation between the two different perspectives, that of Noëlla and Patrice.

In another chapter, Royal Palm, the abandoned son of Pitié, takes over the narrative voice. Like Noëlla, he, too, is born out of an act of rape committed on Pitié when she was a child. Pitié's mother abandons the baby who is later picked up by an old lady. Thus, Noëlla and Royal Palm represent the voice of the children of Soupir, as they remind all the elders, namely, Patrice, Ferblanc, Louis, and Bertrand of the crimes they committed and how those crimes have affected the future of Soupir.

Royal Palm accuses Ferblanc of making people believe in his illusionary dreams that can never be fulfilled: "Au réveil, elle apprend de nouveau qu'elle ne peut ni plonger ni flotter ni marcher. Le ganja la ronge et la dévore et la détruit à petit feu. Elle dit que c'est toi, Ferblanc, qui tout ce temps, a accompli la malédiction de Soupir" (211). The "elle" in the above passage refers to Noëlla who cannot be fooled by Ferblanc's deceptive dreams. Royal Palm uses Noëlla to evoke the crimes committed by these elderly people, as Noëlla and Royal Palm are the only children, representing the future of Soupir. Royal Palm also reminds Louis of the crime of leaving his wife Corinne for another: "Te reste-t-il quelque chose entre tes jambes après ton passage chez la femme de Petit Galet? Ou bien a-t-elle tout dévoré ? Vas-tu montrer à Noëlla la vérité qui pendouille hors de ton pantalon baissé? Es-tu homme à affronter la vérité, Louis Bienvenue, lorsque Noëlla la partagera avec le monde?" (211). Royal Palm ridicules Louis by challenging his masculinity and accuses him of leaving his wife, as Noëlla accuses Patrice of raping and abandoning Marivonne.

In the first part of the novel, Patrice describes the struggles faced by him and his friends, as they build Soupir. In the last part, Noëlla's and Royal Palm's voices present a different picture, as they accuse their elders as incapable of making Soupir a better place for the young.

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Challenged and disturbed by the words of Royal Palm, the narrator along with his friends commits the most grotesque crime of all as the four men rape and murder Noëlla. Noëlla's rape and murder by the four adults who represent the old people of Soupir is metaphorically the murder of the youth and the future of Soupir. Thus, Devi deftly illustrates two different perspectives and points of view in the same novel in such a way that the reader is unable to recognize a single voice of authority. The characters narrate their own stories relegating the principal narrator to the role of a narratee as his authority is constantly called into question through other voices that populate Devi's novel. As a result, the reader is constantly confronted with multiple perspectives, forcing her/him to put together the fragments in order to create her/his own meaning and interpretation.

2.2.2 *Ève de ses décombres*: Multiple Narrators

If in *Soupir* Devi uses narrative metalepsis to challenge the notion of a singular narrative authority, her later work, *Ève de ses décombres*, allows her to play more radically with this notion, as in this novel the reader is confronted with multiple narrative voices that share narrative responsibility, thereby creating multiple temporal universes, a frequent characteristic of Devi's works. These different narrative universes are linked together through a single event: the murder of Savita. The narrative responsibility is shared between four teenage narrators: the eponymous heroine Ève, her friend Savita, her lover Sad, and Clélio, a boy from the local gang who is charged for Savita's murder. As Ève, Sad, Clélio, and Savita share the narrative authority in the novel, the reader hops from one temporal world to another. The narrator shifts every other page, inviting the reader into a new world. As a result, the traditional narrative linearity is disrupted, a sense of chronology is absent, and the narration seems fragmented. In addition to the four narrators, there is also an anonymous voice in the novel marked by italicized passages. Using this narrative framework, Devi skillfully allows for a convergence of multiple perspectives and

views of the events. In this section, I will analyze the absence of a single narrative authority in the novel and the space such a narrative framework provides for multiple universes to interact with each other, allowing a multiple consciousness to emerge.

Sad considers himself a writer and claims to be writing the story of Ève and others, indicating that he might be the major narrator who has more authority than others over the act of narration:

> Ce soir-là, allongé dans mon lit, j'ai pris un feutre et j'ai commencé à écrire des choses sur le mur, près de ma tête. Bien sûr, c'étaient des choses sur Ève. Elle seule occupait ma pensée. Je me suis mis à lui parler, je lui dis 'tu,' je devine où elle va, ce qu'elle pense, ce qu'elle vit. Elle ne sait pas que je la devine si bien. J'ai tellement écrit sur elle que parfois je me dis que j'écris aussi sa vie, et celle des autres, et celle de tous. (28)

At another point in the novel, while addressing the reader as "vous," he states that he is writing the story on his walls so that it is accessible to the reader and will not be erased easily: "Mais une goutte bleue est entrée en moi. Je la transforme en encre de gamin noir déchirant les murs. Cette histoire que vous lisez sur mes murs, ses mots ne partiront que quand les immeubles poussés de la mouillure des cyclones auront disparu" (68). Sad's own assertions as a writer make him appear as an important narrator in the novel. Ève, too, states that she is tired and asks Sad to continue the narration of the story, thereby according him some narrative authority: "Quelle est la suite de l'histoire? Sad, c'est ton boulot, ça, que de raconter. Moi, je ne sais pas" (153). As Ève transfers all her narrative privilege to Sad, her statement undoubtedly asserts Sad's importance as a story teller, but at the same time it demonstrates that Ève herself has a significant role as a narrator in the novel. It thus robs Sad of absolute authority over the narration, emphasizing that the narration of this novel is a collaborative project.

In addition to sharing the narrative responsibility with Sad, Ève is also the sole motivation of Sad's writing, thereby indicating that this process of sharing and reciprocity between the two

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is much more profound. At the beginning of the novel, Sad states that Ève is his reason and emphasizes her importance in his life: "Ève est ma raison" (13). For him, Ève and writing are intricately related to each other and cannot be separated: "Moi je veux les deux choses: l'écriture et Ève. Ève et l'écriture. Pas l'une sans l'autre. Seul, je ne suis rien. Elles sont les fruits qui me remplissent, les graines qui feront germer d'autres graines et multiplier ma voix comme un banian qui sans cesse dévore l'espace" (66). Ève plays an important role as the sole inspiration behind Sad's act of writing and therefore controls it from within. If Sad is the one who writes Ève's life as a narrator,[51] it is Ève who is the *raison d'être* of all his writing. Thus, there is a system of exchange between the two in which no one is dominant over the other. The two operate in complete harmony.

In addition to multiple narrators who function together, there is an anonymous voice that takes over the narrative nine different times, identifiable by an italicized font in the text. The novel provides many clues, but never a clear indication as to who is the enunciator of these passages. This voice appears immediately after the passages narrated by Ève and addresses her using the second person pronoun "tu." This suggests that the voice can either belong to Sad, who has stated in the novel that he is writing Ève's story in which he addresses her as "tu," or Ève herself, who is in dialogue with her inner self.

Explaining the presence of this anonymous voice at a conference in Belgium, Ananda Devi stated that she sees it as Ève's inner voice attempting to address the questions Ève asks in the passages she narrates herself. Through the anonymous voice, Devi therefore brings to the fore

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[51] See page 113. "J'ai tellement écrit sur elle que parfois je me dis que j'écris aussi sa vie, et celle des autres, et celle de tous" (28).

Ève's alter ego and emphasizes the fact that it is not only Ève's own narration or that of Sad that construct her character in the novel but several other voices, including those of her friends and the italicized passages that join together to provide a complete account of Ève and her life. It is important to examine this anonymous voice and its significant role in allowing Ève to express herself.

Most of the passages Ève narrates are followed by the anonymous voice, as if it comments on Ève's narration or presents a counter view. In a passage where Ève describes how she is driven to prostitute herself for trifles such as erasers and notebooks, Ève states that she finds prostitution empowering, as it allows her to acquire whatever she desires by trading her body: "Je pouvais acheter. Echanger ce dont j'avais besoin contre moi-même. Des morceaux, des parcelles. […] j'ai dix-sept ans et j'ai décidé ma vie" (20-21). Prostitution accords her the power to choose and make decisions regarding her body and life. Ève asserts her power by making herself an object of abuse: "Je marche seule et droite. Je n'ai peur de personne. Ce sont eux qui ont peur de moi, de l'inexploré qu'ils devinent sous ma peau" (21).

For Ève, prostitution is not only a means of acquiring material things she desires, but it is also her way of resisting the society and its fixed definitions that imprison women. Her acts of prostitution allow her to exist outside those definitions, and give her power over men: "Plus ils me touchent, plus ils me perdent. Ceux qui osent regarder sous mes yeux sont pris de vertige. Ils sont si simples. L'inexpliqué les effraie. Ils veulent des cadres rigides. Fille à marier, fille à prendre et à jeter. […] mais je n'appartiens ni à l'une, ni à l'autre. Cela les dépasse et les exaspère" (21). On the one hand, men have absolute power to play with her body; on the other, they can never possess her as she is beyond their comprehension. She is a mystery to them, and it is her act of prostitution that grants her this power. Thus, Ève believes she is the predator, as she is the one who attacks men by her mystery, not the contrary: "Je sais me protéger des hommes.

Le prédateur, c'est moi" (21). Ève's account of her life and prostitution presents her actions as subversive, and therefore empowering.

In order to protect herself Ève has to detach her being from her body during the sexual act: "Ça ne me fait rien. Ce n'est qu'un corps. Ça se répare. C'est fait pour ça. Je passe outre les pièges et les obstacles. Je fais ma danse d'évasion" (22). Ève views her "évasion" as positive, because it protects her from getting hurt. The anonymous voice, however, views it as dangerous and destructive, because it takes Ève away from herself and transforms her from within: "Ombre ou aile, ce que tu étais n'est plus. Tu deviens autre chose. Dans le quartier de Troumaron, un reflet te suit. Il te nargue. Il te dit que tu marches à rebours. Il transforme tes surfaces, inverse le sens de ta trajectoire, révèle l'envers de ton silence. […] un jour tu te vois dans le miroir, et plus rien de tout cela n'est à toi" (23). According to the italicized passages, her actions not only hurt her physically, but her act of evasion takes her away from herself. The anonymous voice thus highlights the pain and misery absent in Ève's own passages and foregrounds the violence Ève undergoes. If Ève presents herself as a strong girl who uses prostitution as a means to resist patriarchal society and voices her resistance by hurting herself, the italicized passages project a contradictory image by describing the gruesome encounters she has with men who rape her several times before leaving her half dead in her neighborhood. In this way, they complete Ève's tale by presenting a different account.

The passages narrated by the anonymous voice are extra narrative not only because they are separated from the rest of the novel through italicization, but their form and content, also isolate them: "*Par blessure. Par mystère. Pour confirmer, avec rage, avec hargne, avec désespoir, ce qu'ils pensent tous, là-bas, dehors. Pour être, pour devenir, pour ne pas disparaître à tes propres yeux. Pour sortir de la gangue des passifs, des oisifs, …*" (53). These italicized passages with their fragmented sentences do not follow any narrative rules, but rather

transcend them, thereby breaking away from the traditional narrative structures. Thus, the inclusion of the anonymous voice creates an essential extra-narrative space required to highlight Ève's experience and misery that cannot be expressed or contained in the normative narrative framework. The fragmentary and unconventional nature of the italicized passages along with their content makes them violent and different from the rest of the text. These passages then throw the reader into a different world outside the normal narrative world. They enable Devi to take her narration to a level of supernatural madness that aptly describes the intense cruelty that Ève undergoes at the hands of her clients. These passages also give voice to all her gruesome adventures that cannot be discussed by Ève in her own passages, as the brutality and cruelty of these adventures is such that the trauma cannot be expressed in her own words.

The unconventional narrative madness and violence presented by the anonymous voice is the only means of resistance for the people of Troumaron. In Sad's words, "Notre alternative: soit la défaite, soit la conquête par la violence. Mais cette conquête là n'en est pas une. C'est la résistance des désespérés" (148). This violence presents itself in the act of narration through the anonymous voice that describes the violence done to Ève and expresses her pain using fragmented and unconventional structures, allowing the reader to feel the intensity of the character's emotions.

In addition to voicing Ève's pain and misery, the anonymous voice offers some solutions against the violence that the island offers to its residents. It urges the characters to resist their disappearance and oblivion in the torpor of Troumaron:

> *[…] sortir de tout cela, déjouer les chercheurs, les suiveurs, quitter la piste, tromper les chiens, changer de forme, achever ta mue et tes métaphores et tes métamorphoses, […] suivre un chemin de broussailles qui mène loin au fond des mythes et permet d'en sortir refaite à neuf, récurée de ta peau, marchant sanglante au rouge de tes vies, être, devenir, ne pas disparaître.* (53)

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The anonymous voice encourages the characters to leave the insular world of lassitude and closure, to find themselves anew in order to struggle for their existence. It enables the characters and readers to ask themselves how to resist disappearing in a setting where nothing matters, where nothing can change-- in other words, a world of complete despair and destitution.

Sad finds the answer in writing, in being able to narrate:

> Au feutre indélébile, sur les murs de ma chambre, j'écris à toute vitesse, comme un malade, comme un dément, pris d'une envie de tout raconter avant qu'on ne m'oublie. C'est une histoire fragmentaire et boiteuse, faite d'amertume et de colère, mais c'est la seule que je connaisse. La vie de gens comme moi, si simples qu'ils brisent avant même que de s'être construits, si incertains qu'ils s'effacent avant d'avoir touché aux choses. (128-129)

The act of writing/narration is therapeutic for Sad. A frenzied recounting of his tale of misery and pain is what can save him from disappearance, as it allows him to leave something behind for the next generation. It will allow him to become immortal, as his voice can be heard even after his demise. Sad's anxiety to exist resonates with the anonymous voice that urged all the characters to resist their disappearance and death:

> J'écris pour ne pas devenir fou. Je crois que, ça aussi, on l'a déjà dit. J'ai envie de pleurer. De cela et de tout, de mon envie d'exister à tout prix, moi, l'enfant de Troumaron…dire dire dire dire…j'écrirai mon histoire et j'écrirai des poèmes et je les enverrai à un éditeur….je serai entendu et je serai lu, c'est tout ce qui compte, peu importe comment ils s'y prennent et dans quel but, qu'ils m'exploitent, si c'est ça qu'ils veulent, tout ce que je veux, moi, c'est sortir la tête de l'eau, c'est sortir du lot, c'est être. (140-141)

Sad is anxious to make his voice heard, as it is the only means of survival for the people of Troumaron. Therefore, the only possibility for Sad is to narrate his story/ write his tale, as it is a way to assure his existence in an island whose insularity can engulf everything, whose misery can devour people and make them forget their own being. Devi's works reveals that Sad is not the only character who seeks an escape, an evasion from the torpor of the island and who desires to be heard as well as understood.

Clélio,[52] first sought attention through his violent gang activity, and as he sits in prison, he, desires to be heard one last time. Wrongly accused of Savita's murder, he states, "J'espère que j'aurai une seconde chance. Si quelqu'un m'écoute, j'aimerais bien une seconde chance. Quitte à me faire prêtre" (139). He is not a writer like Sad who can write to save his sanity. Determined to express himself, Clélio imagines himself screaming in the prison. His cry is no simple scream, but a wail indicative of the deep sorrow he carries within his heart. He hopes this wail will break through the silence of the city, awaken it, and enlighten it:

> Il soufflait, il gémissait, on l'entendait dans les villages voisins comme la voix des morts. Jusqu'à ce que les vagues ouvrent des passages de plus en plus larges et ôtent leur voix au vent et aux morts. Alors, c'est moi qui crie, qui souffle, qui gémis et qui réveille cet endroit de son silence. Dans la prison, on n'entend plus que ma voix. (147)

The above passage illustrates Clélio's desperation to express his sorrow and misery. At the same time it emphasizes the fact that narration itself is the only possibility for the people of Troumaron. Like Sad and Clélio, Ève, too, desires to be heard. She announces her intent and need to narrate at the very beginning of the novel. The novel begins with a passage that serves as a preface. Although it hardly resembles a conventional preface and seems like a chapter, it is the placement of this passage at the beginning of the novel that makes it a preface. Since this passage is narrated by Ève, she becomes a narrator/character introducing the novel to the reader, thereby occupying a significant place.

In the preface the reader cannot understand many of Ève's references as they only gradually become clear later in the novel. Yet, the preface is revelatory of Ève's intention to narrate her story in order to overcome the silence that is stifling her: "le silence entré en moi me

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[52] Clélio is accused of Savita's murder because he is the most notorious of the local gang of boys who indulge in violent activities. He has committed many notorious crimes earlier and had been in prison several times. The police arrest him as he is suspected of involvement in the murder.

coupe le souffle" (9). This silence is broken not only by the sound of her footsteps, but by other actions as well:

> J'entre dans mon pas. C'est le seul recours, désormais [...] Une boursouflure rassurante s'y trouve, tout contre mon aisselle: la brûlure de tous les faux départs et de toutes les arrivées manquées. Bientôt, ce ne sera plus un rythme caché dans mes veines. Ma marque s'imprimera sur un front, entre les sourcils. C'est pour cet instant que je suis née. (9)

Ève's friend Savita is killed by a professor because Savita saw him having sex with Ève. Ève kills this professor by shooting him in the head using a pistol a policeman gave her for self-defense. The rhythm of Eve's footsteps resists the claustrophobic silence of Troumaron and gives her the courage to kill the professor who murdered Savita. Ève refers to this event in stating, "ma marque s'imprimera." Her action gives her a sense of life. Another act that breaks Ève's silence is her act of narration. She narrates her story full of "la brûlure de tous les faux départs et de toutes les arrivées manquées." It is only after she has narrated her story that she can expiate all her sins, referred to as "faux departs," and reclaim the self she has lost: "Je marche, même si je voudrais courir vers moi-même. Je suis sortie. Rien ne m'arrêtera pas" (10). Her desire to reclaim herself resonates with the anonymous voice, as it encourages Ève and the narrators to resist their disappearance and death.

The four narrators of *Ève de ses décombre*--Ève, Sad, Clélio, and Savita--are surrounded by the despair and torpor of Troumaron, very much like their counterparts in *Soupir*. Living in complete despair and destitution, they have no heroic deeds to narrate. They cannot recount conventional tales full of events and actions, as their universe is marked by inaction, apathy, and frustration. For them it is the act of narration that is more important than the tale narrated. What they seek is the opportunity to speak, to scream, and to be able to express their misery and pain, even if their stories seem fragmented and unconventional to their readers.

In making such narrators recount their tales, Devi demonstrates that narration is the only possibility they have in their lives to voice their concerns and make their presence felt. For Devi, narration is not simply the recounting of a tale. Instead, it is the act of seizing the narrative voice in order to communicate with others, especially those who are willing to listen and share their sorrow. It is a bridge that connects the narrator with the narratee to create an ongoing dialogue.

2.2.3 *Indian Tango*: Narrator-Character Relationship

Although Devi plays with the narrator-character relationship in most of her works by challenging the traditional notions that accord authority to a single narrator who controls the characters, her most recent work, *Indian Tango*, adds a new dimension altogether to this relation. It has a complex narrative structure with no focal consciousness and no steady unfolding of a plot. The novel is structured as a series of narrative fragments dated alternately March, April, and May 2004. Although there is no formal division of the novel, the reader can discern that the novel's first half alternates between March and April 2004, and the second between April and May 2004. This fragmentary structure of the novel resembles journal entries marked only by months without specific dates. The fragments seem to be narrating two stories completely unrelated to each other.

This complexity is further enhanced by the enigmatic diegetic layering of the novel. The fragments dated April 2004 in the novel's first half and May 2004 in the novel's second half narrate the story of a middle-aged woman named Subhadra, her life as a house wife and her relationship with her husband and in-laws. These fragments are narrated by an extradiegetic narrator who refers to Subhadra as "elle" whereas the fragments dated March 2004 in the first half and April 2004 in the second are narrated by an autodiegetic narrator recounting the story of a writer. As a result, the two stories appear as independent fragments. There is no obvious merging of the tales, and the reader is forced to grapple with two different temporal universes

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that alternate with each other. A strict sequence or chronology of events is disrupted in favor of chaos as the narrative voice alternates between "je" and "elle." This section will analyze the diegetic complexity of this novel in order to understand the narrative voice and how the shift between "je" and "elle" enables Devi to create an exemplary relationship between the narrator and her character. This relationship subverts the traditional hierarchy between the narrator and the character and establishes a companionship that allows for multiplicity of narrative voice and multiple consciousnesses.

While the two stories in *Indian Tango* develop independently, the content of the stories is revelatory, as it allows the reader to discern an overlap between the parallel narratives, informing her/him of the diegetic complexity of the text. The autodiegetic narrator, who is also a writer, is constantly chasing a lady she calls Bimala, after the name of a character from a film by Satyajit Ray. Bimala is sometimes described as a real person chased by the narrator, and sometimes as the narrator's imagined character who is under the narrator's absolute control.

The reader discovers later in the novel that the narrator's Bimala is none other than Subhadra, the protagonist of the other story, thereby indicating that the autodiegetic narrator of the writer's story is also the extradiegetic narrator of Subhadra's tale. This calls for an examination of the relationship between Subhadra and the writer. The latter is in love with Subhadra, and chases her in order to seduce her. The fragments dated April and May even suggest that they may have had at least one sexual encounter. However, the writer's revelation that Bimala is also a figment of the narrator's imagination allows for an intriguing reading of the novel and its diegetic complexity.

In this novel, the narrator is not simply the creator of her character. She is also the savior who envisages rescuing her character from a society that does not allow her the liberty to express herself. The process of her creation does not simply entail bringing a character to life. The

narrator also desires to create a being who can be herself against all odds, who understands herself, knows herself, and recognizes herself: "Je lui explique ainsi les choses. Je tisse sa vie de mes envies, je déroule les images qui la ramèneront vers moi. […] je lui apprends à être elle […] à ne pas s'effacer de son regard" (82). The narrator is then faced with a double task of creating a character and of enabling her to reclaim herself from a society that has alienated her from her own desires and needs. In making love to Bimala, the narrator familiarizes her with her own body by evoking the physical pleasures Bimala has never known with her husband. In this way, the narrator returns Bimala's body to her, enabling her to recognize her desires and pleasures: "Je la rends à elle-même. Je ne prends rien d'elle" (82). It is not so much in the act of writing, but in the act of making love to Bimala that the narrator "creates" her, because the narrator's act of writing is intricately linked to her act of making love with her character: "J'écrirai Bimala. Encre, plume, mots, tout cela sortira de mon corps et s'inscrira sur le sien. Quel plus beau papier que la peau vierge d'une femme? Et quelle plus belle poésie que celle écrite par la langue sur son corps? Mes métaphores sont jouissives et je les aime" (83).

In this passage the narrator creates an engaging ambiguity between writing and the act of making love, as it beautifully delineates how the narrator creates/writes Bimala by making love to her. The act of making love, however, is never a one-way process. The pleasure and pain experienced in this act is mutual, indicating that Bimala too plays a significant role and the narrator does not have absolute authority. The character too exercises some control over her narrator.

Although the narrator manipulates the character and is also instrumental in allowing her to discover and rediscover her body and desires, she herself is completely seduced by Bimala and spends her time chasing her character every day, as if the character's charm has completely imprisoned her:

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Je dois trouver la force de me libérer de Bimala, mais, dès que je m'allonge, les mots me reprennent, des mots qui me font trembler et gémir, des mots qui deviennent des images, […] et je ne peux plus lutter. Je rends les armes, ayant compris que certains combats sont perdus d'avance. Je me hasarde dans l'inconnu de Bimala. Plus j'avance, plus je me désoriente. (120)

The writer is so seduced by Bimala that she is driven to distraction over which she herself has no control and even feels as if it is Bimala, the character that enables her to write the story. In fact, the character controls her narration to such an extent that the narrator believes she is her character's slave. She feels that she is creating Bimala according to Bimala's wishes and desires, indicating that the character has a say in her creation. She is not a complete fabrication of the narrator: "Je crée Bimala et je suis son esclave. Elle fait ce que je veux dans mes rêves, mais je ne peux la forcer par mes mots. Mes mots peuvent l'envelopper, l'habiller, la déshabiller; mes mots ne peuvent la faire autre que ce qu'elle est" (45). The narrator highlights the fact that she has limited control over her character, as the narrator's words only describe the character. They cannot change her or make her different from what the character wants to be.

The narrator-character relationship acquires further complexity as the narrator acknowledges that her existence depends on the character as much as the character depends on her, announcing an unspoken alliance between the two:

Je sais que j'ai besoin d'elle pour nous délivrer, elle et moi, pour ensemble parfaire ce qu'il reste en nous d'incomplet, pour réunir nos corps comme deux paumes plaquées l'une contre l'autre, pour faire de l'écrivain un être humain et de la femme éteinte un noyau de brûlure. Sans cette réunification, sans la destruction de ce mur qui me divise depuis tant d'années en deux parts ennemies, je ne parviendrai pas à me résoudre. (80)

If the narrator is the savior of her character and allows her to be herself in spite of society, the character too rescues the narrator by making her "un être humain." The narrator who feels fragmented needs the character to complete her existence. This also explains Devi's choice of recounting the stories of the writer and the character independently. The fragments alone are

incomprehensible, because they present the narrator and the character individually as separate entities. When the reader is confronted with the two stories separately, she cannot comprehend them. It is only when the character and the writer come together that one can make sense of the novel and can understand them both, as they exist for and with each other, not as separate entities.

Bimala, in addition to being a character in the novel, is also an alter ego of the writer. She is an extension of the writer's "other" self: "En fin de compte, j'ai eu envie, pour une fois, de franchir la barrière; de vivre la vie de mes personnages en allant jusqu'au bout de moi-même. […] En Bimala, j'ai trouvé ma réponse. Elle est à la fois une femme et un personnage, une image et une réalité" (119). Bimala completes the narrator because it is only through Bimala that the narrator can become the person she always desired to be, a human being full of desires and emotions. The ambiguity between the real and the imagined Bimala allows the writer to break all barriers and transcend all boundaries to connect to a character that is absolutely free to love, to exist the way she desires, a liberty that can only be availed in fiction, not in reality.

As the narrator becomes herself through the character, the character too acquires completeness through the narrator. It is only in the eyes of the narrator that the character can see her real self, as the narrator is the only one who offers the character the possibility/the companionship to see herself with all her desires, pleasures, and pains: "Peut-être pense-t-elle que ce qu'elle voit dans mon regard à moi, elle ne l'a jamais vu dans un autre regard: elle" (124). In order to be herself, the character needs the narrator as much as the narrator needs her. Thus, the relationship between the two is mutual and reciprocal where both contribute in the construction and the "creation" of each other.

The narrator's existence depends on the character to such an extent that sometimes she believes she is transformed into her character, obliterating all differences between the two:

Je te cherche, je te suis, je te guette, je te projette. Je suis l'ombre de ton identité. Pendant ce temps-là, je ne suis rien; en sursis, en suspens. Je me désintègre pour me retrouver de l'autre côté de l'écran, dans le miroir bascule de la page. Je me transforme en cette présence vénéneuse qui va pousser Bimala dans ses retranchements, et, une fois là, l'en sortir neuve, riche, vitale. […] peut-être suis-je aussi Bimala, enracinée dans sa torpeur et ses habitudes, suivant son chemin d'un côté de ses berges tandis que son double sautille de l'autre côté? Peut-être ai-je envie, en la secouant de sa complaisance, de me sortir aussi du trou? (140)

In Bimala's presence, the narrator's own ego dissolves completely. She disintegrates, indicating the radical transformation that Bimala brings into the life of the narrator, as if Bimala becomes a part of the narrator's being. In saving Bimala, she is thus saving herself. Her revelation, "peut-être suis-je aussi Bimala," as the two blend into mirror images of each other leads to a complex doubling that questions the traditional narrator-character divide. Devi further complicates this doubling as she plays with the pronouns in selected sections of the novel and makes it difficult for the reader to discern the speaker's identity-- the narrator or the character or both.

Subhadra takes the possession of "je" in a passage narrated by the extradiegetic narrator, resulting in an ambiguity between "je" and "elle," that transgresses narrative authority: "Moi, Subhadra, je me suis livrée. Pas moi, elle, cette femme, là, que je ne connais pas. […] Une main sur mon dos, qui me touche, qui me pousse en avant." (54). As Subhadra takes the "je" of the narrator, the narrator herself is reduced to "elle," a mere character in this passage. There is, therefore, a complete exchange of roles between the two, bringing the narrator and the character to the same level.

As Subhadra narrates the scene of sexual intimacy, she procures more agency than the narrator who then becomes a character. The nature of the act, however, is such that it transforms Subhadra from within: "un acte qui changera ma vision de moi-même. Mais je ne sais plus trouver le chemin vers l'extérieur, vers le passé, vers moi" (54). It is, however, the presence of

the other, the "elle" that is instrumental in bringing this change, as both the narrator and the character work in harmony and collaboration to construct the narration.

As the text reverts back to "elle," Devi narratologically creates a situation where it is difficult to say who is referred to by the "elle," Subhadra or the narrator: "Elle ne comprend pas. Elle ne comprendra pas jusqu'à ce qu'elle soit ressortie de l'autre côté d'elle-même. Mais alors, elle ne sera plus la meme" (55). However, the statements are such that they are applicable to both the character and the narrator, as the act of love-making is their first sexual encounter with another woman and transforms them both. It is the act that establishes their desire and identity and allows them to understand themselves. In this discovery they are companions, because this discovery could not have happened without either of them. Therefore, it is with and through the other that the two women discover themselves.

What seems to be a fragmented narration with two different stories turns out to be an engaging story of two women who recognize themselves, their needs, and their desires through their love for each other. Devi's fragmented narration enables her to create a relationship between the narrator and her character that brings them to the same level, transcending the traditional narrator-character divide, as narrative authority is shared by two voices that construct each other. The title of the novel is of particular importance as it evokes the dance of tango. Among the heterosexual couple Tango is a dance in which a man leads but when the same dance is performed by a same sex couple each partner takes turns to lead the dance, the power is shared and the dance is harmonious. In the novel, *Indian Tango*, Devi creates a similar dance between two female characters in love with each other, as they share the authority to narrate and construct a narrative in collaboration. In this way the double narration subverts the traditional definition of Tango to create a different one.

Devi deftly plays with time in order to disrupt Aristotelian linearity in favor of a fragmented narration that allows space for mutlisubjectivity. *L'arbre fouet* uses the thematic and cultural device of reincarnation to play with linearity. It introduces the notion of cyclicality as a temporal framework that results in the sharing of narrative voice, challenging single narrative authority. Furthermore, this novel alludes to certain timelessness where one seeks to go beyond time, beyond the linear framework that privileges a single focal consciousness.

Her sixth novel *Soupir*, also influenced by Non-Western epics, uses *mise en abyme* to disrupt linearity. This *mise en abyme* leads to narrative metalepsis that allows Devi to introduce multiple voices that take over the narration, undermining the traditional singularity of narrative authority. Through such a narrative, Devi creates a mosaic of ideas that enrich the text by providing the reader with multiple perspectives, leading to the emergence of multiple consciousnesses.

In her recent novels, *Ève de ses décombres* and *Indian Tango,* Devi attacks the notion of a single narrator more ferociously in order to create new possibilities. She takes the character-narrator relationship to a new level, allowing her narrators and characters to come together and voice their concerns collectively as the act of narration itself becomes more important than the narrated tale. In bringing different temporal universes together Devi allows multiple voices to join in the act of narration that facilitates the expression of marginalized voices through mutlisubjectivity.

Devi's narrative framework brings her characters to the same level as her narrators, challenging the traditional hierarchy between the two. In this way she allows for new kinds of narrative possibilities in which narration ceases to be a discourse by a single authority. In her texts this authority is shared and a sense of hierarchy is absent. She thus creates a model that

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suits the feminine world whose concerns can best be articulated as a collective rather than an individual.

CHAPTER 3
MAGICAL REALISM: DEVI'S NARRATIVE TOOL

The term "magical realism" was coined around 1925 by German art critic Franz Roh to describe paintings that demonstrated an altered reality. For him, magical realism was a way of

representing and responding to reality as well as pictorially depicting its enigmas. Although the term was later used by Venezuelan Arturo Uslar-Pietri to describe the work of certain Latin American writers, it came in vogue only after Nobel Prize winner Miguel Ángel Asturia used the expression to define the style of his novels in the 60s. The term gained popularity with the rise of the "el boom" led by writers such as Julio Cortázar of Argentina, Carlos Fuentes of Mexico, Mario Vargas Llosa of Peru, and Gabriel García Márquez of Colombia and with the increased interest in Latin American literature in the last three decades. More recent Latin American authors in this vein include Isabel Allende and Laura Esquivel. (Young 3).

In the 1960s magical realism was a way to express the Latin American mentality and create an autonomous style of literature. Subsequently, the term has been applied both to earlier writers such as Mikhail Bulgakov from Russia, or Ernst Junger from Germany and to postcolonial and other contemporary writers from Salman Rushdie (Indo-British) and Günter Grass (German) to Janet Frame (New Zealand), Angela Carter (U.K), and Toni Morrison (Afro-American). Dynamic critics such as Brenda Cooper and Wendy Faris have attempted to broaden the scope of magical realism by attaching this term to works by writers from Africa, Europe and Asia. In her work *Magical Realism in West African Fiction* Brenda Cooper argues that magical realism arises out of postcolonial, unevenly developed societies, where modern and ancient, and scientific and magical views of the world co-exist. Therefore the concept cannot be restricted only to Latin America. In her book she examines three writers from different African countries, and their plots, themes, and narrative techniques that mingle the dimensions of magic, myth, and historical reality.

Similarly, in *Ordinary Enchantments: Magical Realism and the Remystification of Narrative*, Wendy Faris discusses a rich array of examples from magical realist novels around the world, including the works not only of Latin American writers such as Gabriel García

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Márquez and Juan Rulfo, but also of authors such as Salman Rushdie, Günter Grass, Toni Morrison, Ben Okri, and Marie Darrieussecq. For her, magical realism has become the most important trend in contemporary international fiction, especially in postcolonial cultures because it "has provided the literary ground for significant cultural work; within its texts, marginal voices, submerged traditions, and emergent literatures have developed and created masterpieces" (1). Faris believes that there is a need to use the term in a larger context rather than limiting it to Latin America or the Caribbean:

> Although magical realism has been most widespread in Latin America, my aim here is to continue the critical trend that extends the mode beyond that region, beyond 'el boom,' which popularized the term. […]. A truly comprehensive study of magical realism in world literature would need to range much more widely and, I suspect, could be extended into other literatures, especially in the Near and Far East. (2-3)

Magical realist techniques of merging real with the unreal or the supernatural have long been associated with Latin America because of the continent's natural landscape, volcanoes and waterfalls; its indigenous cultures with their spiritual and religious traditions; and the political, social, and economic upheavals it had to undergo due to oppression of indigenous populations, the forced migration of African slaves, battle with colonial powers, followed by dictatorships. All the conditions that made magical realism a vehicle to describe and bear witness to the challenges of daily life exist in other parts of the world, especially in most postcolonial third-world countries, and therefore it would be useful to investigate their literature through the lens of magical realism.

Although magical realism is conceived as inherently political because it challenges several assumptions of order, it has never been viewed as a feminist genre. In fact, it also perpetuates some of the patriarchal culture's stereotypes "using the female body as a bridge to the beyond" (Faris 2). Yet, many practices of magical realism that make it relevant for political

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struggles might be pertinent to some issues in feminist theory and criticism. Magical realism is a literary mode that aims to seize the paradox of the union of opposites. It is characterized by two conflicting perspectives, one based on a rational view of reality and the other on the acceptance of the supernatural as prosaic reality. According to Angel Flores, magical realism involves the fusion of the real and the fantastic, in which the presence of the supernatural is often connected to the primeval or "magical" Indian mentality. Ray Verzasconi,[53] a celebrated critic, sees it as an expression of the New World reality which at once combines the rational elements of the European super-civilization and the irrational elements of the primitive. It therefore overthrows the realist view of a true or objective reality in favor of diversity and variety; as Wendy Faris explains, "Magical realism modifies and replenishes the dominant mode of realism in the West, challenging its basis of representation from within. That destabilization of a dominant form means that it has served as a particularly effective decolonizing tool" (1).

Magical realist techniques allow the writer to express what cannot be expressed under normal circumstances. Writers living under tyrannical dictatorships have typically used this mode to voice their concerns. For instance, Günter Grass's *The Tin Drum* and Patrick Suskind's *Perfume* were written after World War II in response to the Nazi regime in Germany. In addition, magical realism writers in Latin America criticize North American hegemony, while Milan Kundera used it to oppose the power of Soviet Communism. Toni Morrison wrote *Beloved* in direct response to the atrocities of slavery and its aftermath.

David Young points out that the political is part of magical realist work because the blending of the "magic" and the "real" is often represented as a "collision of cultures or

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[53]Ray Angelo Verzasconi, "Magical Realism and the Literary World of Miguel Ángel Asturias" (PhD Thesis, Seattle: University of Washington, 1965).

civilizations, one 'primitive' and the other 'civilized' and presumably 'realistic'" (140). For him,

magical realism is not so much a challenge to the conventions of literary realism, as it is to the

basic assumptions of modern positivistic thought: "Magical realism's inquiries drive deep,

questioning the political and metaphysical definitions of the real by which most of us live" (140).

Magical realist strategies merge different worlds, and evoke hybridity that has often been

exploited by postcolonial and post-modern writers to undermine Western obsession with

binaries. The supernatural and the fantastic have been used by these writers to question the

boundaries sketched by a binary approach. Magical realist elements encourage new perspectives

that allow the blurring of these boundaries between categories and erode them from within. Lois

Zamora agrees with this notion as she notes:

> Magical realism that draws upon cultural systems that are no less real than those
> upon which traditional literary realism in privileging mystery over reality
> transgresses the boundaries between mind and body, spirit and matter, life and
> death, real and imaginary, male and female. These boundaries are erased,
> transgressed or refashioned in magical realist texts. […]. Magical realist texts are
> subversive: their in-betweenness, their all-at-onceness encourages resistance to
> monolithic political and cultural structures, a feature that has made the mode
> particularly useful to writers in postcolonial cultures and, interestingly to women.
> (6)

It is the hybrid and the subversive aspect of magical realism that accords it a political

relevance, allowing postcolonial writers to use it as a device to decolonize the colonies. Could it

be used as a tool to decolonize women from patriarchal coding? Could Ananda Devi, for

example, use it to eliminate or refashion gender stereotypes, to reduce gender tensions and

traverse the boundaries created by gender stereotyping? Faris's answer to this question is an

enthusiastic and optimistic yes, as she believes that "the processes that contribute to the

decolonizing force of magical realism can also be seen to operate in relation to gender. In that

context, magical realism continues the process of patriarchal culture's disenchantment with itself

and its dominant forms of realistic representation" (4).

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For Faris, the hybridity inherent in magical realism has the potential to make space for a plurivocal "defocalized" narrative that can represent women as double-voiced, clear the boundary between the self and the other, and prepare ground for a narrative that integrates both a dominant and a muted mode in a given text, thereby according voice to the marginalized along with the dominant. According to Faris, magical realist texts tend to merge rather than separate different realms, emphasizing relations rather than individualization, and therefore align better with a female sensibility. Thus, one can discern a feminine thread in magical realism whether or not the author is a woman due to several aspects such as polyvocality and a sense of collective that is generally active in magical realist texts.

Isabelle Allende also sees a link between her magical realism and that of minority women writers in the United States: "Today, great writers from minority groups in the U.S. are finding their voice in the wonderful, rich imagery of magic realism. Writers such as Louise Erdrich, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and Amy Tan all have a unique, rich way of writing that can be described as magical realism" (55). In connecting herself to these minority women writers under the banner of magical realism, Allende enlists magical realism as a kind of support system for feminine writing, further suggesting its decolonizing potential for women.

In this chapter, I will analyze the merging as well as the juxtaposition of the real and the fantastic or the unreal to examine how it alters the sense of reality, and more specifically how Devi employs this approach to redefine narrative in a way that allows feminine voice to occupy a pivotal place in the new narrative dynamics emerging from this blend. By using elements from Hindu religion and culture, she constructs a world that allows the unreal to coexist with the real in the most matter-of-fact manner, creating a feminine world where patriarchal codes are subtly or radically challenged.

Drawing upon the insights from Wendy Faris, Isabel Allende and others who believe that magical realism can serve feminist projects and ambitions, I will explore the hybridity inherent in the genre, the persistent exchange between the real and the magical to understand how the "ineffable", the "irreducible" element can become the magical space that allows muffled voices to emerge. I will examine the gaps and interstices that become important sites of action and meaning. As Brenda Cooper states, "Magical realism strives, with greater or lesser success, to capture the paradox of the unity of opposites; it contests polarities such as history versus magic, the pre-colonial past versus the post-industrial present and life versus death. Capturing boundaries between spaces is to exist in a third space, in the fertile interstices between these extremes of time and space" (1).

In first part of this chapter, I will analyze the notion of third space to examine two small towns, namely Soupir in the novel entitled *Soupir* and Souffleur in *L'arbre fouet* as special universes marked by phantoms, ghosts and specters from the past that invade the present and alter the manner in which the reader perceives reality. These are the magical spaces where reality gives way to the extra-real and the unreal in order to voice concerns that cannot be expressed in realistic settings (as understood by the Western reader) or in the "master's" language.

As myths and folktales constitute an important part of all ancient civilizations and even today seem to organize and communicate all ancient wisdom, many magical realists have found these narratives to be useful tools. The mythological world allows the unreal to intervene in the real in a natural and matter-of-fact manner. When fairy tales and legends become an essential part of the narrator's reality, they create a fiction in which the recognizably realistic merges with the unexpected and the inexplicable; elements of dreams, fairy story, or mythology combine with the everyday; fabulous and fantastical events are included in a narrative that otherwise maintains an objective realistic tone. This marks a strong desire among the novelists to reach beyond the

confines of realism by drawing upon fable, folktale, and myth while maintaining a strong contemporary social relevance.

In Devi's works, too, the reader discerns a juxtaposition of the realistic and the fantastic, bizarre and skillful time shifts, and convoluted narratives and plots through the use of myths and fairy stories. She deftly mixes everyday realities with fantasy drawn from the rich interplay of European and native culture, broadening the reader's sense of the real to include magic, myth, and miracles, and thus enrich her idea of what is "real" by incorporating all dimensions of the imagination, particularly as expressed in magic, myth, and religion.

The second part of this chapter will therefore focus on Devi's use of mythological figures and folktales to open a new space of dialogue for women. As myths and folktales become an essential part of Devi's world, I examine what emerges from the convergence of the ancient and the contemporary, how the two influence each other in a way that not only allows Devi to question the realities presented by patriarchs for centuries but also to intervene in this kind of story-telling by rewriting some of these narratives.

3.1 Women in Magical Space: Soupir and Souffleur as Feminine Spaces

3.1.1 Soupir, an In-between Space

Ananda Devi's sixth novel *Soupir* derives its title from the name of a town situated on Rodrigues, the smallest of the Mascarene Islands and a dependency of Mauritius in the Indian Ocean. In the novel Soupir is inhabited by an old lady named Constance, generally referred to as "folle," and her rabbits. The narrator notes that Soupir is a place sandwiched between land and sea in a way that it is difficult to tell where the land ends and the sea begins. According to him, Soupir is a peculiar place situated at the side of a hill, suspended between the ground and the sky: "Soupir. Englouti dans une béance du ciel, un paysage lunaire à moitié détaché du sol comme une dent déracinée si bien que même les racines des arbres couraient sur la surface sans

pouvoir s'y enfoncer" (148). It is so small and insignificant that the narrator describes it as "lieu-dit". Soupir's geography and size thus make it a strange and almost nonexistent space, according it a unique character that resonates in other aspects. It is also a land in-between two worlds, the world of the living and the dead. After Constance commits suicide, the land is taken over not only by the narrator and his friends, but also by the ghostly spirit of Constance, leading to a persistent tension between the living and the dead.

The narrator and his friends move to Soupir, hoping to grow *ganja,*[54] and make a fortune, but their plans fail as Soupir turns out to be a harsh, arid land that has nothing to offer. As they enter Soupir, they are struck by its rocky and rough terrain: "Soupir. Lieu de ronces, cailloux, roche basalte, en déséquilibre sous le ciel bleu, écrasé par la bouche des collines. Il ne pouvait s'appeler autrement. C'est là qu'on naît, c'est là qu'on vit et c'est là qu'on crève, un lepasan entre deux ombres" (1). Although they move to Soupir with the hope of being welcomed by this place, it only offers its rage and aggression to them. The unease and frustration that the narrator and his companions experience in Soupir is summed up in the words of the narrator: "Suspendus à nos jours, à nos heures, arrachant une existence à la mer et à la terre, avec notre odeur de poisson salé […] notre irrésolu" (25). The narrator feels as if he and his friends are existing in a limbo, suspended in time, between the sea and the land, as they struggle every moment to hold on to their existence. In fact, the narrator feels that Soupir has extracted all life from them and made them into living phantoms: "Nous n'étions plus que des coquilles vide à la chair rongée" (24). Soupir imprisons them with its heat and almost turns them into floating ghosts: "La colline fumait de la première chaleur. La vapeur montait de la terre, entourait nos chevilles et nous faisait flotter au lieu de marcher" (148).

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[54] Ganja is a popular Sanskrit term for cannabis or marijuana.

On the one hand, Soupir's rocky and rugged terrain with its aggressive heat turns men into apparitions; on the other, it provides a rich and nurturing environment for the dead spirits who inhabit this town: "Nous sommes seuls à marchander notre vie avec la terre, […] à plaidoyer notre cause avec des fantômes plus vivants que nous" (148). Soupir is therefore a place where the spirits and ghosts reign. The living plead with the ghosts for their existence as the two co-exist in Soupir.

As the narrator walks on the sea shore one evening, he feels that he is surrounded by innumerable spirits, and that he himself is transformed into one: "Mais venu là, ce soir-là, j'ai marché parmi les ombres, sans aucun son, dans un silence tourbeux, et je me suis senti comme ces âmes errantes qui ne peuvent jamais mourir. Il m'a semblé que nous étions tous comme cela: des écorces vides, déjà mortes, qui ambulaient avec une immobilité dans le regard, le cœur pétrifié par une ancienne souffrance" (113). The narrator believes that he is metamorphosing into a ghostly creature due to misery and stasis resulting from the insularity of the island and fears that he will end up resembling the spirits that haunt Soupir. The truth, however, is that in Soupir the spirits are much more vibrant and lively than the narrator himself. Constance, for example, in her first physical appearance after her death, seems healthy and beautiful, bearing no sign of being dead: "C'est là que j'ai vu Constance. Elle est apparue, pas très loin, une silhouette aussi grise et brune que les arbres, mais bien plus souple. Elle était vêtue d'une ample jupe de couleur claire et d'un corsage fleuri. Elle allait pieds nus. Ses cheveux n'étaient pas serrés dans des bigoudis mais laissés libres. […] ses pas ressemblaient à une danse lente" (113).

Constance's description makes no reference to the fact that she is dead. She appears more zestful than the pale, fear-struck narrator to whom she smiles as she accosts him. There are numerous references to her meetings with narrator's friend Ferblanc, who was even caught humming the song that Constance had on one of her records, before her encounter with the

narrator, hinting that Constance's presence in the text almost seems real. Hence, there is little element of surprise in the eyes of the narrator as he sees Constance the first time after her death. Although he seems to be a little scared, his fear soon fades away and the encounter is narrated in a matter-of-fact manner, as if Constance's presence were something natural and the encounter something expected by the narrator. As he and the other characters in the novel accept the presence of ghosts with ease, the reader is also forced to submit to the persistent tension between the real and the unreal. In her essay on magical realism, Angela Flores notes the same: "In magical realism we find the transformation of the common and the everyday into the awesome and the unreal. It is predominantly an art of surprises. Time exists in a kind of timeless fluidity and the unreal happens as part of reality. Once the reader accepts the *fait accompli*, the rest follows with logical precision" (115). In this way, like many magical realist writers, Devi introduces the mysterious or the supernatural element in her text in a matter-of-fact manner so that the real and the unreal both occupy an equal place in the text.

Similarly, the appearance of the second ghost brings no surprise to the narrator or his friends. According to a popular myth in the island of Rodrigues, there is a female ghost sitting on a chariot waiting eternally to be carried to her ailing husband. As a result, people avoid passing by the chariot as it invokes "un désir fou d'aller tout droit sans jamais se retourner" (139). The narrator and his friends, on the contrary, call upon this spirit to direct them to Soupir, as they are tired of Rodrigues:

> Mais à présent, nous étions délibérément réunis autour d'elle. Peut-être nous
> sentions-nous maintenant plus proches des fantômes-- celui de la charrette et celui
> de Soupir-- que des gens de chair et d'os qui persistaient à se battre pour sauver
> cette île de son propre avenir. Nous étions pris entre deux époques. (139)

The ghosts in Soupir then are not mere apparitions hiding on the margins. On the contrary, in this novel both the female ghosts occupy a pivotal position as they become guides, helping

and directing the humans. The ghosts do not simply appear as characters according a supernatural and fantastic element to the novel. They also become narrators, appropriating the narrative "je," which is then shared amongst several living characters and two ghosts, according the ghosts a status of equality with their living counterparts. Devi's spirits do not haunt or trouble the humans following the stereotypical belief attached to ghosts and are therefore not represented in opposition to the living. On the contrary, they act as guides and saviors of the living characters in the novel, thereby playing an important role in the construction of reality

What is particularly interesting is that the two spirits are instrumental in driving the narrator and his companions to Soupir. It is Constance, for example, who asks the narrator and his friends to move there: " […] la folle m'a dit que nous devons aller habiter à Soupir et que tout ira mieux, elle a envie de compagnie au lieu d'en rire, nous avons fait ce qu'il voulait, nous sommes allés habiter à Soupir" (22). The narrator and his companions, who have complete confidence in the mad lady, take her advice without second thoughts. When they are unable to find their way to Soupir, another ghost, the lady with the chariot, directs them: "Mais avant de nous mettre en route, là, près de la charrette, nous avons invoqué le fantôme de la femme qui attendait. Elle seul pouvait finalement nous guider, figée comme elle l'était dans son éternel départ" (140). Thus, the narrator and his companions are led to Soupir by these two ghosts.

The directions given by the lady with the chariot are particularly important. Instead of directing the narrator and his companions, she explains how she perceives Soupir and the rules of survival in that place: "Suivez le ruisseau jusqu'à Constance. Les femmes de cette île sont sa peine et sa chair. Hommes, ayez l'orgueil de l'humble. Femmes, oubliez votre servage. Partez maintenant, puisque le matin sera lourd. Vous n'entendrez plus jamais le coq chanter et votre réveil aura la tristesse des derniers soupirs" (140). According to her description Soupir seems less of a place in reality but a phantasmagoric space of ultimate misery and sorrow. In order to

survive in Soupir, men have to let go of their false masculine pride and women their servitude.

Soupir then is a place that does not follow gender stereotypes that prevail in the rest of Rodrigues

or the world. The lady ghost's directions certainly invite the readers to understand the

metaphorical significance of Soupir. The following section examines Soupir as an extraordinary

magical space where gender tensions are played out in a way that questions gender stereotyping.

3.1.1.1 Soupir as "folle"/ "folle" as Soupir-- a Feminine Space

As Soupir was initially inhabited only by Constance and her rabbits, the place got its name

and identity from her: "Lieu-dit. Il y a dix ans, il n'existait pas. Il n'y avait là qu'une folle qui

habitait une misérable case et qui élevait des lapins. On pense que c'est elle qui a trouvé ce nom"

(16). As a result, the place and Constance have a strong and long lasting relation.

After the narrator moves to Soupir with his friends, they kill Constance's rabbits, feast on

them for numerous days, and get severe indigestion. Ferblanc attributes their illness to

Constance's rage: "Après le massacre des lapins, il a dit, maintenant la folle est entrée en nous, et

ce n'était que son corps pourri pendu à l'arbre, elle s'était elle, réfugiée dans ses lapins. Elle ne

nous laissera aucun répit" (22). Ferblanc's words not only indicate Constance's presence in

Soupir even after her death, but also signal her anger and fury against the people who inhabit the

place and kill her rabbits.

After her death, Constance is no longer a helpless lady leading a solitary life seeking human

company, but rather a powerful spirit that works in conjunction with nature to assert herself. The

narrator states that Constance's rage is not limited to their indigestion, but that she surfaces and

resurfaces in multiple forms to express her anger:

> Le premier soir, personne n'a pu dormir à cause de ce vent qui n'était pas un vent
> mais un souffle continu et obscur qui suintait de la terre. On avait l'impression
> que c'était la folle qui revenait soupirer ici, que l'air même était chargé de son
> reproche et de sa rancune envers ceux qui l'avaient abandonnée de son vivant et

qui avaient détruit ses lapins après sa mort. On se disait qu'elle ne nous laisserait
pas en paix. (84)

The reader gradually realizes that Soupir is a territory completely governed by the "folle."
When Ferblanc's plan of planting *ganja* fails, he accords his failure to the sterility of the place
and blames the "folle," emphasizing her hatred for the new inhabitants: "Elle était pâle et sèche.
Elle ne donnerait rien. Elle était et demeurerait stérile par haine et par rage. Et par volonté de ne
jamais être la mère nourricière que nous attendions. Elle ne se plierait pas à nos désirs. Soupir
était un piège de la folle. Rien ne nous réussirait ici. Cette colline était le dernier retranchement,
celui des désespérés" (52). The narrator, too, insists on the ubiquitousness of the "folle" in
Soupir and blames all his failures on her. What is precisely interesting in these passages is the
strong bond the narrator establishes between "folle" and Soupir as if they were one. Soupir as a
space functions on the whims of the "folle by offering its sterility and aridness to the new
inhabitants. In fact, the narrator at one point states that the two are inseparable: "Et la présence
de la folle. On ne pouvait pas y échapper. Elle était là, elle ne partirait pas. Soupir, c'était elle"
(45) Living in Soupir thus means living with the omnipresent "folle."

Soupir thus becomes a space charged with the presence of the "folle." The narrator and his
friends who attempt to control the space by slaughtering her rabbits, find themselves entrapped
in it and begin to feel frustrated as the sterile Soupir does not allow plants to grow, thereby
making men useless. As a result, the women and children of Soupir do not care for them: "Parce
qu'à ce moment-là plupart d'entre nous avaient tout perdu dans le dernier cyclone, perdu jusqu'à
notre illégitime fierté mâle parce que ni les femmes ni les enfants ne nous regardaient plus du
même œil, perdu jusqu'à notre solidarité d'hommes parce que cela ne nous apportait rien" (50).
They completely lose their masculine pride and solidarity. As they are no longer the bread
winners of the house, they are viewed as good for nothing. The women of Soupir do not seem to

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bother with them and they are left to fend for themselves: "Après quelque temps, elles se sont mises à nous négliger. Elles préparaient les repas, qu'elles servaient aux enfants et mangeaient ensuite elles-mêmes, ne nous laissant que les restes de leurs marmites. Les femmes et les enfants d'abord, les bons à rien ensuite. On grattait les restes carbonisés, attachés aux flancs des casseroles" (156). As *ganja* fails to grow, the men are no longer respected by the women and the children of Soupir and they feel emasculated.

The narrator himself considers all men impotent and blames the failure of the plant on their impotence, their inability to take the responsibilities as men: "Il [Ferblanc] donne le coup de grâce aux plantes déjà détruits par le soleil, par le vent, par la sécheresse, par l'impossible. Mais détruits surtout par nous, par notre impotence, par notre innocence" (163).

As the men in Soupir lose their masculine pride in a reverse move, the feminine ghosts and the women of Soupir seem to gain agency. Constance and the lady with the chariot are bound in a sisterly solitude: "Comme une passeuse de crues, la lune refusait de partir et j'ai fini par croire que c'était Constance qui nous regardait, le visage plat et rayonnant. Elle suivait le parcours de sa sœur de la charrette, qui venait la rejoindre dans leur solitude commune. Nous, les hommes, n'étions que des prétextes" (146). As Soupir becomes a feminine space occupied by the two spirits, men are relegated to the margins. The magic of the novel, however, lies in bringing Constance, the spirit, together with the women of Soupir. At numerous instances the narrator confuses between Marivonne, who moves to Soupir with the narrator, her daughter Noëlla and the ghost of Constance:

> Lorsque je [le narrateur] me suis mis à chanter la chanson de Luis Mariano, elle [Constance] est venue s'asseoir sur mes genoux, comme un enfant qui se repose. [...]. Mais elle écoute, et au bout d'un moment elle chante en sourdine avec moi, dans sa gorge le même mouvement de va-et-vient qu'au bas de son corps, et moi, raidi de la tête aux pieds par cette lenteur gutturale, je pense que c'est Marivonne et je ne sais plus. (195)

Constance thus becomes so much a part of reality that the narrator can no longer distinguish between the real and the unreal. It is this merger of the living women characters of Soupir with the ghost Constance that accords agency to the women of Soupir.

The two feminine ghosts unite with the women of Soupir in solidarity as the city with its ambience and its cyclonic wind becomes a means of expression for them. Through Constance and her extra-ordinary relationship with Soupir, women obtain access to the same space, making it an instrument of feminine resistance. Soupir then becomes a magical place whose cyclonic wind is not just a sign of bad weather but is also a symbol of feminine rage, as it carries the sighs of the women inhabiting this place. Through nature women, dead and alive, come together to assert themselves as men struggle for their existence against feminine aggression: "Le temps, ici, ne se soucierait des hommes. Il faudrait arracher notre existence de la pierre et chaque jour serait un miracle dont nous n'aurions que faire. On se réveillerait et on entendrait le vent épineux sorti des poumons de la folle" (149). The wild winds that possess the power to tear everything apart are empowered by Constance's breath/sigh symbolizing a collective feminine fury.

The title of the novel *Soupir* is also significant as it emphasizes the importance of sigh in a place where the hostility of wild winds not only expresses nature's rage and magnanimity but also asserts the fury and aggression of the women inhabiting the place. Soupir is then one collective feminine sigh that becomes wild as it merges with the cyclonic winds of the ocean. Although a sigh is a silent, harmless expression of sorrow or tiredness, it may be read as a subtle act of subversion. It usually does not carry rage in it. In order for a sigh to become forceful, it requires the energy of other sighs and the power of wild winds. Only an extraordinary magical place like Soupir can enable the feminine sighs to fuse and create a powerful "soupir."

In *Soupir*, Devi's figurativity allows women to use the cyclonic winds in order to express their rage against the male community that has abandoned its responsibilities and duties. As the

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wind carrying feminine sighs and voices becomes aggressive, the men are troubled by its incessant fury. Thus, an element of nature comes to the forefront and joins the feminine force to bring men to a realization of their duties and responsibilities: "Ils n'entendaient plus rien d'autre que le chant incessant des voix. Des voix, des voix qui n'arrêtaient pas de dire et de grincer, de gémir, de hurler, de caresser, de souffleter, de souffrir. Elles parlaient tous en même temps, Constance et la femme de la charrette, rejointes par celle que Corinne [un personnage abandonné par son mari] avait brûlée" (155).

The feminine voices acquire their strength and violence from their sense of solidarity. The narrator describes how they were unable to handle all the voices at the same time, and as all voices merged, it was difficult to fight such rage: "Elles arrivaient au même moment et se mettaient à brailler leur peine et leur colère. […] elles nous entaillaient jusqu'aux parties les plus intimes, elles nous travaillaient comme une pâte informe dont elles tiraient la plus lancinante des douleurs. On ne pouvait pas lutter contre telle rage" (155). Women thus derive agency not as solitary beings but as a collective. It is the connection between the ghosts and the women of Soupir that not only bridges the gap between the living and the dead, the real and the supernatural but also allows subversion of all possible boundaries. Devi's act of favoring collective and communal voices over individual ones thus resonates with Faris: "With respect to communal voice, magical realist texts tend to merge rather than separate different realms, thus implicitly emphasizing relationship more strongly than individuation, a mode often associated with a female sensibility" (178). In Devi's novel, then, the ghosts propose a model of the self that is collective, so that subjectivity is not singular but multiple.

Although Soupir becomes a feminine space where women obtain agency as they come together with the ghosts and appropriate space as an instrument of resistance, the narrator along with his friends rapes his own handicapped daughter Noëlla in what is undoubtedly the most

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shocking scene in the novel, thus challenging the dynamics of the feminine space of Soupir. The

hostility of Soupir's violent winds coupled with the rage of the women push the men (narrator

and his friends) to insanity as Soupir becomes a place where no relationship matters and human

frustration reaches its zenith:

> Soupir était le lieu des rêves terribles. C'était comme une contagion qui nous avait
> frappés. […]. Les gens s'accouplaient n'importe comment, n'importe où, comme
> pris d'envies soudaines de défier leur sort. Comme des cabris, comme des lapins,
> ils se chevauchaient, jeunes et vieux, frères et sœurs, pères et filles, hommes et
> animaux, il n'y avait plus aucune limite, aucune retenue, peu importe les regards
> lourds et vengeurs, il n'y avait plus de règles à Soupir. […]. Ils n'entendaient plus
> rien d'autre que le chant incessant des voix. Des voix, des voix qui n'arrêtaient
> pas de dire, de grincer, de gémir, de hurler, de caresser, de souffleter, de souffrir.
> (155)

As Soupir becomes an inimical space populated by unfriendly voices, can one say that Noëlla's

rape is only a sexual assault triggered against a helpless victim who had no means of running

away or defending herself? The narrator presents two possible interpretations of this act: "Dans

une réalité, nous étions des géants. Nous accomplissions un acte de pureté extrême. Nous nous

déchargions de toute honte et nous nous offrions à sa rédemption. Dans une autre réalité, nous

étions quatre vieux soulards entrés dans leur folie et cherchant une victime qui ne pouvait pas

fuir" (214). Is it possible to read Noëlla's rape as an act of redemption for the men of Soupir?

3.1.1.2 Noëlla's Rape: An Act of Aggression, Impotence or Redemption?

In an interesting twist in the novel, Noëlla takes up the narrative "je" from the narrator

Patrice immediately after he discusses at length how he saved Marivonne, Noëlla's mother.

Noëlla, on the contrary, accuses him of cowardice for having raped her mother and running away

as she lay unconscious: "Je suis née le jour de ma procréation, Patrice l'Eclairé, et je me

souviens de tout. Et surtout, de cette lâcheté qui t'a fait fuir au moment où ma mère ouvrait les

yeux. […] toi, le fuyard, c'est ainsi que je te vois" (199). Noëlla's accusing looks charged with

hatred make Patrice uncomfortable.

Elsewhere in the novel Noëlla, portrayed as the communal voice of the women of Soupir,

along with Royal Palm condemns the men for their cowardice.[55] Ferblanc, for example, is

denounced for giving false hopes to the people of Soupir through his ideas of *ganja*: "la ganja la

ronge et la dévore et la détruit à petit feu. Elle [Noëlla] dit que, c'est toi Ferblanc, qui, tout ce

temps, a accompli la malédiction de Soupir" (211). Noëlla accuses another character, Louis

Bienvenue, of leaving his wife Corinne for another woman: " Te reste-t-il quelque chose entre

les jambes après ton passage chez la femme de Petit Galet? […] Es-tu homme à affronter la

vérité, Louis Bienvenue, lorsque Noëlla la partagera avec le monde? " (211). Noëlla and Royal

Palm accuse Bertrand Laborieux of abandoning his little daughter: "On dit, Bertrand Laborieux,

qu'elle est à la fois ta fille et ta pute. Ça fait quoi à un homme, l'inceste, dis, Bertrand?" Noëlla

therefore becomes an embodiment of all the accusations against the men of Soupir.

Enumerating the reasons that drove the narrator and his friends to the act of rape, Patrice

acknowledges that Noëlla's accusations unsettle him and his friends:

> Tremblants de ces vérités inversées et désespérément tordues, et ne supportant
> plus la peur dans nos yeux lorsque nous nous sommes regardés, nous avons
> montré les dents en grognant. C'est ainsi que nous nous sommes levés comme un
> seul homme, unis tous les quatre par notre traîtrise, sûrs de faire ce qu'il nous
> fallait faire parce que les hommes sont comme ça, ils n'hésitent pas, ils agissent,
> ils décident, ils agrippent leur destin et le broient dans leur paume, ils crachent sur
> ceux qui ne crient pas en eux, ils ont peur de rien et moins d'eux-mêmes, encore
> moins du battement du sang dans leur bas-ventre qui leur donne des enflures
> guerrières et conquérantes. (212)

The narrator ironically criticizes not only himself and his friends who were driven to the act,

because they realized they had failed as men. He also criticizes some of the traits that are

essentially viewed as masculine. Although he initially acknowledges the shame and fear he and

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[55] Discussed in detail in chapter 2. 2.2.1

his friends felt after hearing all the accusations, he later asserts that men are never afraid, thereby recognizing the fact that their aggression against Noëlla was not an act of masculinity but rather the opposite. They abused her, because they were afraid and realized that destiny had defeated them, not because they had the power to take destiny into their masculine hands.

Noëlla's rape is then triggered by a deep seated frustration in the male characters whose masculinity is threatened in the phantasmagoric space of Soupir, and who are constantly tortured by the wild winds that carry feminine rage targeted at them. Noëlla's rape is their last attempt to revive their lost pride. The act of rape, however, ends up doing the opposite. Devi's depiction of the rape projects men as helpless beings instead of ruthless brutes, and is particularly interesting as it reverses power dynamics.

While Noëlla is being raped, she utters the words "ayo mama" (Oh my mother!). There is nothing unusual about these words as they are pronounced by Rodriguians all the time. However, in this particular case these words allude to Noëlla's mother Marivonne, who was raped and abandoned earlier by the narrator, Patrice:

> *Ayo mama*, Oh, ma mère. Mots qu'on prononçait tous tout le temps, depuis toujours, depuis que l'on savait parler, mais qu'il me semblait seulement entendre pour la première fois. Jamais on ne les avait prononcés de cette façon. Pas avec ce regard-là, yeux de puits jamais sondé, yeux de gouffres mal vécus. C'est à ce moment-là que l'immensité de ce que nous avions fait m'a frappé. Lorsque ces deux mots ont invoqué Marivonne. […]. C'est après ces deux mots que nous en avons finis. Et puis nous sommes partis. Il ne restait plus rien. Même plus nos ombres sur les murs. Tout s'était aplani et estompé dans un abrupt crépuscule. (80-81)

These words evoke the narrator's guilt and frustration and become a reiteration of the earlier accusations Noëlla made against the narrator and his friends that drove them to the act of rape. As she reinforces the accusations through these words, she brings the men back to reason. As Noëlla cries for help, her enunciation robs the rapists of all their power.

On the one hand, the narrator sees Noëlla's body as a harmless little thing offering itself to him to be exploited before the rape: "Elle s'était livrée à nous d'elle-même. Elle était consentante, offerte, abandonnée. A la voir par terre, si petite, nous nous sommes sentis grands" (212). On the other hand, as he penetrates this body, he feels a burning sensation as if he is walking on fire. He experiences the same harshness and dryness that Soupir had offered when they first entered the hamlet:

> […] et ça brûle. Ça brûle, ce premier pas en Noëlla. Une marche dans l'aridité, sans réconfort ni semblants. J'entre dans son désert et le reconnais. C'est la terre de Rodrigues, […] Bwa Mor, Brûlé et Soupir tout en un. […] Quel bond hors du temps et de la chaux dans la pénombre des vies interrompues et des chemins sans buts. (212)

The narrator's analogy between Noëlla's body, Soupir, and Rodrigues broadens the context and significance of his act of penetration. It can then be read as the act of violence not just on Noëlla and the other women but also on the town of Soupir and the island of Rodrigues. It is this act of violence that not only reminds him of but also makes him understand that he has failed as a man. As Patrice realizes this, he sees Noëlla's body in a new light. Now it seems bigger and greater than his own: "Parce que ce jour-là, elle est bien plus grande que lui [soleil] et que nous tous" (212). Patrice's act of penetration, then, is not just a conventional act of violence that allows a man to exercise his power over the feminine body and assert his manhood but an act that alludes to his failure as a man. In fact, the manner in which Patrice describes this act, expressing his willingness to take the "brûlure" as a responsible father, presents Patrice as a victim and the act of rape as an opportunity to reverse his nonchalant attitude towards Marivonne and Noëlla: "Il fallait que je me livre nu à son âme chercheuse, à sa raison, à son tranchant. Que j'accepte de marcher sur ses braises, parce que c'était la seule façon de faire acte de père" (213). As Patrice offers himself to his daughter and submits to Noëlla for the first time, accepting his fatherhood, this act allows him to be critical of himself and is therefore redemptive. Such a

representation of rape also challenges traditional representations in which woman is the victim and man the aggressor. In extending Noëlla's rape to the land of Soupir, Devi then introduces new dynamics of power in this particular act of aggression.

At the same time, Noëlla is not viewed as a passive receptor of masculine violence ready to be exploited but rather as a maternal space ready to absorb the masculine aggression, thereby liberating them from their sins and facilitating their redemption: "Il nous fallait accomplir l'impensable dans le noir. Nous, les derniers hommes du passé, les reliques sans avenir, chargés de toutes nos trahisons et de tous nos abandons, il nous fallait nous pencher sur le vide de Noëlla, et l'habiter. Dans une réalité nous étions des géants. Nous accomplissions un acte de pureté extrême. Nous nous déchargions de toute honte" (214). Noëlla's rape then becomes an act of motherly sacrifice that expiates the men from their sins, and in doing so accords agency to her.

After her death, Noëlla appears with Constance in a magical moment. She is no longer a handicapped and helpless person but a spirit that dances on the sea. She surprises the men with her looks. She seems so alive and beautiful that they forget they murdered her. Noëlla's death then is not the end of her life but a stage that allows her to reach another domain. As Ferblanc looks at the two spirits, he is astonished to see hope and happiness in their eyes.

> Il la croyait encore vivante, Noëlla, et elle avait l'air en effet, incroyable, toujours aussi épaisse, la peau toujours aussi brillante, le regard toujours aussi dense, la bouche toujours aussi pleine. La seule différence était que Constance, qui était maigre et toute petite, la portait avec aisance, comme si elle ne pesait rien du tout. Elles semblaient danser, légères. Marcher sur un pli de vent qui leur donnait une allure de voiles sur une houle. Quelque chose, dans leurs yeux, parlait de continuité. Elles demeuraient, non sous forme d'esprits ou de fantôme, mais sous une forme presque tangible, presque humaines. […] je ne sais pas pourquoi elles nous étaient plus claires que le silence de nos femmes. (218)

Noëlla and Constance appear as ghostly spirits and in this state they are more visible than the women of Soupir to the narrator and his friends. The presence of the two ghosts leads the four

men to a self-realization, as the narrator and his friends follow the two spirits to the top of the hill from where they can see Soupir and Rodrigues, enabling them to view the world differently: "Alors, nous les avons suivies aussi, que nous restait-il d'autre à faire? […] C'est comme si nous pouvions l'absorber. Prendre chaque pente et chaque couteau, chaque amas de broussailles et chaque groupement de toits, chaque pli de la route et chaque carré de légumes, et enfin toute l'étendue de l'océan autour, et les avaler un à un jusqu'à ce que leur brûlure soit entrée bien loin au fond de nous" (219).

In the last scene of the novel, as Constance puts Noëlla in Patrice's arms, it is the first time in the novel that Patrice recognizes Noëlla as his own daughter: "Sans même y penser, je tends les bras et Constance y dépose Noëlla. Je prends ma fille contre moi" (219). Patrice's recognition of Noëlla as his daughter is indicative of the fact that he acknowledges his acts of cowardice, precisely the rape of Marivonne and his failure to bear the responsibility of the act. As Patrice holds her in his arms in a paternal embrace, Noëlla too responds like a daughter. For the first time her looks are devoid of accusation, purged of all hatred as if she has forgiven him for all his cowardice: "J'entends la douce ravane à l'intérieur de Noëlla, et le regard qu'elle pose sur moi est, enfin, débarrassé de toute haine" (220). Noëlla's look indicates that she has forgiven her father, as he has realized his mistakes and understood his failure as a man. This moment of forgiveness is redemptive. Noëlla's rape, then, is metaphorically a reenactment of Marivonne's rape in order to make Patrice and his friends realize their folly, and cannot be understood without the magical elements that shape and construct the reality of Soupir. Another such magical place that becomes a feminine instrument of resistance against patriarchal coding is the town of Souffleur in *L'arbre fouet.*

3.1.2 Souffleur, a Magical Space

Like Soupir, Souffleur is another small town existing at the crossroads of two different worlds: that of the living and the dead. The novel opens inviting its reader to a dark and somber place: "Mort du jour, au Souffleur. Et la mer, dans les rochers, a son chant d'écume, son cri d'eau troublée […] le bruit de la mer est semblable à celui de la mort: terrible et infini" (7). The reader thus encounters death at the very onset. The narrator perceives this ancient place as an "endroit sans âge" (7), burdened by the history of numerous centuries.

Souffleur may be small in size but it abounds in natural beauty as exemplified by trees, birds, and sea. It is also inhabited by many mysterious creatures. As the narrator enters Souffleur, she feels a strange heaviness as if she is disturbing the equilibrium of this place:

> La première fois que j'ai tenté d'explorer les environs, j'ai senti que les choses en étaient remuées, dérangées. Les arbres s'agitaient, mal à l'aise. Les fleurs avaient l'air de pâlir. L'herbe ne reconnaissait pas mes pas, ni l'air mon souffle. J'étais intruse devant laquelle se dérobent toutes les intimités […] mais je distinguais partout une énergie folle, péremptoire et indomptée, qui commande ou condamne, qui crée ou qui détruit, et qui n'aime pas l'humain. (2)

The narrator Aeena feels out of place in Souffleur as it has its own character and energy to which the narrator needs to adapt in order to become a part of this space. In order to belong there the narrator needs to undo her earlier habits and relearn everything: "Je devais réapprendre à marcher, à respirer, à me mouvoir sans déranger les ordres entrelacés des arbres et des créatures. M'effacer, pour mieux leur appartenir. […]. Peut-être à la longue finira-t-il par s'opérer en moi une obscure transformation. […]. Je deviendrai, moi aussi, un peu arbre, un peu oiseau" (11). She realizes that the only way to exist in Souffleur is to forget her old self and become one with the space even if that implies complete metamorphosis.

As dogs wander outside Aeena's house attracted by the presence of something old and ancient, Devi alludes to the presence of something mysterious that cannot be seen.

> Quelque chose les attire peut-être ici, cette présence vieillie que je sens moi-même dans la maison et alentour. Mais il n'y a rien de tangible, ni d'identifiable. […] il y a des choses qu'il est difficile de supporter, tous ces inconnus qui imprègnent la terre et la rendent dense et multiforme. Ces mystères conjugués qui nous entourent et que l'on renie ou que l'on ignore. (15)

Devi's Souffleur then is a magical space inhabited by mysterious creatures that are not visible to the narrator's eyes, but whose presence can be discerned through the numerous hidden signs such as the barking of the dogs. Devi's text therefore takes the reader beyond the reality that is visible. She invites her reader into a different realm, a magical realm where reality is not restricted to what is seen but also constitutes elements that are invisible to the naked eye.

In this novel Devi uses the cultural concept of reincarnation to introduce extra-real or magical elements. Here the reader does not encounter ghosts or ghostly spirits as was the case in Soupir, but an extra-real that is more intangible, because the narrator herself changes forms in order to become the person she was in her previous incarnation, Dévika. The reader then discerns the presence of Dévika not as a ghost or a spirit but as narrator's past, making it more complicated for the reader to grasp the story.

As Aeena recalls the past, Dévika makes an appearance in different forms. At times she appears as an entity separate from the narrator while at other instances Aeena herself transforms into Dévika. Moreover, there are moments when the narrator is both Aeena and Dévika simultaneously, making it difficult for the reader to pin down either one. A reader ignorant of the notion of reincarnation would find it difficult to comprehend the text. Even those who are familiar with this concept find the tale chaotic as it is not a typical tale of reincarnation in which one recalls one's past life. Devi employs this notion to create a web of possibilities that allows her to play with the characters and bring different histories together-- the individual histories of Aeena and Dévika and the communal history of slavery attached to "l'arbre fouet," tied together

through a common place Souffleur. The town of Souffleur and "l' arbre fouet" thus become pivotal as they are the point of convergence for different stories.

The narrator's house and the orchard[56] in Souffleur play a significant role in the dynamics of the novel as they invoke memory and facilitate the process of remembrance and thereby become actants in the narrative. Aeena moves to her house in Souffleur after spending several years in an asylum. She inherited the house and the orchard, where the story takes place, from her deceased father who bought this property without the knowledge of Aeena and her mother. As Aeena explores the attic of this house, she finds that the house earlier belonged to a family V…., Dévika's family that moved to that house from India in 1908.

The attic becomes sacred for Aeena, a place of refuge as it reveals her previous life to her. Aeena returns to the attic several times in the course of the novel, sometimes to excavate Dévika's story and sometimes to tell her own. It is in the attic that Dévika makes her appearance for the first time, encouraging Aeena to narrate her tale in order to understand her past. Thus, the Souffleur that resisted the presence of the narrator initially opens itself to Aeena's unceasing struggles, allowing her to uncover and understand its mysteries.

In addition to the attic there are other places in the house that facilitate Aeena's process of recollection. As she begins her exploration, the entire house becomes alive as she discerns Dévika's presence everywhere. When Aeena follows Dominique and her lover Suresh to the barn expecting to see them making love, she instead sees them looking at another couple:

> Leurs yeux sont fixés sur un endroit sombre, au fond de la grange. Je suis leur regard et y perçois aussi des remous. Petit à petit, il me semble qu'il y a là, presque invisibles, deux corps réunis. Une jeune femme toute en rondeurs, aux longs cheveux noirs, et un homme maigre mais puissant, qui l'enlace et la retient au sol. Entre eux, pas d'amour, mais un défi, mais une rage. Au bout d'un moment, ils ont disparu, mais leur énergie ne s'est pas effacée. J'ai fermé les

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[56] The narrator's house and the orchard are the places where the narrated tale takes place. The house inherited by the narrator is the place where Dévika's family resided several years ago. As Aeena occupies this space, the memory of her previous life returns to her.

yeux, effrayée comme Suresh et Dominique par l'invisible qui prend peu à peu chair autour de nous. (60)

The reader later learns that the couple in question is Dévika and the untouchable who had made love in the same barn several years ago and that the barn still reverberates with their energy. This invisible force takes shape in a magical sequence where the couple appears out of nowhere and surprises the narrator, the characters, and the reader. Devi skillfully uses the barn as a reference point to evoke another love story that resembles that of Dominique and Suresh. On the one hand, the appearance of the almost invisible couple seems illogical and unreal; on the other hand, the couple seems to be a part of the space they had occupied earlier. This invisible couple then is not an unreal or mysterious element imposed on the reality of the novel, but something that had always existed as a reality of the barn and made visible through the presence of another couple. Devi in this way merges the real and the extra-real, imposing the past onto the present.

The first appearance of Dévika is indicative of her return to the house. When Aeena returns to the attic after the incident at the barn, she realizes that the V… family seems alive not only in the attic but all around the house: "J'ai envie de remonter au grenier à la recherche des V…, mais je les sens plus vivants dans d'autres endroits de la maison, et de plus en plus, il me semble connaître Dévika et aller à sa rencontre comme un navire naufragé happé par un fort courant contre lequel il ne peut plus lutter" (61). Gradually, Aeena develops a strong relation with the house, opening herself to the memories and mysteries evoked by the space she inhabits. This, finally, paves the way for her transformation into Dévika: "Il y a de plus en plus de choses qui me rattachent à cette maison. Je sens que nos substances se mêlent tout doucement, je me lignifie et m'encastre dans les nervures du bois, alors que la maison au contraire, se sensibilise, s'amortit lentement avec un parfum de chair" (53). The flesh she refers to is the flesh of Dévika who stages a return through Aeena.

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Another place that helps Aeena recall her past and that of Dévika is the lake in which Dévika pushed her father as he was trying to kill her after having whipped her at "l'arbre fouet". What she sees in the lake is not just the blue face of Dévika's drowned father but also the hands raised in prayer of her own father as he drowned in the sea, thereby tying the two distant memories together:

> Et puis un jour, j'ai vu dans l'étang des nénuphars en fleur. […] l'eau était si sombre, si verte, si huilée, cela ne ressemblait même pas à de l'eau. […] deux mains levées en prière qui disparaissait lentement, suivant un corps déjà disparu. Et, bizarrement, un rire me monta à la gorge. Un rire guttural et féroce, qui n'était pas le mien et qui éclata et résonna tout autour de moi, heurtant mes tympans et ma mémoire. (54)

As Aeena recalls the past of her own life and that of her previous incarnation at the lake, she feels as if she is split into two. Unable to identify with the laughter that emerges from her throat, she notices that she is gradually transforming into someone else. What is of particular interest here is the role the lake plays in facilitating Aeena's transformation into Dévika, as it triggers the process of remembrance and reinforces the fact that memories in Souffleur are attached to spaces: "[…] accrochés à l'air même dans la mémoire de cet endroit chargé d'une vie plus dense, d'une nostalgie plus ancrée qu'ailleurs dans la propriété" (55) It is therefore places that evoke memories and ties them in a way that brings not only Aeena and Dévika together but with them two different pasts and two different epochs.

Gradually, Dévika's presence becomes so prominent that Aeena feels as if Dévika is overshadowing her as she no longer follows her own will but that of Dévika:

> Et ce n'est pas moi, je sais que ce n'est pas moi. C'est Dévika qui rôde encore, à la recherche d'on ne sait quelle racine et quelle source. Il semble que ma volonté ne m'obéisse plus et que je l'accueille de plus en plus avidement comme une sœur pleine de tendresse, pleine de dangers. (56)

Devi does not allow her narrator to metamorphose completely into Dévika, but creates a fascinating situation in which Aeena is sometimes herself and at other times her previous incarnation, Dévika, creating a persistent confusion that is baffling not only to the reader but to the narrator herself. As Aeena visits the town where she used to live as a child, she encounters a very old lady almost a hundred years old who calls her Dévika and claims to have made a tattoo of "l'arbre fouet"on her arm. Aeena does not believe her and tries to escape but is stunned when the lady raises Aeena's arm and shows her the tattoo. This tattoo, however, disappears as Aeena returns home, pushing her into further confusion as she is unable to distinguish between her own reality and that of Dévika:

> Je suis dans une dimension autre où je n'ai plus de repères. Mais deviendrais-je, de plus en plus, Dévika ? Instinctivement, je lève mon bras, pleine d'angoisse. Je n'y vois rien. Pas de tatouage de l'arbre-fouet. Je m'effondre dans l'herbe. Je suis terriblement fatiguée, plus la force d'un pas, d'un souffle. Je regarde finalement autour de moi, essayant de reprendre pied dans une réalité qui ne ressemble plus à la mienne. (117)

At a later instance in the novel this tattoo reappears and the narrator is not even surprised at its appearance as she is now cognizant of her metamorphosis: "le ciel s'assombrit, et en moi la vie ralentit, ma chair, épuisée d'avoir subi les changements moléculaires de tant d'années, me fait mal. Je suis abasourdie, mais en même temps sereine. Je lève le bras gauche et j'y retrouve le badamier tatoué, sans surprise. J'entends une petite voix malsaine qui me murmure à l'oreille" (122). As a result, the narrator is transported into different worlds and begins to lose control over her own reality, as she is two characters at the same time: "je suis à la fois moi et l'Autre, et au fond, cela ne fait pas une grande différence, non, pas vraiment" (128).

The narrator is constantly grappling with several worlds: her own reality and that of her past incarnation. Her metamorphosis then does not allow her to be a consistent narrator as she is persistently changing forms. Her control over the narration is not as strong and rigid as that of a

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realist narrator having single narrative voice. In *L'arbre fouet* the reader must deal with a

narrator who evolves during the course of the novel. This discernible change in the narrator and

consequently in the narrative voice makes the narration itself a magical space where all voices

amalgamate to produce a collective narrative experience.

L'arbre fouet then becomes much more complicated than *Soupir,* a text in which the reader

was confronted with a persistent tension between ghosts and humans. The ghosts evoked in the

latter novel had concrete form and distinct presence. In *L'arbre fouet,* however, the narrator

herself transforms into another character belonging to a different temporal zone and a different

reality. The narrator then lives simultaneously in different temporal realities, complicating the

divide between the real and the extra-real. The real is taken over by the extra-real leading to a

different kind of reality that is inclusive of the real and the extra-real; as the narrator states, "Je

suis ici. Et à la fois là-bas, en ce lieu-temps où rien n'est ce qu'il paraît, où les semblances sont

une moquerie de la vérité" (149).

Devi's world is undoubtedly baffling to readers unfamiliar with the notion of reincarnation

as she introduces characters from the past into the present leading to the transformation of those

in the present. Even for a reader familiar with the notion of reincarnation, the plot remains

impenetrable at some level, as it is not simply Aeena who recalls her past incarnation but the past

incarnation also participates in Aeena's present. Devi thus uses reincarnation as an instrument to

bring the extra-real into the real and goes beyond its limitations to create a magical space.

If the lake around Aeena's house transforms her into her past incarnation, "l'arbre fouet"

in Aeena's orchard not only evokes past memories but also intervenes in Aeena's tale in a

decisive manner. "L'arbre fouet" evokes a communal memory for the villagers. It is the tree to

which the slaves were attached and whipped during colonial times:

> Chaque endroit est alourdi de son histoire et de ses légendes. […] on dit que cette propriété au temps des coloniaux, avait un héritage d'esclavage et de martyre. Souvent, en parlant du grand badamier qui surplombe la maison, les gens disent "pied-fouette," l'arbre du fouet. Oui, le nom est approprié. [...] les villageois disent que c'est l'arbre auquel on attachait les esclaves pour les fouetter, et le nom en est resté. (219)

After colonization it was used to tie and penalize undutiful daughters.[57] However, for Aeena this tree evokes a very personal memory. The sight of the tree opens old wounds in her: "Pour moi […] un souvenir à la fois plus proche et plus lointain, à peine évoqué, qui ranime d'anciennes blessures cicatrisées… l'arbre fouet, l'arbre mâle, l'arbre colère" (42). She understands this feeling evoked at the sight of the tree later as she spots Dévika in an extra-real sequence tied to the tree for the first time with her clothes torn, crying for vengeance: "En passant devant l'arbre-fouet, j'ai eu une brève impression, un éclair, plutôt, qu'une femme en lambeaux était crucifiée et criait sa vengeance. […] mais je sais que cette femme est Dévika" (50).

Later in the novel, the tree becomes alive as Dominique's father, the gardener, notices fresh blood on the bark that alludes to Dévika who was tied to the tree and repeatedly whipped by her father, her wrists bleeding as the ropes tore into her flesh: "Du doigt, le vieil homme lui montre quelques gouttes de sang encore fraîches sur les branches écartées, là où mes … où les poignets de Dévika avaient été attachés. Il y a évidemment, d'autres signes de violence" (140). The signs of violence that become visible to the gardener remind him of the role the tree played in penalizing recalcitrant daughters after independence: "L'Arbre-fouet… murmure le jardinier-pêcheur. Les esclaves avaient jadis été attachés et fouettés ici. Puis… (Il me jeta un regard en coin). Ce fut le tour des filles récalcitrantes… Il y a beaucoup de colère, de soupirs, de regrets attachés à cet arbre. A présent c'est lui qui est crucifié à sa mémoire, flagellé par ses souvenirs… Il attendait" (140). As a result, this tree like the other places around Aeena's house is buried

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[57] Discussed at length in chapter 2, section 1.

under old memories related not only to the slaves but also to the rebellious daughters such as Dévika and awaits its liberation from its terrible past.

The last sequence, however, in which Aeena sees Dominique tied to the tree and beaten by a group of fathers indicates that the tree is no longer a symbol of the distant past, but becomes a part of Aeena's and Dominique's present. It is around this tree that all the fathers across ages assemble to penalize their rebellious daughters, symbolized by Dominique. If this tree is a meeting place for all the fathers, it is also the space that evokes anger and rage of all the daughters who have been whipped at this tree. As a result, the two daughters from across different epochs, Aeena and Dévika, come together to save Dominique from the wrath of patriarchy.

Aeena looks out of her window as Dominique is being whipped by the fathers in an extra-real sequence in the novel. She is fearless and filled with rage as she accuses all the men assembled in this sequence of not being good fathers and asks them to stop the whipping as it is futile: "Car vous n'êtes pas les pères, vous êtes les fantômes de l'orgueil. Vos coups de fouets n'entament que la chair; ils ne parviendront pas à dompter l'esprit fier et frondeur qui l'habite. C'est votre propre honte que vous flagellez ainsi: honte de n'avoir pas compris l'intime liberté des filles" (172). She threatens them that their rule is now over as their daughters do not fear them anymore: "Votre temps est à présent écoulé. Votre règne est terminé. Nous n'aurons plus jamais peur de vous…" (172). In this sequence Aeena's fearless looks and Dominique's courage combine themselves with the intense winds and waves of Souffleur to blow away the fathers, thereby leading to Dominique's liberation:

> Ils n'ont pu supporter ce regard droit et lumineux. Ils ont paru souffrir. Peu à peu, le vent s'est intensifié, et les vagues de Souffleur se sont élevées plus haut que jamais, explosant en immenses jets d'argent au-dessus des rochers, avec des hurlements humains. Les pères one été pris entre le fouet des vents et le vertige de la falaise. Ils ont commencé à se dissoudre. Ils s'effritaient en lambeaux blancs

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> qui étaient emportés vers les boyaux de Souffleur. Les regards, les visages, les mains et les âmes sombres one été aspirés par les vagues. […]. Enfin, lorsqu'ils ont tous disparu dans les crevasses, les vagues se sont retirées, les vents se sont calmés, et ont disséminé, seulement quelques cendres au ras de l'eau. (172)

Like Soupir, Souffleur's cyclonic winds and furious waves join the feminine fury to bring an end to the patriarchal empire of the fathers. The winds become whips as that dissolve the dominating fathers and turn them into ashes, symbolizing the triumph of daughters over patriarchy.

The final blow to patriarchal supremacy comes when Dominique's father unlike others detaches Dominique from the tree and chops down "l'arbre fouet" with a heavy axe, signaling a detour from the route taken by the rest of the fathers and an end of the era of torture. The chopping down of the tree also symbolizes the end of patriarchy and salvation for the narrator who states, "Il le fallait, même si je ressentais chaque coup de hache comme s'il était planté dans ma chair. C'était le prix de ma liberté. Je ne reviendrai plus" (172).

In *L'arbre fouet* then as in *Soupir* magical space becomes instrumental in providing a stage for feminine vengeance against patriarchal hegemony. If in *Soupir* Devi uses ghosts to connect women from different generations with this magical space, in *L'arbre fouet* she connects Aeena with Souffleur through her previous incarnation, Dévika. In both the novels Devi brings magic by connecting women across different generations, epochs and times, converging real with the extra-real. She also uses myths to extend this connection between the present day women and women of the past. By introducing myths and folktales in her novels, she undoubtedly invites a distant past to intervene with the present, creating a magical effect similar to the one in *Soupir* and *L'arbre fouet*. Through this convergence of the past and the present, she alters the present as in *Soupir* and *L'arbre fouet*. In addition, she also rewrites the past by questioning and challenging certain myths that have been socially acceptable since time immemorial.

3.2 Magic and Mythology: Rewriting Myths/Folktales

In order to analyze how Devi uses myths to create magical moments in her texts that allow her to alter the present and rewrite the past, it is important to understand the significance of myths and folktales in societies as ancient as the Indian and the Greek. Describing the importance of myths, Mircea Eliade states:

> Myth narrates a sacred history; it relates an event that took place in primordial Time, the fabled time of the beginnings. In other words, myth tells how, through the deeds of Supernatural Beings, a reality came into existence, be it the whole reality, the Cosmos, or only a fragment of reality--an island, a species, a plant, a particular kind of human behavior, an institution. Myth, then, is always an account of a 'creation'; it relates how something was produced, began to *be*. Myth tells only of that which really happened, which manifested itself completely. (6)

Since myths involve actions by "Supernatural Beings" that are known by their deeds in the "beginning," myths describe the various dramatic breakthroughs of the supernatural or the sacred. According to Eliade, it is this sacred/supernatural that establishes the World and makes it what it is today. Emphasizing myth's role in the construction of humankind and its socio-cultural reality, Eliade notes:

> Furthermore, it is as a result of the intervention of Supernatural Beings that man himself is what he is today, a mortal, sexed, and cultural being. […] The foremost function of myth is to reveal the exemplary models for all human rites and all significant human activities--diet, marriage, work or education, art or wisdom. Man as he is today is the direct result of those mythical events. He is constituted by those events. (6-7)

Myth is thus powerful not only because it constitutes the knowledge of the origin but also because it constructs and reinforces the socio-cultural reality of man.

Several feminist critics such as Mary Daly insist that mythologies around the world originated in the worship of the mother goddess as the source and destination of all life. This fact is evident in the works of historians such as Monica Sjoo, Barbara Mor, and Raine Eisler. They

argue that the patriarchal myths we have inherited derive their potency from "stolen mythic power" (Sellers 17).

Sjoo and Mor have studied the surviving images from the earliest periods of human civilization to demonstrate how the earth was originally perceived as the female source of cyclic birth, life, death and rebirth--a belief, they argue, that underpinned all mythological and religious thinking of at least the first 200,000 years of human existence. Women played a primary role up until the Neolithic period. In their readings, during the Bronze Age there was a substantial development of metals, which led to increased interest in warfare. This resulted in the establishment of a patriarchal order where women, along with children and land, became the prizes in a new regime of conquest and plunder (Sellers 20).

Raine Eliser supports Sjoo and Mor's account of transition from a matriarchal to a patriarchal world-view. Eisler's study of the ancient civilization of Sumer reveals an early mythology dating as far back as the Paleolithic period that celebrated the sexual union of female and male partners as a life-sustaining rite. This period is superseded by the Bronze Age in which the tales of battle, conquest and domination were valued. Eisler links this transition to the establishment of a military hierarchy under the threat of invasion by the formerly free Sumerian city-states, where power rested with the citizens. She observes the disbanding of a partnership in favor of a dominator model throughout world mythology (Sellers 28).

Myths are instrumental not only in the construction of man's socio-cultural fabric, but also in reinforcing these constructions. Bronislaw Malinowski believes that "although myths depict the origins of phenomena and customs, they serve to perpetuate rather than elucidate them" (206). Roland Barthes endorses this view through his structural analysis of myth. He suggests that myth arises from an existing association between concept and form, on which myth builds its own supplementary system of signification. It is this characteristic of myth that gives it

its richness and makes it appear natural. Barthes also insists that "there is no fixity in mythical concepts: they can come into being, alter, disintegrate, disappear completely, and that around the meaning of myth there is a halo of virtualities where other possible meanings are floating" (130). The fact that myths are endlessly told and retold allows for multiple versions and interpretations. By scrutinizing myth, therefore, one can work to "loosen its negative strangleholds and sew new variations into its weave" as does Devi in her novel *Le voile de Draupadi*.

Devi has not limited herself to myths but has also incorporated folktales in her texts. Distinguishing folktales from myths, G.S. Kirk states, "Myth has a serious underlying purpose whereas folktales reflect simple social situations that play in ordinary fears and aspirations and pander to our wish for neat and ingenious solutions" (41). Although folktales may not be as powerful as myths, they do reflect the common human fears and anxieties and play a significant role in the construction and reinforcement of socio-cultural realities. Devi's novel *Moi, l'interdite* weaves in a popular folktale with Mouna, the protagonist's story, creating a magical space in which the contemporary merges with the ancient. Through this interaction between two different worlds Devi connects women across centuries and allows them to come together to express themselves. Furthermore, it permits Devi to scrutinize age-old myths and deconstruct them. Because myths and folktales play an important role in reinforcing socio-cultural realities, they can function as effective tools that allow Devi to understand the contemporary world in relation with the ancient. In incorporating myths and folktales into her texts, she retells them in a way that allows her to loosen the patriarchal hold and introduce variations that represent women differently. In this section I will examine Devi's use of Hindu myths in *Le voile de Draupadi* and a popular north Indian folktale in *Moi, l'interdite* in order to understand how their inclusion in the narrative influences the reality of the novels and becomes a source of agency to women. I

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will also analyze how Devi questions the socio-cultural reality reinforced by these myths and folktales and in the process rewrites them.

3.2.1 Magic and Mythical Figures in *Le voile de Draupadi*

Le voile de Draupadi relies heavily on mythological figures from two great Indian epics, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*. The Draupadi of the title is not the protagonist of the novel as one might believe, but a mythical figure from the *Mahabharata*. The reader also finds references to Sita, another mythical figure from the epic *Ramayana*. Through these references Devi invites her reader not only to the protagonist's world but also to an ancient mythical world that dictates the lives of most of the characters in *Le voile de Draupadi*. Vasanti's and the protagonist Anjali's sacrificial acts of walking on fire allow Devi to evoke both Draupadi and Sita, the two most popular mythical figures. As a result, the novel becomes the magical site where mythology converges with the contemporary, altering both the present and the past.

Fire walking is an ancient practice among the Hindu Tamil Diaspora in Mauritius. Many devotees walk barefoot on a rectangular area covered with burning coals during the famous festival of Kavadee[58] as an act of sacrifice and self mortification to show their devotion towards their deity. Mythologically, the act of fire walking is associated with the character of Sita in the Hindu epic *Ramayana,*[59] written between 750 and 500 B.C. by the famous saint, Valmiki. In this

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[58] Kavadee is the main festival of the Tamil Hindu community in Mauritius. Kavadee comes from the word to carry, marking the sacrifice of carrying the "kavadee," a large, decorative, wooden replica of a temple or deity. Devotees, who have been fasting for ten days, begin by gathering at a local river, bathing in the water to cleanse themselves of impurities. In a supreme spirit of devotion and self-sacrifice, the penitents have their bodies pierced with 'vels,' small silver needles. Some even walk on burning coals.

[59] The *Ramayana* is divided into seven khandas, or books, that tell the story of Rama from his birth to his death. Rama was the eldest of the four sons of Dashratha, the king of Ayodhya (part of contemporary India). After his marriage he was exiled by his stepmother, who wanted her son to be crowned instead of Rama. As a result, he spent fourteen years of exile in the woods with his wife Sita and his younger brother Laxmana. One day while Rama and Laxmana were away, Ravana, the king of Lanka disguised as a beggar, abducted Sita. Rama later won her back after

epic, Sita walks through fire to prove her fidelity and chastity toward her husband and to protect

his honor as a man and a king, thereby demonstrating her devotion as a true wife. Once she

emerges alive from the fire, Rama comments that he was aware of Sita's purity but made her go

through the act only to satisfy his citizens. Instead of standing up for his wife whom he trusts

completely, he seems to be more interested in the opinion of his subjects. He therefore places his

duty as a king above his duty as a husband, forcing his wife to go through the ordeal in order to

protect his honor and pride. Amongst the Hindu community worldwide Sita is worshipped as a

goddess for the exemplary life she led as a virtuous wife. Young brides are advised by their

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fighting a battle with Ravana. When Sita returned after her stay in Lanka, Rama was not sure if she was pure enough to be accepted as a wife again. He decided to test her chastity by making her walk on fire. Justifying his demand for an *agnipariksha*, the test of fire, Rama explained that he fought the war for his honor, not for Sita. As a result, he could not take back a woman who was impure and soiled by another man. In order to satisfy Rama's wishes, Sita walked on fire. In Hinduism, the husband is like a god and it is the wife's duty (*dharma*) to satisfy her husband in all possible ways. The sacred goddess of fire who was witness to this ceremony protected Sita and said to Rama: "Here is your Sita, Rama. I find no fault in her. She has not erred in thought, word or deed" (*Ramayana* 304). The gods then descend from heaven to testify to her purity and faithfulness. Rama took Sita back to Ayodhya believing her to be pure and chaste.

 After his father's death, Rama became the king of Ayodhya. He soon discovered that the people of his kingdom were not willing to accept Sita as their queen. They doubted her chastity because *agnipariksha* had taken place in Lanka, and not in Ayodhya, Rama's kingdom. In order to protect himself from further scandal, he asked his brother Laxmana to take Sita to the woods and leave her there with the great saint Valmiki. Sita wanted to commit suicide but decided to live as she was pregnant. In the monastery of the great saint Valmiki, Sita gave birth to Rama's sons Luv and Kush.

 Several years later, Rama discovered that he had two sons from Sita and decided to bring her back to the kingdom, but she had to go through the test of fire again. When Sita was asked to appear in front of Rama, she asked the mother earth to accept her if she had been pure in mind, thought, and deed. As soon as she uttered these words, she disappeared into the earth. It is clear from this episode that Rama was obsessed with his manly honor. All his deeds and actions such as war and the pursuit of his wife were to protect and safeguard his honor as a man. According to Hindu religion, man's primary duty is to protect his honor while that of a woman is to satisfy her husband. For more information, see Kirsti Evans, *Epic narratives in the Hoysala Temples: the Ramayana, Mahabharata, and Bhagavata Purana in Halebid, Belur, and Amrtapura* (New York: E.J. Brill, 1997). For different versions of *Ramayana*, consult bibliography.The mythical figure of Sita finds a mention in works by other writers such as Lindsey Collen's *The Rape of Sita*. This novel was banned in Mauritius as it enraged the fundamentalists.

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mothers to follow in the footsteps of Sita, indicating the influence mythology has on Indo-Mauritian society in which these myths are treated as reality.

In *Le voile de Draupadi*, the sacrificial act of firewalking takes place twice. Inspired by Sita's miraculous escape from fire that asserts her purity and fidelity toward Ram, Anjali's cousin Vasanti attempts to imitate this mythological act in order to prove her fidelity and love toward Anjali's brother Shyam. She, however, meets with a tragic end as no fire goddess intervenes to protect her. Vasanti's act demonstrates her strong belief in Hindu mythology not as a narrative that recounts tales of Gods and Goddesses but as a reality, relevant to the contemporary world. Vasanti's sacrificial act thus allows Devi to depict a society in which myths are an essential part of everyday reality and extra-real participates in the real to the extent that it is difficult to tell the two apart. This act introduces the mythical characters Sita and Draupadi in the novel allowing the past to merge with the present. Furthermore, it becomes the reason for Anjali's act of firewalking. It is around this act then that Vasanti and Anjali from the contemporary world come together with the mythical figures Sita and Drauapdi from the extra-real. Through this togetherness Devi creates a magical space that allows a dialogue between contemporary women and their mythical counterparts from antiquity. Whereas Vasanti had absolute belief in the power of the myth and her act aimed at reasserting it, Anjali's repetition of the act questions the myths exposing their superstitious nature and views them as patriarchal coding imposed on ancient as well as contemporary women.

Anjali's husband Dev believes that a mother's sacrifice can cure an ailing son and asks Anjali to walk on fire for the recovery of their child Wynn who suffers from meningitis. Anjali soon realizes that Dev himself does not believe in the sacrifice but wants her to undertake the act so that he can push the entire responsibility of the child's recovery on her. Dev accuses her of being a bad mother and threatens to leave her if their son dies of illness: "Si l'enfant meurt, ce

sera à cause de tes croyances à toi. Ce sera de ta faute, Anjali, à cause de ton refus du sacrifice. Si Wynn meurt, tu pourras aller te faire foutre ailleurs, je ne te garderai pas" (95). Although in *Le voile de Draupadi* Anjali is not asked to prove her chastity or purity towards her husband, it is her motherhood that is questioned by her husband and her in-laws: "Une mère qui refuse de faire une offrande pour son fils n'est pas une mère" (24).

If in the *Ramayana* it was a question of Rama's pride that forced Sita to undergo the act of sacrifice, in *Le voile de Draupadi* it is Dev's pride in front of his family members that is at stake. Rama and Dev then resemble each other as they both value their honor more than the physical agony of their wives. In prioritizing their honor over their wives, they view their wives not as individuals in their own right but only as a means to safeguard their masculine pride. Anjali interprets Dev's attitude as a manifestation of Dev's weakness and helplessness resulting from his fake masculine pride, as he desires to push the responsibility of his son's recovery entirely on Anjali's shoulders. Describing the festivities that follow Anjali's acceptance to undergo the sacrificial act, she points out that by making her walk on fire, Dev and his family make her accountable for the son's recovery, thereby freeing themselves of all liability:

> Et soudain, je me rends compte de la raison de cette activité intense et presque joyeuse. Pour eux, le problème est déjà résolu. Leur confiance dans le rituel, dans la promesse de la mère est telle que Wynn est déjà guéri. Avec mon acquiescement, ils ont eu ce qu'ils désiraient, un dos pour porter la responsabilité du succès ou de l'échec, un acte concret grâce auquel ils peuvent faire face à une réalité trop désarmante, un geste qui perpétue une ancienne illusion précieuse à tous les hommes, celle du contrôle sur les événements de l'existence, l'autorité et le pouvoir de l'esprit sur la matière. (136)

What is important to note, however, is that Dev is not even convinced if Anjali's act will lead to his son's recovery; yet he forces her to go through it for the satisfaction of his mother and the other members of the family. In the same way Rama was certain of Sita's chastity; yet he wanted

her to go through fire to prove it to his subjects. Thus, Dev asserts patriarchal control over his

wife through his mother and family members as Rama does on Sita through his subjects.

Of particular interest, however, is the reaction of the two characters, Sita and Anjali. Sita

does walk on fire the first time to prove her chastity, but she refuses to repeat the act second

time. Instead, she asks the mother earth to give her refuge, implying suicide in this case. Many

critics such as Sally Sutherland and Alf Hiltebeitel see it as a passive resistance. In their

readings, because Sita prefers death to life after her rejection, roles are reversed, and it is Rama

who must suffer abandonment. Sally Sutherland finds Sita's denial of Rama's second request to

walk on fire as the defining act that is markedly different from her other actions and behavior in

the epic:

> After suffering countless insults and rejections, Sita finally takes revenge on
> Rama in the most aggressive manner she knows. In carrying out her characteristic
> and oft repeated threat of self-immolation, she brings to a culmination her
> passive-aggressive response to Rama. For virtually the first time in the entire epic,
> the actions of Sita at the asvamedha sacrifice are seemingly not predictable. (78)

Sutherland views Sita's aggression, however, as passive because it culminates in a

masochistic act. Instead of liberating Sita, this act turns out to be one of self negation:

> Sita's action can be seen as a sort of counter-aggression against Rama: she would
> rather die than live with him. […] Sita has abandoned her life, she no longer
> wishes to live, or rather subject herself to any further earthly relation with Rama.
> She commits a type of ritual suicide. The act of suicide can be interpreted as the
> ultimate counter-aggression of the powerless. […] Idealized traditional Indian
> values refuse to allow a wife, or for that matter, any subservient person to admit
> disaffection or disloyalty. However, such a denial by no means negates the
> existence of such feelings. One socially acceptable manner of expressing such
> disaffection, it has been seen, is found in masochistic actions, actions turned
> against the self as a form of revenge against the aggressor. (78)

Sita's denial of walking on fire the second time is indeed aggressive in relation to her first act of

complete submission. Yet, Sita's denial is followed by an act of suicide that undercuts her

resistance.

Anjali, however, walks on fire for a different reason. She does not believe in the act of sacrifice and is under no illusion that it will heal her son. Neither is her act an attempt to save her marriage as one might believe. Although she is depicted in the novel as a very submissive person who readily accepts everything without revolt, her unpredictable act of leaving her husband immediately after she accomplishes the sacrifice proves contrary to her depiction.

Dev's proposal to walk on fire evokes Anjali's childhood memories related to her cousin Vasanti who had burnt herself to death while attempting to walk on fire:

> Cela fait longtemps que je n'ai pas rêvé de Vasanti. Je me suis efforcée d'oublier, d'effacer les brûlures pour ne pas les revivre constamment et Vasanti s'est emmurée dans son mutisme jusqu'à ce que, par un étrange jeu de correspondances, la maladie de Wynn l'en ait fait sortir. Il m'est difficile de penser à elle, maintenant, dix ans après sa mort. Son visage est devenu un reproche permanent, une sorte de hantise inavouée. (33)

In this passage Anjali begins to associate herself with her cousin Vasanti who underwent the same act and got burnt: "Une auréole de braise autour de moi, comme Vasanti. Nos destins s'étaient enfin rejoints" (33). It is this sacrificial act that binds them together in feminine solidarity that later becomes the reason for Anjali to walk on fire. She holds herself responsible for Vasanti's death, as she stood watching while Vasanti set herself afire. Vasanti was madly in love with Anjali's brother Shyam, who did not return her affection. When Vasanti mentioned her love for Shyam to Anjali, Anjali told her frankly that Shyam would not accept her. Vasanti then decided to walk on fire to show her devotion and faithfulness toward Shyam and burnt herself in front of Anjali and Shyam.

Vasanti undertakes the act of fire walking believing that her intense love for Shyam, her fidelity toward him will save her from flames as did Sita's chastity in the epic *Ramayana*. Her faith in mythology is such that she believes it to be real. She fails to realize that she is not a mythological character, possessing mysterious powers of divinities. Vasanti's inability to

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distinguish herself from the divine mythical characters allows Devi to merge the real with the extra-real and allow space to mythical characters in her novel. Anjali observes that Vasanti is not the only one who fails to see the difference between myth and reality, but many in Indo-Mauritian society believe in these myths as is evident from Dev's and his mother's notion that Anjali's walking on fire will lead to their son's recovery. Anjali, unlike Vasanti, is critical of Indo-Mauritian society's blind faith in myths. She blames patriarchal society for amplifying the sacrifices made by the goddess and misleading ordinary woman like Vasanti into believing that they have to attain the pure ideals represented by goddesses:

> 'Agni Pariksha', l'épreuve du feu, celle que Sita avait subie pour prouver à Rama sa fidélité. Ce feu dont nous faisions sept fois le tour lors du mariage, composant ainsi une insolite trinité, elle voulait à présent le pénétrer pour tester sa force et son courage…. Elle prétendait suivre la voie de ces femmes ailées, plus qu'humaines, qu'avaient été Sita et Draupadi. Oubliant qu'elles étaient des mythes, amplifiées hors de toute mesure par l'insatiable soif de grandeur des hommes. (139)

Vasanti's act demonstrates that the myths around Sita and Draupadi have been used by society to impose a sense of devotion and chastity on wives. In propagating these ideals, men have forgotten that these mythical figures were divinities and that their acts cannot be repeated by humans. These myths so revered within the Hindu community function as instruments to control women by imposing impossible ideals of wifehood and womanhood on them. Anjali's critical stance in relation to these myths is a refreshing rewriting and reinterpretation of the ancient mythology that aims at liberating women from blind faith.

After Vasanti's death Anjali loses all faith in the ritual ceremonies: "Il y a entre nous des siècles de poussières. Il y a entre nous le fantôme de Vasanti qui m'empêche de m'abandonner totalement à ce qui aurait dû être une croyance commune" (84).Vasanti's act makes Anjali understand the futility of this sacrifice and exposes the superstitious beliefs that underpin these rituals: "Jusqu'à ce que l'autre jour, 'l'accident' comme nous l'appelions alors, survienne et

détruise en moi toute confiance et toute foi dans ces sacrifices" (25). As Anjali walks on fire not with superstitious belief but with the knowledge that it cannot heal her son, she undoes Vasanti's blind faith in myths and rituals. She also expiates her guilt by paying back her debt to Sanjiva, Vasanti's father as Anjali and Shyam were unable to save Vasanti the night of the festivities: "J'avais une dette envers Wynn, et, plus loin, envers l'oncle Sanjiva.[…] Je n'ai pas oublié Vasanti. C'est un peu pour elle que je le fais. Pour elle comme pour Wynn. Ces deux innocences qu'il nous faut racheter, nous tous" (126).

Thus, the principle motivation behind Anjali's act is to pay back Vasanti by freeing her from the patriarchal fire that consumed her ten years ago. In accomplishing the act, not to please her husband but out of responsibility toward a cousin who lost her life, Anjali turns this sacrifice into an instrument of resistance. Whereas Sita walked on fire solely to safeguard her husband's honor, Anjali repeats it for feminine solidarity and thereby frees herself of the patriarchal coding. Moreover, Anjali's abandonment of her husband after the firewalking is particularly compelling as it subverts not only the mythological significance of the act but also the prevalent notion of a dutiful wife. Her act of walking on fire then neither affirms her husband's authority nor safeguards his honor, as does Sita's in the first case. Rather, Anjali's act subverts her husband's authority and masculine pride. However, it is the denouement of the novel that makes it an even more compelling rewriting of the Sita episode. In the last scene, a drunk Anjali broods over a new beginning with a woman named Fatmah. This end implies a renewal and a rebirth for Anjali unlike Sita's abandonment of Rama by seeking refuge in mother earth viewed widely as a masochistic act. Draupadi's presence in the same text, however, adds a new dimension to the novel, as it allows Devi and the reader to compare the two mythical figures.

The mythical figure of Draupadi[60] enters the text in a magical moment when Anjali

prepares to walk on fire and notices Draupadi's saree on the rectangular circle of burning coals.

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[60] In the Ancient Indian epic *Mahabharata*, Draupadi is the daughter of King Drupada of Panchala. Her first name Krishna, which literally means dark, is not well-known even to many Hindus, and she is much more known by her patronymic name Draupadi. She is also known as Panchali (lit., the one from the kingdom of Panchala). She had an unusual birth as she was born out of fire during a yagna (a ritual of sacrifice performed in front of fire to please Gods) organized by her father who had no children for some time. She was later married to Arjuna and his four brothers who were known as the Pandavas. Yudhishthira, the elder brother of the Pandavas and his four brothers were the rulers of Indraprastha under the sovereignty of King Dhritarashtra. Dhritarashtra's son Duryodhana who resided in the capital of the empire Hastinapur was always jealous of his cousins and the wealth they had acquired by building Indraprasta. To take revenge on the Pandavas, his uncle Shakuni treacherously came up with a plan and together with his brothers, his friend Karna and maternal uncle Shakuni, he conspired to call the Pandavas at Hastinapur and win their kingdoms in a game of dice. Shakuni was skilled at winning by unfair means. The idea was that Shakuni would play against Yudhishthira and win at the gambling table what was impossible to win at the battlefield. As the game proceeded, Yudhishthira lost all his wealth and kingdoms one by one. Having lost all material wealth, he went on to wager his brothers one by one and lost them, too. Ultimately he wagered himself and lost again. All the Pandavas were now the dasas (slaves) of the Kauravas. But for the villain Shakuni, the humiliation of the Pandavas was not over. He asked Yudhishthira to wager Draupadi and win everything back. Yudhishthira walked into the trap and to the horror of everybody present, put Draupadi as a bet for the next round. Shakuni rolled the dice and gleefully shouted "Look, I have won." Duryodhana commanded his younger brother Dushasana to forcefully bring her to men's gathering. Dushasana barged into the living quarters of Draupadi who was menstruating and had her hair loose. Dushasana grabbed her by the hair and dragged her into the court . Arjuna tried to help Draupadi but Yudhishthira forbade him. Arjuna vowed to kill Karna for insulting his wife by calling her a whore. In an emotional appeal to the elders present in the forum, Draupadi repeatedly questioned the legality of the right of Yudhishthira to place her at stake when he himself had lost his freedom and as a consequence did not possess any property in the first place. Everybody remained dumbfounded. Duryodhana then commanded the Pandavas to strip themselves in the manner of dasa. They obeyed by stripping off their upper garments. The Kauravas demanded the same from Draupadi who refused. Then to the horror of everybody present, Dushasana tried to strip Draupadi of her saree. Seeing her husbands unable or unwilling to help her, Draupadi prayed to Lord Krishna to protect her. Lord Krishna then worked a miracle so that as Dushasana unwrapped layers and layers of her saree, it kept getting extended. Finally, a tired Dushasana backed off without being able to strip Draupadi as she was protected by Lord Krishna. Duryodhana repeatedly challenged Yudhishthira's four brothers to disassociate themselves from Yudhishthira's authority and take back their wife. No one dared to denounce their loyalty to their eldest brother. In order to provoke the Pandavas further, Duryodhana bared and patted his thigh looking into Draupadi's eyes, implying that she should sit on his thigh. In rage Bhima vowed in front of the entire assembly that one day he would break that very thigh of Duryodhan in battle. Finally, the blind monarch Dhritarashtra's conscience was stirred, in part fearing the wrath of the Pandavas against his sons. He intervened and asked Draupadi to wish for whatever she desired. Draupadi asked her husbands the Pandavas to be freed from bondage. Dhritarashtra granted her wish and also restored to the Pandavas all they lost in the game of dice. Free from bondage Bhima immediately proposed to his brothers to slay all the Kauravas present then and there itself. Yudhishthira and Arjuna prevented him from taking any rash action. After many words of reconciliation between the Pandavas and Dhritarashtra, the Pandavas withdrew to their kingdom along with Draupadi and their entourage. Draupadi's humiliation by the Kauravas became one of the major reasons that led to the historic war of Kurukshetra between the Pandavas and the Kauravas. In mythology, Draupadi's stripping know as "Cheer-haran" is of particular importance along with the saree that was pulled by one of the Kaurava brothers. For more information, see Kirsti Evans, *Epic narratives in the Hoysala Temples: the Ramayana, Mahabharata, and Bhagavata Purana in Halebid, Belur, and Amrtapura* (New York: E.J. Brill, 1997). For different versions of *Mahabharata*, consult bibliography.

This mythical voile then brings the mythological into the real as it magically appears on the burning coal to protect the protagonist. Like Sita who had to undergo several ordeals to prove her chastity and protect the honor of her husband, Draupadi, too had to undergo several ordeals as the wife of the five Pandava brothers. When the five princes in a match of dice lost all their wealth and themselves to their cousins the Kauravas, the elder most Pandava brother decided to bet his wife Draupadi. He lost her, too, resulting in her humiliation in a courtroom full of men. She was dragged to the courtroom, while she was menstruating, insulted by men who called her a whore and finally stripped in front of her husbands. The popular version states that as Dushasana, a Kaurava brother pulled on one end of her saree, it became endless by a magical intervention of Lord Krishna. Dushasana pulled on it until he eventually fell unconscious on the floor.

Clearly, Draupadi's saree has its own mythical significance. Usually a cloth of chastity and femininity, it becomes an instrument of resistance for her. The title of the novel *Le voile de Draupadi* refers not only to this garment but also to the magical metaphorical saree that reappears on the burning coals to protect Anjali's feet:

> Tout doucement, les ondulations de chaleur se font plus épaisses. Elles deviennent plus opaques, comme si elles se fusionnaient entre elles, s'amalgamaient pour former, au dessus du brasier, un voile uniforme.
> Un voile…
> Et soudain, je l'ai vu, flottant au-dessus de rectangle, formant un passage étroit et mouvant, le tissu mystique de la fois indiscutée, le voile translucide qui recouvre les braises et sur lequel je vais bientôt marcher, le voile de fidélité, le voile de chasteté, le voile de féminité.
> Le voile de Draupadi.
> Très droite, je suis allée vers lui. Il est doux au toucher, il semble m'envelopper d'une magnifique chaleur. Mes pieds mous et incurvés ne seront pas brûlés. La tête aérée, la tête ouatée, je marche vers l'autre rive et nulle peur ne me serre plus le ventre. (168)

The "voile's" appearance is a magical moment where the mythical intervenes in the contemporary to alter the present. Traversing centuries and epochs, Draupadi's saree brings

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Anjali and Draupadi together in feminine solidarity as it protects Anjali from getting burnt on the coals, the same way as the fire goddess intervened to protect Sita and testify to her purity and chastity. Draupadi's saree protected her honor in the royal gathering of men where her husbands, the cause of all her humiliation and insult, stood helpless. This cloth from antiquity enters Anjali's life not only to protect her from fire but also to provide her courage, to save her honor as a woman vis-à-vis her husband's masculine pride. Anjali does this by abandoning her husband at the end of the novel. Thus, two different magical sequences, Vasanti's firewalking inspired by Sita and the appearance of Draupadi's saree on burning coals as Anjali prepares to firewalk allow Devi to evoke Sita and Draupadi and bring them together with her contemporary characters Anjali and Vasanti as mythology participates in and alters their everyday reality. Furthermore, the presence of these mythical figures in the novel permits Devi to scrutinize the myths associated with them and their devotion as wives or women, questioning the submissive role these socially accepted myths have imposed on women.

Devi's inclusion of the two most popular feminine mythical figures around the same act of firewalking calls for a comparison between them. Sita is revered across India for her exemplary devotion towards Rama, as she went through several ordeals to prove her fidelity. Sutherland refers to a survey taken of one thousand young Indian men and women in the North Indian state of Uttar Pradesh which reveals that an overwhelming percentage chose Sita as their ideal female role model over twenty-four goddesses, literary heroines, and famous women of history. Sita's idealization intrigues us in light of the fact that Indian epic tradition knows other great heroines-- Draupadi, Savitri, Shakuntala-- women who underwent similar ordeals to prove their devotion to their husbands. Sally Sutherland's analysis of the two heroines-- Sita and Draupadi-- demonstrates that it is Sita's passive resistance against her oppression as compared to Draupadi's aggression that makes her a more acceptable and popular mythical figure:

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Throughout their respective epics both [Sita and Draupadi] are victims of fate and their actions are motivated by means of aggressive and counter-aggressive actions. However the manner in which they demonstrate that aggression is markedly different. Draupadi's is directed outwards--towards her husbands, especially Yudhisthira. But the tradition is uncomfortable with such undisguised aggression, especially associated with a woman. Sita, on the other hand, expresses her anger at her love object inwardly, and this manner of handling aggression, i.e., through masochistic actions, appears to be more societally normative in ancient and modern India for both men and women. Thus, it is no surprise that the young men and women in P. Pratap's survey chose Sita--for she represents to them not only the ideal wife, but her actions represent, perhaps more than the actions of any popular hero of India, the culturally accepted means through which anger and aggressive impulses can be expressed.[61] (79)

Alf Hiltebeitel agrees with Sutherland's argument that Draupadi is undoubtedly more aggressive than Sita. He explains how Draupadi was not only instrumental in initiating the epic war of *Mahabharata* fought by her husbands precisely to avenge the humiliation and insult she had to undergo, but her anger was such that it played a pivotal role in the destruction of Duryodhana, the kaurava brother who insulted her:

The *Mahabharata*'s treatment of the theme of anger is more complex. The eventual destruction of Duryodhana, his brothers and allies by the Pandavas springs from a conflict originally motivated by considerations of political power, but given a special intensity by the shameful treatment of the Pandavas' wife Draupadi by their rivals. But what is remarkable about the story is that Draupadi's own anger is quite as great as that of her husbands, and in her desire for revenge she plays a significant part in spurring them on to war. In many popular retellings of the epic, the finality of Duryodhan's defeat is signaled by an action of Draupadi's: since she was humiliated by being dragged by her hair into male company at the time of her monthly period, she swears never to wash and tie up her hair until she washes it in the blood of Duryodhana himself. (*Is the Goddess* 219)

In the epic dice match between the Pandava and Kaurava cousins, when Yudhishthira lost Draupadi, Duryodhana orders that she be brought to the Kauravas as the slave of her new masters. A messenger is sent to fetch Draupadi, who refuses to come with him and orders him to

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[61] P. Pratap, "The Development of Ego Ideal in Indian Children" (PhD thesis, Benares: Benares Hindu University). Cited in S. Kakar, *The Inner World* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1978).

ask a question in the gambling hall. Her clever question to Yudhishthira who lost her in the match after losing himself, "As the owner of whom did you lose us? Whom did you lose first, yourself or me?" (115), is crucial for Hiltebeital who sees this as Drauapadi's way of acquiring agency in an assembly where she is sold off by her own husbands. According to Hiltebeitel, Draupadi's question challenges the men to consider their lordship over and "ownership" of women in contexts of patriarchy: "Draupadi is a literary figure, not a woman. The Dead Indian Sanskritizing Males who wrote the epic have made her a 'voice' for what is at best their sympathetic understanding of a woman's question" (116).

Her embarrassment at being dragged before a public assembly soon turns into anger directed not only against her husbands but against all those gathered in the gambling hall. The game of dice was played in the presence of such senior and respectful people as Dhritrashtra, Duryondhana's father who was also Pandava's uncle, and Bhisma, the grandfather of the Pandavas and the Kauravas. Insulted and humiliated, Draupadi addresses the kings, demanding to know how they, so learned in the ways of proper conduct, could allow her to be treated in this way: "How is it that the wife of Pandavas, the sister of Parsata, the friend of Vasudeva Krishna, could be brought before the assembly of kings? Tell me whether or not I, King Dharma's wife, born of equal station, am a slave. Then I will do as commanded" (*Mahabharata* 2.62.10). Finally, the king Dhritrashtra gives Draupadi a boon, which Draupadi uses to free herself and her husbands from slavery. Thus, it is Draupadi's aggression and rage that led to her independence and that of her husbands.

Accentuating Draupadi's articulate and forceful nature, Sutherland observes that it is Draupadi's persistent dwelling on the treatment meted out to her by the Kauravas resulting from the rage she harbored against them that leads to the war of Kurukshetra:

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> Draupadi's resentment at having been so insulted by her husband's relatives does not die easily. Her desire for revenge is strong, and she rarely is able to pass up an opportunity to complain to her husbands about her ill-treatment. To some extent, one can attribute the final war to Draupadi's continual harping on the insult she received in the assembly and her husband's failure to avenge it. (67)

Analyzing Draupadi's outspoken and aggressive behavior, Leena Taneja observes that Draupadi never seems to doubt for a moment that she is truly free: "It is perhaps her sense of this freedom that keeps her sticking to the question that will also free her husbands" (cited in Hiltebeitel, 118). Sutherland believes that it is Draupadi's aggression that prevents her from being the ideal for most Indian women: "It is this same aggressive behavior and outspokenness of Draupadi--coupled with the inability of her husbands to protect her--that prevents her, unlike other heroines of the Sanskrit tradition, from becoming idealized as 'the perfect wife,' the wife who endures the most severe trials without complaint" (73).

Draupadi is not the ideal mythical heroine like Sita due to her contentiousness. Devi, however, favors her over Sita in her novel. As Anjali walks on fire, she does not repeat Sita's act of devotion and chastity towards her husband exemplifying the duties of a good wife, but rather subverts it. In Anjali's resistance, it is Draupadi's saree that comes to her rescue as she walks on fire. Draupadi then protects Anjali the same way as Lord Krishna saved Draupadi by miraculously making her saree so long that no one could ever pull it off. By evoking Draupadi's saree not only in the title of the novel but also as the veil that protects Anjali, Devi privileges Draupadi's notion of femininity which is undoubtedly more aggressive than Sita's submissiveness. Anjali definitely desires to follow the route paved by Draupadi; as she states, "J'irais, sans doute, j'irais un de ces jours, comme un fantôme vêtu de cette couleur ocrée, safranée de la terre, cette teinte qui devient l'unique univers de ceux qui suivent la route de Draupadi et cherchent à entrevoir parmi les flammes son voile de féminité qui s'étend sur les braises" (105).

In according importance to a mythical heroine like Draupadi whose aggressive behavior makes her unpopular and unfit to be an ideal wife or an ideal woman, Devi is questioning the myths that aim at imposing unachievable ideals of wifehood and femininity. Anjali's final act of abandoning her husband that complies neither with Sita's notion of chastity and devotion nor with Draupadi's aggressive wifehood, is critical of the patriarchal system that expects complete devotion and submission from wives whereas men neither value their sacrifices nor deserve them:

> Je pense à Sita qui, tout en ayant été fidèle à Ram, était passée par l'épreuve du feu; et à Draupadi elle-même, dont le voile est un voile de chasteté qui protège les marcheurs de la brûlure. A quoi servi toutes ces fidélités ? L'homme a-t-il jamais vraiment compris leur intensité et leur pouvoir ? Ils ont pris la femme pour acquise, mais aujourd'hui, Dev, rien n'est acquis qui ne soit méritée, et je ne crois pas que tu nous aies mérités.   (150)

In judging Dev unfit for her devotion and fidelity, Anjali no longer adheres to the notion of ideal wifehood and goes beyond Sita and Draupadi who never question their husbands or their devotion towards their husbands even after going through several ordeals. In refusing to submit to Dev's whims and masculine pride, she paves the way for new possibilities and alternatives for contemporary women. If in *Le voile de Draupadi* the mythical intervention of Draupadi and Sita alters the reality of Anjali and Vasanti, *Moi l'interdite* narrates the tale of a handicapped girl who lives in the magical world of a fairy tale recounted by her grandmother.

3.2.2 Folktale in *Moi, l'interdite*

The folktale of Prince Bahadour and Princess Housna plays a pivotal role in *Moi, l'interdite*, as it fills the miserable life of the protagonist Mouna and her grandmother with extraordinary hope. Although it is a sad story of love, this folktale becomes the raison d'être for both the grandmother and Mouna who are abandoned by their family, and deprived of all love, care, and affection. Mouna's grandmother, who lost her legs in an accident several years before,

is ill-treated by Mouna's family. Mouna's father sees her as an extra mouth to feed. She spends

her life imprisoned in an attic because she cannot move, and lives entirely at the mercy of her

family members. Imprisoned in a deep sense of claustrophobia and despair, it is only the folktale

that provides her a refuge, allowing her to construct her own magical world of dreams: "Je crois

bien qu'il lui restait un peu de ferment dans le corps, qui lui faisait rêver à une caresse d'homme.

Et alors, elle se réfugiait dans ses contes, moi à ses pieds en auditoire fasciné ou sceptique. Ses

contes étaient emplis d'amour et de tendresse, alors qu'elle n'avait connu ni l'un, ni l'autre" (26).

Deprived of love and tenderness in her real life, the grandmother experiences these emotions

through her narration of the tale. The act of narration allows her to enter into a world of fiction

where the stasis of her life merges with the magical. The folktale then ceases to be a simple story

narrated over generations but becomes a narrative that engages with the realities of its narrators--

the grandmother and Mouna.[62]

 Furthermore, as the principal narrator of the folktale in the novel, the grandmother

controls the story by giving it her own twists and turns based on her desires, whims, and agony,

allowing the reality of her own life to influence the extra-real of the folktale. Mouna notices that

the story becomes wild and torturous as her grandmother experiences the pain and agony of

refraining from urination, too embarrassed to ask the family members to carry her to the toilet:

> Elle préférait se retenir pour retarder le plus possible l'échéance, sa vessie se
> gonflait jusqu'à devenir douloureuse, elle serrait les dents, elle fermait les yeux et
> se réfugiait dans ses histoires. Peu à peu, sans qu'elle s'en rende compte, celles-ci
> devenaient sauvages et torturées. Elle livrait alors à la cruauté des hommes ses
> deux protagonistes, ses deux âmes pures, elle les éclaboussait de toute la boue de
> sa douleur. (54)

The tale is tailored by the grandmother to her emotions and sentiments that cannot be expressed

elsewhere in life. As the story changes according to her whims, the narration becomes the only

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[62] Mouna retells this tale later in the novel.

way for the grandmother to attain agency and control. The grandmother's recounting of the folktale then alters both the story and her reality, allowing the extra-real to become an integral part of the real.

The grandmother's tale is not only a source of life and hope for her but has a similar effect on her audience, Mouna, who sits at her grandmother's feet and listens attentively to her story. She gives in to the utopia of her grandmother's folktale much like its narrator: "Ainsi commençait le conte unique de grand-mère grenier, celui d'où naissaient tous ses contes et qui m'a portée bien au-delà des chemins de l'enfance. Ce mensonge qui m'a fait croire aux bonheurs redoutables" (24).

For grandmother Mouna is the Princess Housna who will one day meet her Prince charming or Prince Bahadour in this case:

> Je l'entends qui me berce, longuement, longuement *soja rajkumari*, *soja*-- je suis sa princesse recroquevillée dans le pan de sari tendu en berceau entre ses jambes inutiles. … Un jour, il te viendra un prince qui t'aimera pour ce corps-là et aussi pour la beauté de tes yeux et puis encore pour la beauté qu'il verra en toi, à l'intérieur de ton corps-là… Ce sera ton Prince Bahadour à toi. (34)

Mouna's reality, however, is tragically different from Housna, who is extremely pretty as is suggested by her name which means beautiful in Arabic: "Ils reçurent tous les dons de la terre, la beauté, la jeunesse, l'intelligence, la richesse. […] Bahadour devait son nom à son courage et à sa bravoure. Quant à Housna […] bien sûr, elle s'appelait ainsi pour sa beauté" (24). Mouna, on the contrary, is born with a cleft-lip, a deformity that makes her resemble a monster, leading to her exclusion from the social fabric. She describes the moment of her birth and how her appearance was scandalous as she did not have a normal face: "Et puis. Il en sort. Une sorte de monstre. Une fille. Mais est-ce bien une fille ? Grise, cheveux hérissés, mains griffues-- une mouna ! s'écrie-t-on, c'est une mouna ! Et puis, stupeur ! Sa bouche n'est pas une bouche ! C'était moi" (30).

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The grandmother's comparison between Mouna and Housna is undoubtedly utopic and

magical as it places Mouna on the same plane as Housna, allowing her to dream of love and

happiness. Mouna, too, desires to live in her grandmother's dream because that is the only means

to escape the hatred and rejection to which she has been subjected by her family and society:

> Je ne veux pas rentrer en moi. Je veux encore écouter ses contes, ses histoires, ses
> rêves. Je veux faire partie de sa vie absente. C'est la seule façon de poursuivre.
> S'échapper, se diluer dans des songes incohérents et fous. C'est ce que nous
> faisons tous. Sans cela, les murs capitonnés ne cesseraient pas de se refermer sur
> nous. (21)

The grandmother's folktale is not simply a means of escape from reality, but it has a

greater effect on Mouna as she gradually slips into a magical state where she cannot tell

between her reality and the extra-real of the tale. She begins to live the folktale as she

calls her lover Prince Bahadour and thinks of herself as Housna, thereby gradually

transforming herself into the character of the story. Mouna believes that she is tied to the

tragic couple as they were born under the same astrological sign of Shani[63]: "[…] mais ils

ne savaient pas que leur planète était Shyani, la mauvaise étoile" (21). Hindus believe

that people born under this sign are destined to lead a tragic life. Since the grandmother

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[63] Shyani : Shani (Sanskrit Śani) is one of the Navagraha which are the nine primary celestial beings in Hindu astrology (that is, Vedic astrology). Shani is embodied in the planet Saturn. Shani is the Lord of Saturday; the word Shani also denotes the seventh day or Saturday in most Indian languages. He is also known as Shanaiscarya, Shani Bhagavan, Shaneesvara, Saneesvara, Shaneesvaran, Shani Deva. Shani is a Deva and son of Surya (the Hindu Sun God) and his wife Chhaya (Shadow goddess) and hence also known as Chayyaputra. He is the cousin of Yama, the Hindu God of death. It is said that when he opened his eyes as a baby for the very first time, the sun went into an eclipse, which clearly denotes the impact of Shani on astrological charts (horoscope).He is known as the greatest teacher. He is known in Hindu scriptures as the greatest trouble giver as well as the greatest well wisher. He is depicted dark in color, clothed in black; holding a sword, arrows and two daggers and variously mounted on a black vulture or a raven. This may be the reason why Shri Shani-Maharaj is feared by most. However, Shani is also not one who gets carried away by platitudes like the careless and/or insincere chanting of mantras or the performance of rituals without sincerity and/or faith. He forces people to be disciplined, and to understand that one needs to be humble, focused, patient, and hardworking to achieve success. Since most Hindus fear Lord Shani, they prefer not to approach him alone directly; rather they turn to God, in His various Forms, for relief (*Dictionary of Hindu Mythology* 121).

thinks that Mouna herself is born under the same astrological sign, her destiny would be as tragic as that of the couple: "Bien sûr, pour elle comme pour moi, la mauvaise étoile de Shyani avait marqué nos fronts de son fer noir, et nous n'étions là que pour nous défaire des espoirs inutiles et factices et aller jusqu'au bout de nos amertumes" (80). In this way the destiny of the couple is similar to that of Mouna, making her believe that she is reliving their story.

Although grandmother's notion that Mouna is tied to Housna and will relive her fate makes Mouna think that she is Housna, this belief is marked by an uncertainty indicating that Mouna is simultaneously living in two different worlds the real and the extra-real: "Parfois, pourtant, un doute me vient. A-t-il été? Est-il vraiment venu? A-t-il dansé avec moi en ce matin des tendresses? Ma mémoire est si fausse. Cette incertitude est terrible. Je ne sais pas si je m'appelle Housna, née sur un tapis d'orient" (107). Moreover, at various instances Lisa corrects Mouna as she thinks Mouna is inconsistent in her narration: "C'est ton enfant que tu as tué, tu me l'as dit, affirma Lisa, essayant de mettre de l'ordre dans mes idées. Pas ta grand-mère" (82). Devi uses this uncertainty of the narrator to merge her story with that of Housna, thereby allowing the folktale to become an integral part of Mouna's story. Mouna's uncertain narration thus permits her to give her own twists and turns to the tale. As Mouna is mobile and goes through numerous experiences unlike her grandmother, her recounting of the folktale is more complicated than that of her grandmother.

As a neutral audience to the grandmother's tale, Mouna often asked her to change its tragic ending into a happy one: "Ils meurent à chaque fois juste au moment où ils auraient pu être heureux… tu ne pourrais pas changer la fin, pour une fois?" (24) At Mouna's insistence, the grandmother replies that Mouna will have her own chance to narrate the story and that she can change it according to her desires, thereby emphasizing not only Mouna's role as a narrator in

the novel but also the need for a rewriting of the story: "C'est toi qui la changeras, cette histoire. C'est le conteur qui lui donne ses couleurs et ses rythmes, sa voix et ses élans. La séquence que tu voudras créer, le motif que tu souhaiteras tisser, c'est toi qui en décideras lorsque tu la raconteras à ta petite fille" (25).

Mouna then becomes both the protagonist as well as the narrator of the folktale. She is not only retelling it as suggested by the grandmother, but she is also rewriting it as her own tale. In order to understand her process of rewriting, it is important to compare the grandmother's folktale with Mouna's rewriting of it.

The grandmother's folktale is the story of two young lovers, Prince Bahadour and Princess Housna, who leave their city to join the nomads so that no one can separate them. Unfortunately, they are lost in a desert where they struggle for many days with their limited resources of food and water. Initially, the brave prince gives his share of food to the frail and beautiful Housna but, as the resources are depleted, they give up and are soon surrounded by vultures who think them to be dead. Bahadour is unable to stand the sight of Housna being attacked by the vultures and decides to strangle her. He himself dies several days later as vultures gradually consume his organs. The two thus meet a very tragic and agonizing end, the price they pay for not conforming to the rules of the society. What is interesting in this tale, however, is the state in which they are discovered by the villagers several days later:

> Lorsque les nomades découvrirent leurs corps, ils avaient déjà été attaqués par les vautours. Leurs yeux étaient crevés et leurs orbites caves contemplaient, imperturbables, un ciel qui n'avait eu aucun clémence envers eux. Leur poitrine ouverte exposait des organes à moitié dévorés. Le vent et sable du désert avaient fait le reste. Rien d'humain ne subsistait dans ces cadavres méconnaissables. Pourtant, lorsque les nomades voulurent les enterrer, ils ne purent détacher les deux mains entrelacées. Les corps tombaient en morceaux, mais les doigts refusèrent d'être séparés. Ceux qui les touchèrent ressentirent aussitôt une immense tristesse qui les empêcha de poursuivre leur besogne. (80)

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Although the cruel world does not recognize their love, by dying in each other's arms, they enable their love to survive eternally. And that is precisely why the nomads do not have the courage to bury them, as they leave the two bodies intertwined, covering them with sand and allowing time to take care of the rest. The two lovers die, but it is their death that makes their love eternal, as the grandmother states:

> Un jour, Bahadour et Housna reviendront chercher ce qui reste d'eux pour réconcilier leur âme avec la cruauté des hommes. Et toi qui passes par le désert comme un cavalier d'ombre, sache que ce n'est pas le vent qui hurle au-delà des dunes ou qui gémit dans les cavernes de sel. Ecoute ce chant, tu n'en sortiras pas indemne. Quand tu te retrouveras parmi les hommes, tu te sentiras à la fois éclairé et mortifié, et tu auras appris à aimer et à désespérer, car la voix de Housna et Bahadour sera entrée en toi. (80)

All those who listen to the song are struck by the sacrifice of the couple and cannot stay indifferent to their love. Housna's and Bahadour's tale influences all its audiences.

Mouna, the only audience for the song in the novel, is initially unhappy with the tragic ending of the story and desires to change it. However, she later realizes that it is the only ending possible, as the sacrifice of the two lovers is inevitable to evoke an ideal love that can create hope in people's hearts in this ruthless world: "Mais en y réfléchissant bien, je voyais que c'était la seule fin possible. Les deux amants se devaient d'être pétrifiés dans leur beauté et leur jeunesse à tout jamais, pour nous donner espoir et nous nourrir du chant qui s'échappait de leur lèvres tuméfiées" (25). The two die but it is for each other that they sacrifice themselves. Bahadour kills Housna by his own hands, but it is only out of affection as he cannot see her suffer. Their death brings to the fore the fact that there are those who are willing to struggle against cruelty and prove that it is love that triumphs in the end. Their story then is a tale of hope that inspires love and kindness in the listener's heart.

Although Mouna dreams of being Housna and even calls her lover Prince Bahadour, she understands that her story will be more tragic than that of the lovers, indicating that she is

suspended between the magical of the folktale and the reality of her life: "Nous vivions notre

conte de fées, sachant qu'il n'y aura pas de fin heureuse" (7). At another instance she

distinguishes herself from the characters of the folktales and emphasizes the fact that her reality

is different. "Et je poursuis mon autre vie. Celle-ci, ténèbres à perpétuité, me semble si factice

que je n'en suis à peine consciente. La réalité est autre. Je ne suis pas d'ici. Je suis venue d'un

autre jour, une lumière aveugle dans les yeux et je suis radieuse" (67). She knows that in

retelling grandmother's story she is rewriting the tale as she dresses it with her own experiences

and gives it new dimensions: "Je comprenais que le conte de grand-mère grenier, avec moi,

aurait une autre fin. Je lui avais donné mes couleurs et mon rythme, ma voix et mes élans" (109).

What remains to be seen is how Mouna's rewriting is different from the folktale and why it

inspires a different response.

Born with a cleft lip, Mouna is confined to a limekiln so that she does not embarrass the

rest of the family that considers her deformity monstrous. She is blamed for all the mishaps that

take place not only in the family, but also in her village, for example, a drought or a fire in the

fields. Rejected by all, she finds love and solace with her grandmother who is also ostracized by

the family. The grandmother becomes Mouna's mother as she offers her dry breasts to her after

her biological mother refuses to feed her. She grows up listening to the grandmother's folktale

and dreaming about Housna and love. In addition to the grandmother, there is another creature in

whom Mouna finds a true companion. It is a dog that visits her in the limekiln. She freely moves

around with it, almost metamorphosing into a dog herself. Finally, she abandons this dog for her

lover whom she calls Prince Bahadour as if she were reliving the folktale. The lover, however,

after several nights of passionate love decides to leave Mouna with a baby in her womb. She kills

her baby by drowning it in the sea, because she does not want her child to undergo the same

rejection as she did, believing this to be an act of love, similar to Bahadour's act of killing Housna.

Although Mouna enjoys passionate encounters with her lover, thereby living her grandmother's dream, this illusion does not last long as her lover abandons her unlike Prince Bahadour who died for his love. While contemplating the reason of his sudden disappearance, Mouna realizes that it was probably her story that horrified him to the extent that he decided to leave: "Et puis, Lisa, le Prince Bahadour s'est enfui. Il est parti sans rien dire […] Je n'ai pas vraiment été surprise. Sans doute je l'ai su lorsqu'il a lu mon histoire dans le sari. Etait-ce la peur? Etait-ce l'offense? Etait-ce un songe abîme, la violence de mes serments? Ou tout simplement le refus de croire à la beauté cachée dans un corps fait d'absence?"(113). Mouna states that her lover's action failed to surprise her precisely because she noticed the unease on his face as he read Mouna's story off her grandmother's saree.[64] Mouna's story is the one that inspires hatred and lays bare human cruelty. It leads to the sentiment of shame and disgust:

> Pendant longtemps il est resté à lire le sari et à soupirer comme si petit à petit ma vie entrait en lui. Les étincelles ont commencé à s'éteindre. J'ai eu envie de l'arrêter, alors, cela allait trop loin, il ne fallait pas qu'il s'approprie mon âme, cela pouvait le tuer. Mais il a tout lu, jusqu'au dernier mot. Et puis il a fait comme si rien ne s'était passé, il a cru que je n'avais pas vu le plomb coulé en lui, goutte à goutte, pour l'anéantir de honte. (110)

While the grandmother's tale incites a feeling of love and hope in the hearts of its listeners, Mouna's story stuns all by its brutality and evokes a sense of shame and guilt as happens with her lover. Her tale is marked by a deep sense of fear and devastation as it exposes human savagery against a being who has committed no sin except being born deformed. Mouna's grandmother always ended the folktale with tears, reacting to the pain and agony the two lovers suffered: "Ainsi se terminait son chant, comme un cri de lassitude, avec le bruit de ses larmes"

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[64] According to Mouna her story was inscribed on her grandmother's only saree, the only cloth she possessed. This saree is also the cloth that enabled her to recall her human existence after she returned from her escapades with the dog.

(80). Mouna's tale, however, is so horrifying that it is impossible to believe it. In fact, the novel begins with the narrator expressing her fear that the reader might not believe her story because it is barbaric and wild: "Cette histoire couleur d'eau croupie n'a peut-être aucune réalité. Laissez-la s'écouler à travers la bonde de l'oubli. N'essayez pas de la saisir. Elle parle de rêves déchus, et aurait un bruit de déchirure si l'on pouvait entendre le bruit secret des cœurs" (7). She even warns her reader of the violence and brutality that this story presents: "Je suis comme l'île qui chante sa propre mort. Cette violence n'est pas celle qu'on voit en soulevant un rideau: c'est celle d'une chair mise à nu" (7).

She emphasizes the pain and anxiety that marks her story. The pain is such that the reader might even be led to believe that this story is too bizarre to be true.

> Mon histoire commence un jour de terre gonflée de sel et d'estuaires couleur de sang. C'est le genre de signe qui accompagne la naissance d'êtres tel que moi. Nos yeux brumeux sont faits pour voir aussi bien la cruauté que l'innocence. Cette brûlure qui me consume de l'intérieur, c'est elle que je vous livre en mon absence: des mots qui ne sont qu'une ombre, une illusion d'envol et de rupture, l'infime cassure de mes rêves. Vous ne croirez peut-être pas à ce conte étrange et angoissé. (8)

Her grandmother's folktale is a web of words that allows her to have an illusory escape from the world of destitution in which she lived. Mouna's story, on the contrary, offers no respite to anyone, but rather is the source of anxiety and suffering.

Mouna's tale brings to the fore the hatred people harbor against her because of her deformity. It is the story of a girl whose dreams resemble those of Housna, who seeks true love like Housna's but whose face bears no resemblance to that of Housna.

Completely rejected by the human race, the protagonist gets love and compassion from a dog:

> C'était moi. Le bébé qui n'en était pas un. C'est ainsi que j'ai été marquée pour ce qui allait m'arriver plus tard, quand je quitterais la race humaine pour faire partie d'autre chose, pour vivre dans un conte qui n'était pas celui de grand mère grenier

> mais le mien propre, pour être, différemment, autrement, loin des regards glacés
> et des barrières dressées. (30)

Mouna gets along very well with the dog, and it is with this dog that she discovers a new world. The dog is the first creature after the grandmother who communicates with Mouna even though the "conversation" is made of compassionate silence and courteous smiles. In addition to the grandmother, he is the only creature who shows compassion towards Mouna, a sentiment unfamiliar to Mouna because she was always shunned as a monster by her own family members: "J'ai regardé ses yeux, et j'y ai vu quelque chose d'inouï: la compassion. Je me suis assise en face de lui, et, dans cette aube qui n'avait rien d'annonciateur, nous avons eu une conversation faite de silences et de sourires. Une conversation d'amour. A partir de ce jour, il est devenu mon compagnon" (73).

Her comraderie with the dog reaches a point where she herself begins to metamorphose into one: "J'avais développé un esprit de meute. Je suis sortie de la mare à quatre pattes, car je ne pouvais plus marcher debout. Le chien me surveillait avec un tel air de fierté que j'ai senti que je me transformais sous son regard" (73). As the dog takes her out of the limekiln for the first time, she begins to discover the world not as a human being but as a dog. In due course of time she abandons her clothes and transforms herself completely into a dog, believing that only love that can bring such a change: "Finalement, à quatre pattes, je lui ressemblais. Je me suis mise à sourire comme lui, de ce sourire déchiqueté des créatures en perpétuelle souffrance. L'amour…L'amour seul pouvait opérer cette transformation" (87). She accepts her new life as she erases all memory of being a human. As a beast she learns to rely on instincts and understands the simplicity of the bestial world in which the laws of nature rule. Animals kill for food and not for pleasure unlike man who rejoices in the suffering of others: "Et qu'auprès de ma famille-monstre, j'avais appris que la véritable pureté ne pouvait être parmi les hommes: elle

devait donc se trouver parmi les animaux. Je devins une bête avec grâce et grandeur" (96). Mouna's metamorphosis is a magical transformation that allows her to access the world of animals. Through this extra-real experience she understands the fundamental difference between animals and man. She not only adapts completely to the life of the animals, but also comes to appreciate their simplicity and grace, qualities she finds missing in humans. Her magical transformation permits her accessibility to a world different from that of the humans in which she is loved and can love back in return. Her metamorphosis is a critical comment on the humans who strive hard to distinguish themselves from animals, but in reality end up becoming worse than beasts.

Ironically then, one can say that Mouna's monstrous looks expose the hatred and bestiality hidden within the human race. Mouna's cleft lip does not turn her into a devil as the villagers believe, but it brings out the devil hidden within them. This is precisely why her story cannot be read or heard without a sense of shame and disgust. Although Mouna returns to the world of humans as she encounters her Prince Bahadour and desires to live the grandmother's folktale, her prince disappears after making her pregnant bringing her love story to a tragic end. Although Housna's story exposes human hostility towards love, the sacrifice made by the two lovers not only negates it by demonstrating that there are people capable of true love but also inspires others who listen to it. When Housna's story is replaced by a protagonist who is deformed, the folktale of love becomes the most horrid tale, displaying human savagery and unsettling all listeners. In bringing the two stories together, Devi allows for a comparison between the two that exposes and emphasizes the brutal and inhuman conditions in which Mouna finds herself.

The merger of the two stories opens the claustrophobic existence of the protagonist and her grandmother to the magic of the folktale allowing them access to a world of dreams. In recounting and reliving this folktale, both Mouna and her grandmother modify it to be able to

voice their personal emotions and sentiments. The folktale therefore enables the expression of these characters. Furthermore, Devi uses Housna's tale as a narrative framework to construct Mouna's story. In replacing maimed Mouna by the beautiful and graceful Housna, Devi rewrites the ancient folktale of love and sacrifice as she underscores the barbaric treatment meted out to Mouna due to her deformity and difference.

In this chapter I argue that Devi's works, highly influenced by non-Western epics, religion, and spirituality, tend to use magical realist strategies to liberate the muffled feminine voice. As the extra-real merges with the real in her novels, female characters acquire agency that would seem impossible in a strictly realistic scenario. The extra-real not only allows women from different lives and ages to come together but also provides them accessibility to magical hybrid spaces that unite with feminine forces to resist patriarchal hegemony. Soupir in the novel by the same title and Souffleur in *L'arbre fouet* are feminine spaces where gender stereotypes are challenged, leading to alternate possibilities that explode the binary oppositions revered by Western rationality. The feminine fury carried by wild, cyclonic winds invades the interstices often ignored by realistic representations and makes them the site of action where notions of the feminine and the masculine are redefined.

In addition to space, Devi uses Hindu myths and folktales as they play a pivotal role in the Indo-Mauritian culture. Myths participate in the reality of Devi's characters and transform their lives. This convergence of myths/folktales with reality not only questions realistic representations of women but also their status in the popular myths accepted since time immemorial. By bringing myths together with reality, Devi also attempts to revisit them, scrutinizing the role of submission and passivity they imposed on women. Thus, in *Le voile de Draupadi*, she brings two mythical figures Sita and Draupadi together with her characters Anjali and Vasanti. In making Anjali relive the experiences of her counterparts from antiquity, Devi

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alters these myths and allows new possibilities for women. In *Moi, l'interdite* Devi merges the reality of her character Mouna with a folktale narrated by her grandmother, allowing Mouna access to different worlds as she narrates her horrid tale marked by hatred and brutality. In bringing myths and folktales to the contemporary world, Devi rewrites them in a way that the feminine potential is excavated from patriarchal myths that have limited women in restricted roles for ages. Thus, bringing magic to her realist texts in the form of myths, folktales or ghosts not only allows Devi to articulate feminine concerns as a collective but also permits her to rewrite the ancient texts in ways beneficial to women.

CONCLUSION

Through a critical analysis of Ananda Devi's novels, this dissertation has demonstrated how she skillfully employs different strategies to intervene in the dominant/androcentric narrative and unsettle it from within. The *mélange* of the West and the non-West enables her to play with the representation of reality, fiction, and the imaginary simultaneously. Devi takes her narrators and readers to a zone where reality co-exists with the extra-real, the Western with the non-Western, the feminine with the androcentric, plot with the plotless, narrator with narratee in ways that challenge their distinctions, creating a rich array of possibilities for feminine silence to voice itself.

Bringing together feminist criticism and narratology, this study opens a space that enables us to discuss the place of feminine discourse in the construction of narration using the terminology of narrative theory. This project not only illustrates how Devi inserts feminine voice and expression in the dominant narrative structure, but also analyzes rhetorical narratology, its relevance and scope in relation to Devi's texts. By choosing classical definitions of plot and temporality as the starting point of this study, I also explore their limitations when juxtaposed with complex narrative structures such as Devi's that are influenced by many different cultures. In a world that is rapidly turning into a global melting pot, where writers are weaving in experiences from many different cultures and societies, one needs to revisit persistently the old definitions of narrative and narratology. My work suggests ways in which narratologists might rethink their objects of study. Informed initially by the terminology and definitions of rhetorical narratology, this study also investigates the traditional notions of plot and temporality, demonstrating how Devi adds new dimensions to these concepts while constructing spaces for her female narrators and characters. A close scrutiny of narratological terms and concepts has revealed certain lacunas that can be addressed by future narratologists.

In this dissertation I argue that through the use of different narrative and thematic techniques Devi brings together women across different ages in order to create a feminine solidarity, allowing silenced discourses to emerge. In the first chapter I illustrate how Devi resists the Victorian romance plot and valorizes relationships outside marriage. Consequently, I discuss different alternative sexual relationships in which the partners enjoy togetherness and love neither based on gender differences nor informed by a man-woman opposition. These relationships bring women together as lovers, sisters or friends, enabling them to create a community.

The second section of the first chapter examines this togetherness on a narrative level, as I demonstrate the narrator's persistent desire to connect with her narratee. Devi's ostracized story-tellers have no heroic deeds to narrate, as their world is filled with despair and destitution. They recount tales of misery and stasis that challenge the notion of plot based on action and events driven by a masculine desire. This study examines an inherent desperation in Devi's narrators to reach out to their readers in order to make their stories heard and understood. Tales are recounted in a manner that involves the narratee in the process of narration. As a result, the act of narration acquires new dimensions, becoming a work of collaboration between the narrator and the narratee, and challenging the traditional hierarchical divide between the two. Narration then is not simply the telling of a tale by the narrator to a narratee but the construction of it in which both participate. As a narrator's desire to connect with the narratee is the only motor of these narratives, they unsettle the traditional definition of plot and tend to align with Susan Lanser's notion of plotlessness. Through Devi's narratives this dissertation demonstrates that the construction of plotless texts can enable the feminine or muted discourses to surface, and thereby contributes to feminist criticism. Furthermore, this study allows us to understand the limitations

of classical definitions of plot and points out the need to rework them, thereby contributing to narratology.

The second chapter further challenges the traditional narrator-narratee divide by using the non-Western notion of reincarnation and Gérard Genette's concept of narrative metalepsis. Devi's characters intervene in the recounting of their tales, taking the narrator's "je" and participating in the construction of the narrative. The result is a text that favors multiple consciousness and polyphony instead of a single dominant narrative voice. In order to introduce a structure that allows different characters to become narrators in the text, Devi plays with the temporality of her works. Her novels do not adhere to a single story on a linear temporal axis but deal with numerous stories that take the reader to different temporal zones. This study demonstrates that polytemporality allows Devi to bring women from different time periods together to create a feminine solidarity against patriarchy. This chapter also points out issues with the traditional notion of linearity that is problematic for many post-modern and non-Western writers, as it privileges a single narrative authority. For plurivocal texts that valorize multiple narrative voices, one needs to reconfigure the notion of time and narrative.

In yet another attempt to introduce multiple consciousness and plurivocality, Devi uses magical realist strategies that bring women from antiquity together with their contemporary counterparts. In the last chapter I examine techniques that allow the real to merge with the extra-real, enabling women to access magical spaces that were forbidden to them in a strict realist scenario. Influenced by Indian mythology, Devi deftly weaves in myths and folktales in her novels so that the contemporary women are in dialogue with their mythical counterparts. This merger permits Devi not only to alter the reality of her novels but also to comment on the age-old myths that function as foundations of contemporary reality. In bringing myths to her texts, she attempts to rewrite them in a manner that women are freed from the images of passivity and

submission imposed on them through these myths. As Western reality meets magic in her works, Devi comments on the Western notion of reality. In introducing imaginary sequences, ghosts, and mythical characters, Devi creates a fictive world very different from the Western realist novel based on "rational" truth. An examination of this merger allows us to demonstrate the limitations of Western realist narratives, particularly the restricted role they have accorded to woman characters.

Thus, the different strategies, namely plotlessness, narrative metalepsis, polytemporality, and magical realism all create disarray on thematic, linguistic and narrative levels. It is this chaos that enables Devi to disrupt classical structures. As Devi's narrative flows freely, unrestrained by grammatical or structural rules, she makes her characters and readers experience an unsettling confusion that dissolves all boundaries, and challenges categories and fixed definitions. Her narratives create interstitial hybrid spaces from where her narrators connect with others like themselves and voice their concerns as a collective. The reader who subjects herself to the chaos and the confusion of these texts emerges enriched from its maze, as she can hear the muffled voices of Devi's marginalized narrators and characters. The text takes the reader to a world of destitution and despair, but brings her back with hope and an aspiration for change. While Devi's writing may be charged with intense suffering and pain, it always ends up inspiring a certain optimism in its reader.

My work on Ananda Devi has led me to other emerging women writers of Indian origin not only from Mauritius but from the Caribbean as well. What these writers have in common is the shared experience of displacement, and the collective memory of Coolitude.[65] Their writings

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[65] From 1838 onwards, the English needed more labor to sustain their trade on colonial plantations and reassert their authority. After the official abolition of slavery, hundreds of thousands of Indian men and women were persuaded to leave or bluntly kidnapped from their mother country to become slaves known by another name: indentured laborers, later called coolies. *Coolitude*, a term proposed by the Mauritian poet Khal Torabully, is both an

share an imagination built along symbolical and metaphorical crossings, superseding national and geographical boundaries. If Devi's *Soupir* develops an analogy between the residents of Soupir and the slave ancestors, Shenaz Patel's *Le Silence des Chagos*, Nathacha Appanah Mouriquand's *Le dernier frère*, Rosetta Khalideen's *Thoughts* and Arlette Bogat's *Terre d'exil et d'adoption* celebrate a similar affiliation with ancestors. The questions of identity along with gender issues remain some of the most pertinent questions for these writers. Almost all use Creole references leading to a cross-cultural approach in which caste and class barriers are easily transcended.

These authors are also pioneers in bringing the condition of women in their respective countries to the fore through their works. Their narratives closely resemble those of Devi's in style and content, as they are characterized by an attempt to understand and fictionalize the past while subverting monolithic discourses (mainly Western as well as male). Their works reveal the inherent conflict between the past, traditional values and customs of their communities and a patriarchal system against which they need to fight. As a result, in these texts one discerns a focus on female characters and the use of diverse strategies that continue the feminine fight for survival. Like Devi's writings, these texts, too, are marked by a deep concern to give voice to

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intellectual interpretation of, and a poetic and artistic immersion into the world of the coolie. The concept of Coolitude encompasses the experiences of the first generation workers together with those of their descendants spread across the Caribbean, Pacific and Indian Ocean islands today. The symbolic value of the word lies in both the scope it gives us to interpret the specificities of the coolie experience and its use as a comparative tool. Torabully's poetics of coolitude is defined as the articulation of the imaginaries of mosaic India and other human and cultural spaces. Starting from the derogatory word "coolie", which he revitalizes, Torabully extends it to geographical and cultural migrants throughout the world. In his poetry he voices the need of relation between the descents of the emancipated slaves and the indentured, allowing interplay with other cultures (*Coolitude: An Anthology of the Indian Labour Diaspora*).

women. Veronique Bragard observes a recurrent motif of the killing of the father or the male in the works by these writers: "Devi, Mootoo, Rahming epitomize the very killing of this patriarchal fossilized world and on another level, the paternalism in terms of literary production" (372). Like Devi, many have used insanity as an effective tool to fight the repression imposed on them through societal norms.

Exploration of Devi's novels and an examination of her style of writing suggest new approaches to analyze works by these writers in order to understand how, after several generations, memory and heritage influence their works. One can read the similarities in the strategies these writers develop to construct associative identities that bring together their experiences with those of Devi. How do they redefine feminism while articulating their particular concerns, dealing with conflicts between a strong patriarchal past and westernized feminism? How do they use the landscape as a source of metaphor and inspiration? How do they employ their ancestral heritage and reshape it to create a culture with which they can identify? What brings these writers together in their fight against patriarchy? How do regional and national specificities of these writers set them apart? Literature by women writers of Indian origin is still in its nascent stage in Mauritius and the Caribbean. Most of these texts have not yet been the subject of in-depth critical analysis. Hence, a study that incorporates the common experience of these writers from different parts of the world-- from the Indian Ocean to the Caribbean Sea-- will be a significant contribution to women's writing.

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