R. KICHENAMOURTY

INDIAN DIASPORA IN FRANCOPHONE FICTION

ABSTRACT: The objective of this paper is to discuss four novels which focus on the Indian Diaspora and the problems it raises: Ernest Moutoussamy’s Aurore (Dawn), Raphaël Confiant’s La panse du chacal (Jackal’s Paunch), Nathacha Appanah’s Les rochers de Poudre d’or (Rocks of Poudre d’or) and Sully Santa Govindin’s La tragédie d’Appassamy (Appassamy’s Tragedy). In these novels one can find a pattern which may lead to a typology of the novels on Indian Diaspora, centred on a three-fold thematic texture: an indictment of the colonial regime, the trauma of travel and settlement of the indentured labour, and the saga of survival.

KEYWORDS: Ernest Moutoussamy, Raphaël Confiant, Nathacha Appanah, Sully Santa Govindin, Indian diaspora

0. INTRODUCTION

Henri Troyat’s novel Aliocha (1991), which narrates the trials and tribulations undergone by a large number of Russian ‘émigrés’ in Paris, was an instant success and left a profound impact on the readers of French fiction. These ‘émigrés’ are hankering to go back to their native country, like the narrator’s mother:

“Ah! Is it possible to return home!” murmured his mother. “And hear again Russian spoken in the streets and shops; set foot on my native soil, and breathe the air of our country.” (p.22)

( -Ah! Retourner chez soi! murmura sa mère. Entendre de nouveau parler russe dans la rue, dans les magasins, fouler le sol qui vous a vu naître, respirer l’air de nos campagnes, est-ce possible? )

A similar situation is described in Raphaël Confiant’s novel, Eau de Café - chapter 12: “La dérive de René-Couli” - pages 132-133, in which an old Indian woman who had come to Guadeloupe as a coolie yearns to go back to India:

EFL Journal 1:1 January 2010.
©2010 The English and Foreign Languages University.
My grandmother had been dreaming of returning to her native country. She had gathered up all her belongings and rushed to the Trinité port the day of the departure of the repatriation ship. But there, the police demanded to see the contract. They insisted on seeing the signature of their master proving that she had completed her seven years’ contract period. She unpacked her linen on the quay, showed her kerchiefs, Hindu parchments, letters she could never decipher, though nobody knew how they had come to her. But she did not succeed in convincing the authorities of her good faith. The repatriation ship left without her and she turned mad.

(Ma grand-mère avait rêvé du retour au pays natal. Elle avait rassemblé toutes ses affaires et s’était précipitée au port de Trinité le jour du départ du bateau de rapatriement. Mais là, la gendarmerie lui a réclamé son contrat. Ils ont demandé à voir la signature de son maître prouvant qu’elle avait accompli les sept ans de labeur requis. Elle déballa son linge sur le quai, présenta des mouchoirs, des parchemins hindous, des lettres qu’elle n’avait jamais pu déchiffrer, arrivées jusqu’à elle par nul ne savait quel hasard, sans parvenir à convaincre les autorités de sa bonne foi. Le bateau de rapatriement partit sans elle et de ce jour, elle tomba folle.)

But the sufferings of the Russiun émigrés are nothing compared to what the Indian immigrant endured when she was displaced. The Russian émigrés were mostly aristocrats who had fled to France when the Bolshevik Revolution broke out; and their migration was motivated by the preservation of privileges and the fear of persecution; and no dearth of money or means stood in the way of their going back to their native country.

On the contrary, the Diaspora referred to in the second text had been almost forced down the throats of the poor and the underprivileged who were cheated into accepting jobs in faraway countries on the basis of false promises. These people were, moreover, sent to distant islands which are far removed from the western civilization. And in the days of
yore, the return to India was for them an impossible dream. They were soon to realize that this was nothing short of another form of slavery as the recruiting agencies would not respect the terms of agreement and trample underfoot all norms of human dignity. The result was deprivation, destitution and untold misery.

1. FRANCOPHONE NOVELS

The objective of this paper is to discuss four novels which focus on the Indian Diaspora and the problems it raises: Ernest Moutoussamy’s *Aurore* (Dawn), Raphaël Confiant’s *La panse du chacal* (Jackal’s Paunch), Nathacha Appanah’s *Les rochers de Poudre d’or* (Rocks of Poudre d’or) and Sully Santa Govindin’s *La tragédie d’Appassamy* (Appassamy’s Tragedy).

The first two novels, *Aurore* and *La panse du chacal*, are centred on the Indian Diaspora in French Caribbean islands (Guadeloupe and Martinique respectively). The other two novels, *Les rochers de Poudre d’or* and *La tragédie d’Appassamy* highlight the Indian Diaspora in the Indian Ocean islands (Mauritius and Réunion respectively). A brief presentation of these works will be followed by a discussion of the underlying themes, though no attempt will be made to theorize about anything within the framework of this article.

It all started with the abolition of slavery, in 1848, in islands which were under the French rule or in the islands where the French still owned plantations. The abolition of slavery was, in fact, long overdue as great thinkers had, since the 18th century, constantly denounced the subjugation of one race by another. The oppression of slavery is, for instance, mentioned in Voltaire’s novel *Candide*, in which a Black slave describes his predicament:

“Yes, Sir,” said the Negro. “It is the custom here. They give us a pair of cotton drawers, twice a year, and that is all our covering. When we labour in sugar works, and the mill happens to snatch hold of a finger, they instantly chop off
our hand; and when we attempt to run away, they cut off a leg. Both the cases happened to me and it is at this price that you eat sugar in Europe….Dogs, monkeys and parrots are a thousand times less wretched than us.”

(Oui, Monsieur, dit le nègre, c’est l’usage. On nous donne un caleçon pour tout vêtement deux fois l’année. Quand nous travaillons aux sucreries, et que la meule nous attrape le doigt, on nous coupe la main; quand nous voulons nous enfuir, on nous coupe la jambe; je me suis trouvé dans les deux cas. C’est à ce prix que vous mangez du sucre en Europe…..Les chiens, les singes et les perroquets sont mille fois moins malheureux que nous - Candide ou l’Optimisme, 1759)

However it took a powerful parliamentarian like Schoelcher to put an end to slavery, in 1848, after years of struggle. But the abolition of slavery took a heavy toll on the economy of French-owned sugar factories which dangerously fell short of labour. The government and the factory owners were hard-pressed to find cheap labour. A new system was introduced that went under the name of ‘engagisme’, which provided for recruitment of Indian coolies on contract basis. But the terms of the contract, which stipulated that the coolies had the choice of returning to India at the expiry of the period of contract, would not be respected by the employers. That is how the coolies got stranded once and for all in those faraway islands which turned out to be hell for them.

Aurore by Ernest Moutoussamy is set in Guadeloupe, a group of islands in the Lesser Antilles chain in the Eastern Caribbean. With three novels (Il pleure dans mon pays, 1879, Aurore, 1987, Chacha et Sosso, 1994) and several poetical collections and political essays to his credit, Ernest Moutoussamy is the first ever writer in Guadeloupe to highlight the Indian heritage in French Carribean culture.

His novel, Aurore, narrates the story of Râma, a Brahmin boy who falls in love with a ‘dalit’ girl, Sarah. Estranged from his mother who had found another girl for him, he leaves with the dalit girl for an unknown destination aboard the Aurélie. The young lovers hope to find happiness
in the other end of the world. “Destiny calls me into those faraway countries. I have been too much crushed by this society,” thinks the girl. But the girl dies during the horrifying voyage across the oceans and the boy arrives alone in the island where he undergoes untold misery and ordeals. Hope burgeons however when Aurore, the other girl chosen by his mother, joins him after going through the same kind of torture and tension during the journey.

Raphaël Confiant’s novel, *La panse du chacal*, also describes the consequences of the Indian immigration, in this case, towards Martinique, another island of the eastern Caribbean Sea. The author of the novel (b. 1951) is a non-Indian and one of the chief leaders of ‘créolité’ today. Born in Lorrain (Martinique), he taught at ‘Lycée de Lorrain’ and wrote several novels in ‘creole’ before writing novels in French which include *Le Nègre et l’amiral, Eau de café*, *Ravines du devant-jour*, *L’Allée des soupirs, La Vierge du grand retour* …

*La panse du chacal* tells the story of Adhiymân Dorassamy who runs away from Madurai where his parents had been devoured by jackals during the great famine that was rampant towards the end of 19th century. In the persons of Adhiamân Dorassamy, Dévi (his young wife with whom he faces the worst storms), Vinesh (their eldest son, who is torn between Indian values and the frenzy of créole culture), Raphaël Confiant retraces the epic journey of hundreds of thousands of coolies who had fled from their native country to the Promised Land which turned out to be a horrendous hell. Exposed to the contempt and disapproval of the negros and mulattos, they had slowly invented quite an extraordinary way of survival.

The author of *Les rochers de Poudre d’or*, Nathacha Appanah was born in 1973 at Mauritius. She has been living at Lyons since 1999 as a journalist. This novel has won the RFO du Livre Prize for 2003 and the Rosine Perrier Prize for 2004. It fictionalizes the Indian Diaspora, narrating the story of a handful of Indians who set sail for Mauritius aboard the Atlas in 1892. They include Badri, a simple-minded card-player, Vythee who wants to join his brother who had already gone to Mauritius, Chotty Lall, a peasant who had to repay the debt his father had incurred, and Ganga, the daughter of a king who as a widow runs away from home
for fear of being burnt in the funeral pyre. They hope to start a new life in that unknown country, but they soon realize that they were all cruelly trapped into a contract that would soon make their return to the motherland impossible. These Indians did not know that they were going to replace the Black slaves in sugarcane fields. Their destinies would finally be tied up in the village of Poudre d’or.

*La tragédie d’Appassamy*, which has the subtitle of *Epopée en dix chants ou Récit d’un voyageur étonnant* takes the reader to another island, Réunion, which is now an overseas ‘département’ of France. The author of this novel, Sully Santa Govindin, is a teacher by profession and he refers to his novel as a ‘récit’ and ‘epic’, though it can easily fit into the category of novel in view of the narrative techniques he experiments on, such as non-linear narration and resourceful foregroundings. He has written several remarkable non-fiction works on the cultural and historical realities, based on his personal links with the Indian communities in Réunion. He is also the chief architect of GERM (Groupe d’Etudes et de Recherches sur la Malbarité).

Published in 2007, *La tragédie d’Appassamy* tells the story of the trajectory followed by Indian ‘coolies’ to the archipelago of Mascareignes and brings out the atrocities perpetrated on the ‘engagés’. The odyssey of Appassamy, the protagonist, begins in India, crosses the ocean, continues in the sugarcane plantations and ends back in India. Enticed by the excessive promises of the ‘mestries’, Appassamy escapes from an orphanage and sets off for Birboon Desh (Réunion Island) where he encounters misery and betrayal. After a brief idyll he had with Kamatchi, he is incarcerated for his subversive ideas against the plantocracy and the colonial authority. After this adventure in the foreign land, he returns to India where he is hounded again for his clandestine activities against ‘engagisme’. He ends up as a miserable wreck near Chidambaram. This is the only novel where the return journey of the protagonist is also narrated.

From a structuralist point of view, one can find a pattern which may lead to a typology of these novels on the Indian Diaspora, centred on a three-fold thematic texture: an indictment of the colonial regime, the trauma of travel and settlement of the indentured labour, and the saga of survival.
2. AN INDICTMENT OF THE COLONIAL REGIME

The colonial regime had indirectly encouraged the malpractices in the recruitment of the indentured labour. The unscrupulous ‘mestries’ (agents) resorted to all sorts of unfair means to send Indians to the faraway islands.

In *Aurore*, the main character Râma and the girl he loves, Sarah, were drugged and illegally transported to the ship.

In *La panse du châcal*, Adhiyaman Dorassamy was recruited on a false promise by a ‘mestry’: “All you will have to do there, in America,” declared the mestry, “is to spread the sugar in the sunlight. It’s not a tiring work. On the other hand you’ll be given food, shelter and money and what is more, you will be repatriated after five years, at the expense of the Compagnie des Indes.” (Tout ce que tu auras à faire là-bas, aux Amériques, lui déclara un mestri au’il avait fini par approcher, ce sera d’étendre du sucre au soleil. Ce n’est pas un travail fatigant. D’ailleurs, tu seras logé, nourri et payé, sans compter qu’au bout de cinq ans tu seras rapatrié aux frais de la Compagnie des Indes.)

In *Les rochers de Poudre d’or*, the recruits were not properly informed about the kind of work that was in store for them.

In *La tragédie d’Appassamy*, one old man says: “Pavadé Mestry, the recruiting agent, cheated me on the direction of the ship which was in fact bound for Martinique! And I was pursuing, at the age of sixteen only, a mother who had left for Mascareignes with the son of God!” (Le vieillard précisa: « Pavadé mestry, le recruteur me trompa sur la direction du voilier! Le navire se dirigeait en réalité vers la Martinique! Et moi âgé seulement de seize ans, poursuivais une mère convolée pour les Mascareignes avec le fils de Dieu ! »)
3. THE TRAUMA OF TRAVEL AND SETTLEMENT

A sense of fatality seems to weigh on the ‘engagés’ as they yield to the temptation, despite warnings, and cross the ‘kala pani’ (the black waters of the sea) which a Hindu should not cross, lest he should die without a sepulchre in his native country.

The following warning given by a Brahmin in Aurore is typical:

Those who had left had not returned. Over the last thirty years, we have lost tens of thousands of brothers and sisters. You can never see them again as almost all of them died as slaves in sugarcane fields .... Kala-pani, the terrible curse, kills many of those who set off across the ocean.

Ils ne sont pas revenus ceux qui sont partis. Depuis trente ans ce sont des dizaines de milliers de frères et de sœurs que nous avons perdus. Vous ne les reverrez plus jamais car presque tous sont morts dans l’esclavage des champs de canne à sucre... Kala-pani, terrible malédiction, tue beaucoup de ceux qui partent sur l’océan. (p.65)

Nathasha quotes the pamphlet distributed in the State of Uttar Pradesh towards the end of the 19th century.

Save yourselves from depot wallahs
It is not a service but a pure deception
They take you overseas.
They are not colonies but jails.

(Eloigne-toi des gens du dépôt
Ils ne t’aideront pas
Ils ne t’apporteront que désespoir
Et par-delà les mers, ils t’emmèneront
Vers des colonies qui ne sont que des prisons.)

The ordeal starts the moment they become ‘engagés’, as this extract from Aurore suggests:

Out of about 40 000 ‘engagés’ snatched out of India and imported to Guadeloupe, about one fourth were treated as beasts of burden. Plantation owners benefitted not only from
the colonial subsidy, but also from a bonus of 285 Fr per head. That is how they filled the vacuum created by the abolition of slavery and paid a price of three dead Indians per hectare.

(Sur les quarante mille engagés arrachés de l’Inde et importés à cette date à la Guadeloupe, près du quart étaient leurs bêtes de somme. Bénéficiant non seulement de la subvention coloniale mais aussi de la prime de deux-cent quatre-vingt-cinq francs par tête, ils avaient réussi à combler le vide laissé par l’abolition au prix de trois cadavres indiens par hectare replanté.) (p.120)

Similar passages are found in *La Panse du chacal* also:

What terrible trials they had endured collectively! Cramming together in that foul-smelling cabin in Pondicherry, the terrible fiery tempests which almost wrecked the ship taking them to America…, the dismal crossing of the sea of darkness, impeded by an outburst of small-pox epidemic.

(Que d’épreuves n’avaient-ils pas vécues ensemble! L’entassement des semaines durant dans cette case fétide du port de Pondichéry, la terrible tempête de la mer de feu qui faillit naufrager le navire qui les emmenait en Amérique …, la morne traversée de la mer des ténèbres, entravée par une épidémie de variole.) (p.338)

Since their arrival here, the Indians have been caught between the Black anvil and the White hammer. Punch-bags, scape goats, expiatory victims, outcasts: that is what they had been ever since they left their dried up rice-fields of their Tamil country.

(Les Indiens, depuis leur arrivée dans ce pays, n’avaient en effet, cessé de se retrouver coincés entre l’enclume nègre et le marteau blanc. Souffre-douleur, boucs émissaires, victimes expiatoires, laissés-pour-compte tel avait été leur sort dès l’instant où ils avaient quitté les rizières desséchés du pays tamoul.) (p.338)
4. THE SAGA OF SURVIVAL

Here a distinction should be made between the Indian Ocean islands and the Caribbean. In the former, which are comparatively nearer to India, the ‘engagés’ had the possibility of communicating with other members of Indian community who had settled there in earlier times. In the latter, the sense of alienation that the ‘engagés’ had to suffer was deeper as they were isolated and forced to live in an entirely hostile ambience due to the presence of innumerable other communities, with no hope of returning to India.

While in *Les rochers de Poudre d’Or* the characters are driven to desperation, in *La tragédie d’Appassamy*, the protagonist places on record his indignation by addressing a petition to the authorities:

> We are addressing this petition in order to alert you on the deplorable conditions in which we have got stuck. We have not emigrated of our own free will into the warehouses of the ships, to come to Birboon like slaves leaving our native country, our parents, our friends, our hearths and our fields. We were cheated by dishonest people. We were taken fraudulently to these colonies. Instead of being relieved after five years of service, as stipulated by the contract, we have to toil for ten or twelve years. We are not conveniently fed and dressed. And we are getting exhausted by hard work. Our colleagues are dead prematurely as a result of persecutions by White inhabitants or out of worry, care, diseases and other causes. Unable to bear the persecutions which we are subjected to, we rather think of setting fire to our employers’ houses and fields.

(Nous vous adressons une pétition afin de vous alerter sur les conditions déplorables dans lesquelles nous sommes englués. Nous n’avons pas de notre plein gré émigré dans l’entrepont des navires, pour venir comme des esclaves à Birboon en quittant notre pays natal, nos parents, nos amis, nos foyers et nos champs. Au contraire, nous avons été trompés par des hommes artificieux. Echus dans les dépôts
entre les mains des agents d’émigration, nous avons été pour le plus grand nombre conduits frauduleusement aux colonies. Au lieu de terminer au bout de cinq ans notre temps de service, comme le stipulent les contrats, il nous faut travailler dix ou douze ans pour arriver au terme de notre engagement. Nous ne sommes pas convenablement nourris et vêtus pendant ce temps et nous nous épuisons au travail. Nos camarades sont morts prématurément suite aux persécutions d’habitants européens ou par le chagrin, les soucis, la maladie et diverses autres causes. Ne pouvant supporter les persécutions auxquelles nous sommes assujettis, nous pensons qu’il vaut mieux mettre le feu aux maisons des employeurs et aux champs.) (pp. 90-91)

But in Aurore and La panse du chacal, the struggle for survival assumes epic proportions and the Indian community achieves a sense of triumph at the end.

The following extract from Aurore illustrates the point:

On this land strewn with painful offshoots of history, the Indian planted the mast carrying the message of independence of the Ganges in the month of January 1888. Uprooted, despised, alienated, estranged and hurt, he drew his strength to fight back in himself and in the dark night which surrounded him… If they were assailed by doubt, the young for their part headed straight towards Freedom… They wrote in Tamil ‘Long Live Freedom’.

(Sur cette terre peuplée par de douloureux accouchements de l’histoire, il planta donc en ce mois de janvier mil huit cent quatre-vingt huit, malgré les coups de griffes et la peur, le mât portant le message de l’indépendance du Gange. Déraciné, méprisé, exploité, solitaire, asservi, meurtri, il puisa en lui-même et dans sa longue nuit les ressources de la résistance. … Si le doute s’emparait de quelques-uns, les jeunes, eux, maintinrent le cap vers l’aube de la liberté.… Ils écrivirent en tamoul : ‘Vive la liberté’. » ) (pp. 133-4)
The struggle that Râma puts up will be rewarded with success as can be symbolically seen by his reunion with Aurore, the girl chosen by Rama’s mother and who set off in pursuit of him by the next ship bound for Guadeloupe.

At Zevalos, beneath the bamboo, Gopi celebrated Râma’s wedding with Aurore. A new century was beginning.

(A Zévalos, sous le bambou, Gopi célébra le mariage de Râma et d’Aurore. Un autre siècle commença.) (End of the novel)

Raphaël Confiant’s novel ends on a similar note of hope for those who stayed back in their land of exile:

“This is nothing, son…” he spluttered. “In the night, beware of Aïnar and his cavalry of stranglers.” With these strange words, he regained, with his arms dangling, the ancestral land, our beloved Mother India the Moksha, this finitude which our gods reserve for men of unshakable faith. His agony lasted indefinitely. His funerals rallied Indians, Negros, Chabins, mulattos, Chinese, Syrians and Békés, who had come from the north of the Martinique. All these people were stubbornly fighting against one another. Every one of them was aware that a New Era was round the corner and that they had to invent new words unheard of and free from the dirt of hatred, so as to survive.

(Ce n’est rien, mon fils… balbutia-t-il, mais fais attention à la nuit ! Dans le noir, redoute toujours Aïnar et sa cavalerie d’étrangleurs… . Sur ces paroles étranges, il gagna, d’un même ballant, la terre ancestrale, notre mère Inde bien-aimée, et la moksha, cette finitude que nos dieux réservent aux hommes d’inébranlable piété. Son agonie dura un temps indéfini. Ses funérailles rassemblèrent Indiens, Nègres, chabins, mulâtres, Chinois, Syriens et Békés, accourus de tout le nord de la Martinique, tout ce peuple créole d’ordinaire si acharné à s’entre-déchirer. Chacun était conscient qu’un Temps neuf commençait à s’installer et qu’il faudrait désormais inventer des mots inédits, débarrassés de leur gangue de haine, pour pouvoir le vivre.) (p.364)
5. CONCLUSION

A close scrutiny of Francophone fiction on Indian Diaspora, especially in the French Caribbean islands, will certainly suggest that there is an extraordinary effort on the part of the Indians to preserve and protect the identity of the Indian component in the culture of their land of exile. Feki Hella (2005) draws an interesting conclusion from an interview she had had with Ernest Moutoussamy: Unlike V. S. Naipaul who, in his *A House for Mr. Biswas*, denigrates the value of Indian culture in his fiction, Francophone writers strive to highlight it favourably in their novels.

At a time when an attempt is being made to focus on the aspects of an Indian Diaspora as fictionalized in the works of V. S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Bharati Mukherjee, Rohinton Mistry and several other writers in English, it is hoped that a similar study conducted in Francophone writings will be complementary to the effort and make for the drawing of a broader picture.

The above-mentioned novels deserve better recognition, not only because they represent some new voices in French literature, but also because they may serve as new standards of reference in the comparative field.

REFERENCES


Dr. R. Kichenamourty
Rtd. Dean, School of Humanities &
Head of the Dept of French, Pondicherry University
14, 9th Cross, Tagore Nagar, Puducherry-605008
srakichena@yahoo.com