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## UNVEILING THE CULTURAL DYNAMICS OF THE INDIAN DIASPORA IN MAURITIUS: A READING OF ANANDA DEVI'S *L'ARBRE FOUET*

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### Abstract

Ananda Devi is a Francophone Mauritian writer whose militant writings attempt to deconstruct hierarchical social structures. Thanks to her mother who hails from Andhra Pradesh, Devi was deeply influenced by Indian customs and traditions. The cultural, religious and mythological influences are packed in her novel *L'Arbre Fouet* (*The Whip Tree*) whose backdrop is Mauritius. This paper seeks to examine the rituals, beliefs, habits and traditions of the Indian diaspora who assert their Indian identity in Mauritius. The reconstruction of Hindu cultural elements in Mauritius allows the Hindu community to maintain its diasporic links with its motherland.

**Keywords:** diaspora, culture, identity, reconnection, India.

### Introduction

Ananda Devi is a Francophone writer born in Trois-Boutiques, Mauritius. Hailing from Andhra Pradesh, she belongs to the Indian diaspora in Mauritius. Mauritius becomes the backdrop of most of Devi's novels which aim to disrupt patriarchal ideologies ingrained in the Indian society.

It is stunning that Devi examines Indian traditions, rituals, myths, beliefs, cuisine and epics in depth in her novels. Although her roots are Mauritian, the elements of Indianness intertwined in the novels are remarkable. Devi declares that she grew up listening to the Indian

epics of Ramayana and Mahabharata and other mythologies from her mother which have influenced her consciously and unconsciously though she was born and bred in Mauritius. Her novels provide a fertile ground for exploring the cultural elements of the Indian diaspora in Mauritius. The author delves into the cultural elements in her novel to establish a reconnection with India, her ancestral motherland.

### Analysis

Mauritius is a former sugar plantation colony known as 'Little India'. Large numbers of Indians migrated to Mauritius during British India as indentured labourers or coolies to work

in the sugar plantations. Hindus constitute the dominant community in Mauritius. They have always been nostalgic of their Indian motherland. Movindri Reddy affirms that “they recreated and established rituals, customs, and traditions that are novel to the island but nevertheless have connections, however weak, to India” (153). Little by little, Hindu customs and values penetrated into the Mauritian soil. The Indo-Mauritians identify India as ‘Mother India’, their sacred land of origin. Julia Waters believes that:

Since their arrival in Mauritius, Indo-Mauritians and particularly Hindu Mauritians have been able to assert a strong sense of collective ethnic belonging by maintaining diasporic links with Mother India. (4)

Hindu Mauritians have preserved their cultural practices and ancestral languages that define their cultural identity and re-establish links with India. The religious rites are observed in homes and temples with devotion. This is poignant when we explore Devi’s novels where the Indo-Mauritian community idealizes the ancestral culture and demonstrates excessive attachment to their motherland. Patrick Eisenlohr’s statement is relevant in this context:

Hindu Mauritians, who constitute the largest and politically dominant ethnic community in Mauritius, have legitimized their central place in a Mauritian nation not in terms of an imagined state of autochthony but through the construction of ancestral diasporic cultures. (5)

Ananda Devi evokes the various elements of Hindu culture which is based on the sacred scriptures of the Vedas, the Puranas, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. The significant cultural elements of *L’Arbre Fouet* are the Hindu notions of karma and reincarnation. The laws of karma and reincarnation are the principal beliefs of Hinduism which hold the vision of life and death. In this novel, the narrator Aeena

recounts the life of a young woman Devika who had once lived in Aeena’s inherited property. The stories of the narrator Aeena and Devika are intertwined with the elements of karma and reincarnation. Aeena is possessed by the mysterious events of her previous life and feels agitated. She discovers that she had been Devika in her previous life and has been reincarnated in this life. She decides to devote herself to the quest for what exists between her and Devika. The burden of her past traumatizes Aeena and reduces her to silence. Aeena’s state of mind is tumultuous and she no longer wants to fall a prey to her memories and each time the trauma of her past resurfaces, she stops abruptly.

Aeena visits Jerome, her friend who finds peace in his ashram. Those who gather in his ashram sing the verses of the Gita. They observe that Jerome had to be sent to the Himalayas and to the banks of the Ganges. Devi links the narration with Indian cultural elements and enables the readers to reflect on the Bhagavat Gita, the Himalayas and the Ganges. By evoking these elements, Devi would like to emphasize the spirituality, holiness and religion of the Indian land. Bhikhu Parekh’s affirmation holds true in this context. Parekh states that “religion [...] is the most tangible marker of cultural identity” (29). Hindu Mauritians read the verses of the Gita habitually to reconnect themselves with their country of origin.

Aeena delves into the mishaps and catastrophes that remain frozen in her mind. She believes that her house holds the secrets that she must unveil. On a rainy day, she goes up to the attic to dig into Devika’s story. She looks at a photo where she finds an elderly man, a young woman with a little girl sitting on the ground. This photo reminds Aeena of her family. She observes the resemblance between D evika’s father and her own which reminds Aeena of her past. The painful events of the past bring her morbid feelings and she descends from the attic. To cope up with her trauma, Aeena wanders and explores the orchard where she finds an overabundance of red fruits. She fixes her eyes

on an almond tree and stands bewildered. After a fairly long journey, she reaches the cemetery. In this quiet place, she finds two graves and reads the inscriptions on these graves - one is drowned and the other has had a natural death. The name Dévika horrifies her. She had died at the age of eighteen. Aena reads these words on the grave: "She believed in reincarnation and her last wish was to find herself guilt-free again one day" (43, my trans).

Aena wonders what Dévika is guilty of. Aena reflects: "Could she have been parricide? But no. She didn't necessarily have the same Karma as me" (44, my trans). The narrator associates her destiny with that of Dévika. Aena's father had accused her of parricide in one of her past lives and as a result she was reincarnated to atone for her sin. It is a Karma that Aena drags behind her and which weighs on her. She feels tormented by agonising thoughts and begins to cry. Every time Aena passes the whip tree, she gets a chill. She has the image of a crucified woman crying out for revenge. The whip tree has a historical significance because slaves were tied to it and whipped during the colonial era. Once slavery was abolished, fathers tied their ungrateful daughters to the tree and whipped them for dishonouring their families. Aena finds a lot of things that connect Dévika to the house, to the whip tree and to the lily pond. She hears Devika's voice deep inside her screaming for revenge. Dévika remains invisible and buried deep within the narrator. Aena firmly believes that she is the reincarnation of Devika.

The image of the water lily pond perturbs Aena all day. A bizarre thought strikes her mind that it is a forbidden love for which Devika was crucified on the whip tree. Devika's father wanted to push her into the pond but she pushed him into the pond and he was drowned. After killing her father, Dévika died with the desire to be reincarnated without the guilt of parricide. Aena recalls not only the drowning of Devika's father but also her agonising childhood and her father's tyranny. As a priest

and astrologer, he had learnt the stories of his daughter and accused her of parricide. Aena has been burdened with this karma that follows her from life to life. Dévika whispers to Aena that women are victims of selfish and tyrannical men. She says it is a curse to have been born a woman. Devika's soul cries out for vengeance against man who is the master of a woman's destiny.

Aena's mother dies whispering: "she will be a 'swamini' on the banks of the Ganges" (85, my trans). While listening to her, Aena's father corrects her: "she will be 'bhikarin' on the banks of the Ganges" (85-86, my trans). The father curses that Aena should be a beggar in order to atone for her sins. He forces her to kneel down on stones from time to time. She is forced to sleep among the cattle and given the remains of the food. Devi uses several Hindi words in her novel. Swamini and Bhikarin are Hindi words which are translated as owner and beggar respectively. The influence of Hindi in Indo-Mauritian society is remarkable. Eisenlohr notes that "Hindi, as a language of the ancestors, is linked to the diasporic situation of the Hindus in Mauritius, establishing a relationship between the Hindus of the diaspora and the motherland" (52). Diasporic belonging to India is reconstructed through the ancestral language. The Indo-Mauritians affirm their sacred attachment to India through Hindi and propagate their language to strengthen the spirit of Indianness in their community and cultivate the language among their children. They wanted to preserve their ancestral language in the Mauritian soil. As Eisenlohr affirms, "the generous support for Hindi as an ancestral language... is a source of pride for many Hindus in the north of Mauritius" (83).

Aena recounts her father's Brahminical priesthood. Aena's father sits in front of the statue of Goddess Devi, rings the bell and chants his tantric prayers. He consults an old book and utters a song to Yama, the god of death, to Rudra, the god of storm, to Vayu, the god of wind. Deities highlighted in Indian mythology

include Vayu, Yama, Indra, Agni, Rudra and Varuna. Devi exposes the influence of the Hindu religion and Indian mythology in Mauritius. Oddvar Hollup states that "religious practices, rituals and worshiped gods are important elements of the ethnic identity of Hindus in Mauritius" (226).

Devi also introduces the caste system that is embedded in Indian society. The caste system (varna) has four categories: priests (Brahmans), warriors (Kshatriyas), merchants (Vaisyas) and workers (Sudras). Brahmins have been the spiritual leaders. Having retained their roots, Hindus adhere to the caste system in Mauritius. In the process of rebuilding their bond with their motherland, Hindus have maintained pride in the caste system. Daniel Bass asserts that "caste still matters among Indians in the diaspora, not only as cultural vestiges but also as deeply meaningful aspects of community and identity" (30).

Aeena continues her quest for karma. She shares memories of her childhood in the village with her parents where she is forced to offer prayers, rituals with her father every morning owing to her karma. She recites: "Om bhur bhuvah swaha... Bhargo devasya dhimahi, diyo yo nat prachodayat..." (159). Every evening, Aeena has to recite the prayer in Sanskrit before dinner and listen to her father's philosophy. Sanskrit is the sacred language of Hinduism. It has always been used by Hindu priests in rituals, hymns and songs during religious ceremonies to invoke the celestial gods. Sanskrit is an integral part of Hindu rituals in Mauritius. Hindus offer their daily prayers in Sanskrit. Indo-Mauritian Hindus preserve the tradition of singing in Sanskrit. In this context, Oddvar Hollup asserts that "language and religious practices are important elements of the ethnic identity of Hindus in Mauritius" (226).

After ruminating over her memories, Aeena regains her strength and expresses her desire to dredge the lily pond to understand the mystery. While the villagers are dredging the

pond, Aeena brings in a big pot of biryani. Biryani is a very popular dish in India with aromatic spices and rich flavours. Biryani has become a popular dish in Mauritius crossing all cultural and ethnic spheres. The cuisine brings nostalgic feelings for Indo-Mauritians. Movindri Reddy's ideas are relevant to our examination of Hindu cultural identity in Mauritius. He declares:

Throughout the diaspora, food maintains certain continuities with the regional cuisine of India... Food is also used to signify ethnic otherness – Indians in the diaspora are associated with chutney, masala, chai, channa, etc. It emphasizes the connection with India but also recognizes their presence in a place outside India. (154-155)

One of the villagers finds a femur in the pond. Aeena recalls the Ganges festival and the drowning of her father. While reciting prayers, Aeena's father is carried away by the tide. Aeena hears the screams of her father. She lets him drown without running to his rescue. Aeena remembers her own father's death after finding a bone in the lake. Devika pushes her father Babou into the pond and he drowns and Aeena also leaves her father Swami to drown in the sea. Aeena claims that both girls are victims of the tyranny of their fathers. Both girls were whipped by their fathers for transgressing the moral codes established for women in the patriarchal order. They suffered their enslavement but they were not silent. They triumphed over their enslavement by transgressing codes of conduct and killing their fathers. It is this act of parricide that unites Devika and Aeena against the tyranny of their fathers. Aeena says proudly, "It's the same thing, we're sisters. More than sisters. Identical. We are the guardians of feminine pride. We have triumphed over our enslavements" (77, my trans).

Aeena reflects on Devika's marriage at the age of twelve. She did not want to marry her

fourteen year old cousin and tore his photo. Indo-Mauritians preserve their heritage by the fact that their members tend to marry within their respective ethnic groups. Endogamy perpetuates ethnic boundaries. Devi Nirsimloo Anenden argues that kinship and marriage are the primary elements in the constitution and maintenance of ethnic identity. She asserts that "kinship and marriage are complementary in that they serve to maintain and strengthen identity..." (45). Endogamy is one of the most powerful elements in maintaining the identity of Mauritian society. Oddvar Hollup highlights the role played by marriage and kinship in the construction and reconstruction of Indian ethnic identity in Mauritius. He declares: "The ties of kinship and marriage [...] define "Indianness" and constitute elements of ethnic identity" (219).

Devika rebels from a very young age and is locked in the attic. In the following days, an untouchable comes to work in their garden. For Devika, it is love at first sight and she dreams of this untouchable. The untouchable is forbidden to enter into the house. The parents tell her: "He is polluted, an untouchable" (126, my trans). It is at this moment that Devika decides to touch the untouchable to demonstrate her resistance against her misogynist father. Every day, she laughs, sings and chats with him. The untouchable is seduced by Devika. But he is conscious of the cultural barriers that stigmatise him as untouchable. This scene highlights the existence of the caste system in India. Untouchables or Dalits are the lowest in the Hindu hierarchy and suffer oppression, discrimination and violence. They are isolated and excluded from the social organization. Untouchables are forbidden to enter upper-class streets or temples and to have meals with upper-caste men. Dieter Neubert states that "the Hindus, designating the Indo-Mauritians, are divided according to language, region of origin in India and religion. For religious Hindus, caste is also a marker of difference" (146).

While Aena's father makes preparations for the family reunion, Devika subverts the social barrier to experience bodily caresses and ecstasy with the untouchable. It happens to be a terrifying day when Babou discovers the two bodies embracing each other. Babou uses derogatory words to humiliate his daughter. It is for this forbidden love that Dévika is crucified on the whip tree. Joginder Singh's statement is relevant in this context. He states that "the mere perception that a woman has acted in a way that brings dishonour to the family is enough to trigger violence" (447). Indian and Mauritian societies condemn and stigmatise women who transgress the established culture because marriage is a sacred institution where the chastity of women is one of the fundamental virtues. The notions of honour, purity and chastity are inscribed on the bodies of Hindu women in India and Mauritius. Hindu women who subvert these codes of conduct and bring disgrace to the family and society are beaten and expelled from society. Devika is buried alive with ants attacking her entire body. He accuses his daughter as she has transgressed the moral codes established by the Brahmins for women in Mauritius.

After brooding over her memories, Aena stares at the whip tree where girls were tied up and whipped by the fathers for crossing the moral codes. When the narrator returns home, she finds Dominique, her friend, who is perplexed and torn. Dominique admits that she is pregnant by a foreign tourist. She submits to the indignation of society like Devika's shameful act with the untouchable. Aena jumps when she looks at Dominique tied to the whip tree with her head tilted. Dominique is cursed and whipped by the fathers who cry that she shall not be forgiven.

Aena urges Dominique to fight against patriarchal subjugation. She affirms that they are not fathers but the ghosts of pride. Aena shouts vigorously that fathers should be ashamed for stealing the freedom, love, cheerfulness and grace of daughters. She

vehemently asserts: "Your reign is over. We will never be afraid of you again" (171, my trans). When the fathers have all disappeared, the gardener-fisherman unfastens Dominique from the whip tree and places her on the grass. With fury, he chops down the whip tree and Aena does not move until he finishes. Aena and Devika rebel against patriarchal subjugation and liberate Dominique. By killing the fathers, Aena and Dévika kill the tyranny of men in Indo-Mauritian societies.

### Conclusion

Through the female characters, Devi fights against the patriarchal order represented by the whip tree in this novel. She uses the themes of reincarnation and Karma to highlight the miserable condition of Indo-Mauritian women in patriarchal society.

*L'Arbre Fouet* is exemplary in highlighting Hindu cultural elements in Mauritius. The agony of getting displaced to a foreign land encourages Indo-Mauritians to constantly stay in touch with their motherland through their ancestral traditions and customs. They also cultivate their ancestral culture in their offspring to inform them of their glorious cultural values and the rich heritage of their nation. Indo-Mauritians perform rites of passage by attributing a sacred dimension to each cultural element of their historical roots. They nourish their relationship with their ancestral land to rebuild their identity which is an integral part of the Indian diaspora. They retain their emotional, cultural and spiritual connections with Bharat Mata. Their language, religion and culture are markers of their Hindu ethnic identity in Mauritius.

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