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UNIVERSITY of LIMERICK
OLLSCOIL LUIMNIGH

***Remembering the Island: Insularity and Memory in the Contemporary
Mauritian Novel in French***

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Thesis submitted to the University of Limerick to fulfil the requirements for the
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ABSTRACT

Ailbhe O’Flaherty

Remembering the Island: Insularity and Memory in the Contemporary Mauritian Novel in French

Since 1979 there has been a marked increase in literary production from Mauritius, primarily in French, and Mauritian authors have been gaining in popularity amongst a French-speaking readership. Yet, within the context of postcolonial literatures or francophone studies, little attention has been paid to fiction from the islands of the Indian Ocean until very recently. This thesis therefore presents a valuable study of novelists writing in the French language from the culturally and linguistically diverse island of Mauritius. It considers the impact representations of insularity and memory have had on contemporary Mauritian writing in French and the role of recent fiction in creating a sense of heterogeneous Mauritian island identity in literature. The chosen corpus is deliberately broad, comprising work by eight authors (Appanah, Berthelot, De Souza, Devi, Humbert, Le Clézio, Patel, Pyamootoo) thereby allowing for a comprehensive and holistic overview of contemporary fiction from Mauritius. Interviews were conducted with four of the novelists. The contemporary authors studied draw on the island, and memory of the island, as narrative strategies and themes and draw together the different strands of Mauritian society in order to facilitate the reconstruction and validation of a multifarious Mauritian identity in literature. Experimenting with portrayals of islandness in eschewing clichés or subverting island metaphors, they employ figurative and literal representations of the island that challenge the reader’s perception of Mauritius. Furthermore, how Mauritian novelists negotiate personal and collective memory in their writing is instrumental in the process of accepting but breaking with the past and taking on board a heterogeneous creolised Mauritian island identity. The thesis ultimately demonstrates that rather than endorsing any notion of pure cultures of origin, today’s generation of Mauritian writers acknowledge the creolisation that is integral to contemporary Mauritian island identity and this is reflected in the richness and complexity of their writing.

DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis is entirely my own work and has not previously been submitted for any other academic award at this or any other institution.

The following articles/papers have been published from the research presented in this thesis:

O’Flaherty, A. (2010) “Every Woman is an Island? The Island as an Embodiment of Female Alterity in Mauritian Women's Writing” in Bragard, V. & Ravi, S. (eds.) *Ecritures Mauriciennes au féminin: penser l’altérité*. Paris: L’Harmattan.

O’Flaherty, A. (2007). “Islandness and “Otherness”: Representations of the Island in the Contemporary Mauritian Novel” in the *Journal of Mauritian Studies, New Series, Vol. 4, No. 1*.

Signed _____

Ailbhe O’Flaherty
November 2016

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DEDICATION

For Sadhbh and Niamh

– may you continue to love stories and be forever curious about the world.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	iii
DECLARATION.....	v
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	vii
DEDICATION.....	ix
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	xi
INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER ONE - LITERATURE REVIEW.....	11
1.1 Overview.....	12
1.2 Contemporary Mauritian Literature in the context of world literatures in French.....	13
1.2.1 The emergence of contemporary Mauritian literature.....	13
1.2.2 Mauritian writing and francophone literatures.....	18
1.2.3 Mauritian literature and postcolonial theory.....	21
1.3 The evolution of scholarship on Mauritian literature.....	30
1.4 The island.....	39
1.4.1 The island in literature.....	39
1.4.2 The island in Mauritian fiction.....	42
1.4.3 Mauritius and the islands: Indian Ocean cultural memory.....	45
1.5 Memory.....	48
1.5.1 Memory in literature.....	48
1.5.2 Memory in Mauritian fiction.....	50
1.6 Conclusion.....	54
CHAPTER TWO - INSULARITY, TOPOGRAPHY AND LOCATION IN MAURITIAN ISLAND NARRATIVES.....	56
2.1 Introduction.....	57
2.2 Topography and location.....	58
2.3 Writing place: the island's influence on island writers.....	61
2.4 Boundaries and insularity in Mauritian fiction.....	69
2.5 Islands within islands.....	78
2.5.1 Inequalities and divisions in the island-prison.....	79
2.5.2 Marginalised island communities in Mauritian society.....	86
2.6 The city: Insularity in the enclosed urban space.....	91
2.7 Centre and periphery.....	104
2.7.1 Mauritius on the periphery of the métropole.....	108
2.7.2 Mauritius as mainland to peripheral islands.....	112
2.8 Conclusion.....	115
CHAPTER THREE - RE-IMAGINING THE ISLAND: APPROPRIATING AND SUBVERTING THE ISLAND TROPE.....	117
3.1 Introduction.....	118
3.2 Island metaphors and tropes.....	118
3.3 The simmering island and the power of the elements.....	123
3.4 The gendered island.....	129
3.4.1 The island topos as a geographical embodiment of woman.....	131
3.4.2 Woman as island: the island as a peripheral female space.....	135
3.5 The idealised island.....	142
3.6 The island as metaphor for alterity.....	151
3.7 Conclusion.....	155

CHAPTER FOUR - REMEMBERING THE ISLAND: EXPLORING ISLAND IDENTITY THROUGH THE MEMORY OF PLACE.....	157
4.1 Introduction.....	158
4.2 Exile from the island as a catalyst for memory.....	159
4.2.1 Voluntary exile and nostalgia for the island in Berthelot’s L’Outre-Mère ou les Eaux de Mériba and Appanah’s La Noce d’Anna.....	161
4.2.2 Forced displacement from the island: separation, dislocation and remembrance of the island in Le Silence des Chagos.....	166
4.2.3 The island and sensorial memory	172
4.3 The island remembered from within: the island as a site of memory	178
4.4 Conclusion.....	188
CHAPTER FIVE - PERSONAL MEMORY AND THE RECONSTRUCTION OF INDIVIDUAL IDENTITY	191
5.1 Introduction.....	192
5.2 Selective memory and identity construction.....	194
5.2.1 Conscious and unconscious remembering in La Noce d’Anna, Le Désamour and Le Dernier Frère.	195
5.2.2 Reinventing and reconstructing family identity in novels by Humbert and Le Clézio	205
5.3 Memory and ancestry.....	214
5.3.1 Intransigent memory: memory and heritage in La Maison qui marchait vers le large and Le Sang de l’Anglais	216
5.3.2 Lineage and identity in Le Portrait Chamarel.....	223
5.4 Trauma and unreliable memory: Le Silence des Chagos and Le Dernier frère	228
5.5 Conclusion	237
CHAPTER SIX - FROM INDIVIDUAL TO COLLECTIVE MEMORY	241
6.1 Introduction.....	242
6.2 Indo-Mauritian collective memory in Les Rochers de Poudre d’Or.....	245
6.2.1 Individual and collective experience of indentured labour.....	246
6.2.2 Crossing the kala pani: images of haunting and ocean crossing in Les Rochers de Poudre d’Or.....	252
6.3 Collective forgetting: Le Dernier Frère	258
6.4 Village and community memory in Bénarès	262
6.5 Bearing witness and reinforcing cultural memory: Le Silence des Chagos	265
6.6 Silenced memory: the absence of slavery in Mauritian fiction.....	270
6.7 Towards an Indian Ocean cultural memory.....	275
6.8 Conclusion	281
CONCLUSION: TOWARDS HETEROGENEOUS CREOLISED MAURITIAN ISLAND IDENTITY IN CONTEMPORARY WRITING.....	284
BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES	295
APPENDIX.....	314
Chronology of Mauritius.....	315

INTRODUCTION

As an island country with a diasporic population emerging from its colonial and postcolonial past, Mauritius has long been seen as a particularly interesting site of interrogation on identities. The country is composed of many different social, religious and ethnic groups and this cultural incoherence is a consequence of the island's history of colonialism. After an initial settlement by the Dutch, Mauritius was colonised by the French in 1721, then ceded to the British in 1810. The French imported slaves from eastern Africa and Madagascar, and encouraged migration from India. Later, under British rule (and after the abolition of slavery) considerable indentured labour was sourced from India. Chinese migrant workers and entrepreneurs also came to Mauritius in the twentieth century. The creolisation of Mauritius, a result of these colonisation and migration patterns through the centuries, is a defining characteristic of Mauritian society, and by extension its literature, which in recent decades avoids replication of the metropolitan novel and allows for cultural, indeed intercultural, exchange. Since the initial militant literature that followed independence in 1968, writing in Mauritius has become more moderate and diverse. A preoccupation with origins and identity as well as with the challenges faced by a plural postcolonial island society can be observed in contemporary texts. Contemporary writers are reluctant to represent Mauritius as an exotic idyll, an image that has long dominated the popular and literary imagination since *Paul et Virginie*. The contemporary Mauritian novel examines multifaceted Mauritian identity and represents uniquely Mauritian concerns from a local perspective and in a local voice.

Mauritius, a small island and former colony that has long figured as an image of the exotic in French literature, lends itself to a study of the island in contemporary writing. Reflecting the diversity and pluralism of its society, contemporary Mauritian

literature has little cohesion, which is why the island is an effective unifying motif. We will consider how contemporary Mauritian novelists portray Mauritian island identity and to what extent the island is considered a marker of identity in their work. How Mauritian novelists negotiate personal and collective memory in contemporary literature is instrumental in the process of accepting but breaking with the past and taking on board a heterogeneous creolised Mauritian island identity. We assess to what extent the core themes of our study, island and memory, are key characteristics of the contemporary Mauritian novel in French and whether a specifically island-based memory is evident in the corpus.

Since 1979 there has been a marked increase in literary production from Mauritius, primarily in French, and especially by women authors. It is therefore important to assess their significance, especially the diverse manners in which they negotiate themes such as collective memory, cultural memory, national identity, insularity and exile. Within the context of postcolonial literatures or francophone studies, little attention has been paid to literature from the islands of the Indian Ocean until very recently. It remains the case, however, that there are relatively fewer specialists in this area than of, for example, literature in the French language from the African continent, the Caribbean or Canada. It follows that, although numerous primary texts are available and scholarly activity is increasing, the volume of critical material available on Indian Ocean literature is considerably less than that pertaining to many other French-speaking regions.

This thesis examines novels written and published since 1979 by Mauritian authors (Mauritian by birth or by heritage), both male (Carl de Souza, Barlen Pyamootoo, J-

M.G. Le Clézio) and female (Nathacha Appanah, Lilian Berthelot, Ananda Devi, Marie-Thérèse Humbert and Shenaz Patel). The “Contemporary Mauritian Novel in French” of our title refers to those significant and celebrated Mauritian novels written in French between 1979 and 2007. 1979 marks the year of publication of Marie-Thérèse Humbert’s *À l’Autre bout de moi*, a novel that breaks with the established norms in Mauritian narrative tradition, hitherto eurocentric and “francotropic”, and heralds the beginning of more innovative representations of colonial and postcolonial Mauritian society, with its examination of the complexity of Mauritian identity, and female identity in particular. Many commentators recognise Mauritius’s independence in 1968 as the point of departure for a new type of literature by Mauritian writers. Arval Arouff (2001), for example, considers the year 1968 a major catalyst, after which the number of authors and genres published in Mauritius multiplied and diversified. Issur (2005), who also regards the post-independence period as a particularly prolific one for Mauritian novelists, identifies the end of the 1970s in particular as the beginning of a revitalisation of Mauritian literature, and the 1990s as an extension of this initial wave of productivity. Like many others, Issur considers the publication of *À l’autre bout de moi* as the beginning of a new era in Mauritian writing. This widely-held view is supported in this thesis in which Humbert’s 1979 novel marks the beginning of the period covered by the title the “Contemporary Mauritian novel in French”. The novels published between 1979 and 2007 constitute a broad, representative body of work, enabling this study to determine how the authors set about bringing together the vastly divergent identities which characterise Mauritian society in the almost four decades since independence. The corpus spans a period of approximately thirty years to give an overview of the trends and major developments and changes in the field. It is acknowledged that most of the authors treated in this study have published novels since

2007¹, with many of the authors in question becoming more widely published, studied and prolific since that time. This thesis, however, is concerned with the instability and change that marked the post-independence decades before Mauritian writers gained in confidence and recognition.

Aside from the more prolific and better-known novelists such as Devi, de Souza, Humbert, and Appanah, those authors whose work has hitherto received less attention in critical publications related to Mauritian literature, namely Berthelot, Patel and Pyamootoo are also included in this study. Berthelot's work is of interest because to date, her work has not been the subject of academic scholarship, perhaps being considered of insufficient literary merit by academics, yet it is of significance here because insularity and memory are central themes in two of her novels in particular. Patel's novels have often been overlooked because she is a journalist and because her topical and acclaimed third novel about the plight of the displaced Chagossians, *Le Silence des Chagos*, overshadows her other literary works. Certainly, *Le Silence des Chagos* is of importance to this study, as memory and island identity are core elements of the novel, but Patel's lesser-known debut novel, *Le Portrait Chamarel*, is also significant with its assessment of the difficulties in describing and negotiating Mauritian identities. Pyamootoo's novels have attracted less academic scholarship than his contemporaries but he remains an important figure in Mauritian cultural life. *Bénarès*, his short but arresting novel about a journey through the Mauritian nightscape, has particular resonance for the present study with its exploration of time and space, as well as memory and identity.

¹ See Devi's *Indian Tango* (2007) Paris: Gallimard, *Le Sari vert* (2009) Paris: Gallimard, *Les Jours vivants* (2013) Paris : Gallimard, Berthelot's *Aujourd'hier* (2009) Vacoas: Editions du Printemps and de Souza's *En chute libre* (2012) Paris: Editions de l'Olivier, and Patel's *Paradis Blues* (2014) for example.

Three novels by the French-Mauritian author, J-M.G. Le Clézio (*Le Chercheur d'Or*, *Voyage à Rodrigues* and *La Quarantaine*), are also considered relevant to our discussion. In his Mauritius-based corpus, Le Clézio explores his Mauritian heritage, and demonstrates his interest in real and metaphorical journeys to the island. As a French author whose ancestors hailed originally from Brittany and subsequently from Mauritius, Le Clézio has a strikingly different relationship to Mauritius than the Mauritian-born writers included in this study and serves therefore as an interesting source of comparison. For the purpose of this study he is regarded as a Mauritian writer. Other researchers, such as Issur (2001, 2007) and Ravi (2007) have also included Le Clézio's work in a discussion on contemporary Mauritian literature in French², as has Racault (2007). According to Racault, if we can justify including in the corpus Mauritian nationals living and writing abroad and writing so-called Franco-Mauritian novels, then it is reasonable to include a writer of Mauritian heritage who was brought up and lives in France (Racault, 2007). Writers "in exile" from Mauritius, such as Humbert or Le Clézio, frequently evoke the island in their writing. We shall see that Le Clézio's mythological construction of Mauritius is comparable to the conceptualisation of the island as a known and remembered space by Mauritian-born writers.

The chosen corpus is deliberately broad, thereby allowing for a comprehensive and holistic overview of contemporary fiction from Mauritius. In considering, in most cases, more than one novel per author it will engage in a wide-ranging discussion on the topics of memory and insularity, and avoid reducing an author's importance to one

² *L'océan Indien dans les littératures francophones* (2001) included no less than five articles on Le Clézio, for example.

particular work. Given time and space constraints, and for the purposes of logical and relevant discussion, not all of the novels in the corpus will be subject to the same depth of analysis in each chapter, nor will all novels published by a particular writer be examined.

Interviews were conducted with four Mauritian authors, Devi, Berthelot, de Souza and Patel, during a period of research in Mauritius in June and July 2007. The interview with Devi followed a public lecture at the University of Mauritius on 12 June 2007. Comments by Appanah are taken from her public reading and discussion at the University of Limerick in 2006. The authors were questioned about contemporary Mauritian writing, their own place within Mauritian and other literatures in French, their attitude with regard to literatures in the French language, how the island is represented in their work, how place influences their writing, what role memory plays in the writing process and its influence on characters and plot, the role of memory in Mauritian society and as a theme in literature, choice of narrative voice, and how the question of identity is broached in their work, amongst other topics. The theoretical framework underpinning the present study is suitably varied and draws on aspects of literary criticism related to postcolonial studies, francophone literature, memory theory, and island studies. These are outlined in further detail in the Literature Review.

Chapter One therefore assesses and critically evaluates scholarship on contemporary Mauritian fiction in French and outlines the theoretical framework underpinning the thesis. Chapter Two begins the in-depth investigation of islands in literature, examining how physical aspects of the island are addressed by Mauritian novelists. We assess how the island's distinct topography and marginality influence the writing process,

determine protagonists' behaviour and drive the narrative. In particular, we show how the confined space of the small island heightens tensions and further reinforces divisions within the plural island society. Exploring the island in terms of its physical position as centre or periphery in relation to the continents and neighbouring islands, we show that the island narratives examined challenge the reader's notions of place and identity. Chapter Three explores the significance of the island metaphor in Mauritian literature, in particular how island imagery has been appropriated, challenged and subverted in order to reflect the reality of life in past and present Mauritius. The resulting complex representations, sometimes contradictory or ambiguous, constitute a multifarious narrative device to reflect the reality of life in Mauritius and reveal strong confident local voices appropriating the island trope in an apparent act of "writing back".

Merging the two key topics of island and memory, Chapter Four assesses the importance of the island as a remembered place and a site of memory, and examines the resultant interplay between place, imagination and identity in contemporary Mauritian fiction. Attachment to an inimitable environment is regarded as a key constituent element of Mauritian identity and heightened by exile from the island. Chapters Five and Six develop the topic of memory further by examining personal memory and collective memory, respectively, in contemporary Mauritian writing, in terms of individual, family or community memory. They explore how individuals and groups articulate their past and their link to Mauritius or another ancestral home-place. In a context of exile and displacement, the struggle to assert personal identity can be read as a metaphor for the complexity of Mauritian identity. Many Mauritian novels portray the memory of an entire people or community and the novels demonstrate how

idealisation of the past is largely problematic. While group or collective memory can be divisive, Indian Ocean cultural memory, however, offers the possibility of recalling a shared and unique past for Mauritians and their island neighbours.

The conclusion considers the impact figurative and literal representations of insularity and memory have had on contemporary Mauritian writing in French, and more generally, the role of recent fiction in creating a sense of heterogeneous Mauritian island identity in literature.

The most fascinating feature of Mauritian literature is its fluidity. This thesis considers two aspects as particularly relevant and helpful in assessing the impact of recent Mauritian writing in Mauritius and beyond. The recurring motif of the island throughout Mauritian literature is the cohesive element, a mechanism that highlights the specificity of the local voice and the uniqueness of geographical and cultural context. We see that the island embodies and exacerbates the problems encountered in the small postcolonial society. Regularly presented throughout history as a microcosm, the island appears to magnify those problematic issues and topics that divide society. However, we also see the island as the common denominator; the marker of identity in a pluralistic society and a link to other societies in the region. Mauritius is a unique case because of its ethnically diverse population and history of different colonial rule. The island motif in Mauritian writing links Mauritian literatures to other island literatures, and yet, while it is certainly allied to island literature, recent Mauritian writing is not easily classifiable solely as island literature. We see that while memory has been used to forge homogeneous identities for different groups and individuals, and therefore used to reinforce differences, it is being increasingly employed to re-interpret Mauritian

identity and move towards the depiction of a heterogeneous Mauritianness. This heterogeneity has become more embedded in Mauritian literature in French since 1979. The theme of memory also provides a linking mechanism between Mauritian literature and African literatures. Mauritian literature, like postcolonial African literature of the second half of twentieth century, shows a quest for a postcolonial identity. The phenomenon of memory is closely allied to the creation of this autonomous identity. Memory, in the Mauritian context, while initially divisive has also become a means of reconciliation, a route by which the trauma caused by dislocation can be, if not healed, then at least explored.

One of the challenges of writing this thesis is that recent Mauritian literature cannot easily be defined; the paradox of writing about it is that it refuses to be categorised. In fact, its very strength and interest lie in the shifting framework that allows Mauritian literature to defy categorisation. Just like its history, Mauritian writing has known a constant state of becoming, of being in flux. It is, nevertheless, distinctive because of the diverse range of ethnic and cultural identities it represents. This thesis presents a valuable study of well-established and emerging novelists writing in the French language from the very culturally and linguistically diverse society of Mauritius. It reveals the richness and complexity of their writing and their contribution to our understanding of creolised postcolonial island identities in literature.

CHAPTER ONE - LITERATURE REVIEW

1.1 Overview

The aim of this literature review chapter is to situate the research topic within the context of previous research and current thinking on the contemporary Mauritian novel in French, and in particular, in relation to scholarship on island and memory in literature. An analysis of critical literature will highlight the lacunae addressed by this thesis, in particular the lack of substantial research relating to how personal, community and national memory are represented in contemporary fiction and the lack of references to a specific island-based and regional memory. The chapter also describes the theory underpinning the thesis through an overview of existing literature in the fields of study that pertain to the research subject, namely francophone literatures, postcolonial studies, memory in literature and the island motif in literature.

The first section addresses the choice of corpus and considers the relevance of the fields of francophone literatures and postcolonial theory for this study. No one school of literary theory or appreciation in particular is applied throughout this thesis, due to the eclectic nature of contemporary Mauritian writing, in accordance with Lionnet who observes that:

As an internally transnational terrain of multilingual productions, Mauritius readily lends itself to cross- and inter-disciplinary study. Its culture, literature, music and cinema invite the use of a multiplicity of critical perspectives (be it postcolonial, feminist and human rights ones or formal and aesthetic analyses) that can do justice to the layering of influences and conceptual angles that have marked its steady development and its insightful creativity (2010: 397).

Certainly, postcolonial criticism is one of the most useful approaches for this research, as it encompasses concepts relevant to the study of identities in the literatures of former colonies, such as representations of otherness, memory and hybridity. However, the difficulties and limitations of applying postcolonial literary theories to Mauritian

literature are outlined in section 1.1. The second section examines the evolution of scholarship on Mauritian literature, and reviews current research in this area.

The third and fourth sections examine the key thematic areas relevant to our discussion, which will guide the thesis towards a clearer conceptual framework. In the third section the concept of the island in literature is studied in a review of theory related to the island motif, and the importance of the island is assessed in the context of Mauritian literature and for the wider Indian Ocean region. The fourth section examines memory as a theme and narrative strategy in literature and in Mauritian fiction in French, in particular.

1.2 Contemporary Mauritian Literature in the context of world literatures in French

This section examines Mauritian literature's place within world literatures in the French language. We trace the Mauritian novel and the emergence of a dynamic local literature since 1979. Mauritian fiction is then assessed in its relationship to francophone literatures and postcolonial studies, and we consider to what extent these theoretical approaches are helpful or not when applied to the Mauritian context.

1.2.1 The emergence of contemporary Mauritian literature

The twentieth century marked a move away from the romantic lyricism that characterised writings from or about Mauritius in the previous centuries, in canonical texts such as Bernardin de Saint Pierre's pastoral and moralistic novel *Paul et Virginie* (1787) or Alexandre Dumas's *Georges* (1843), towards literature that was more concerned with depicting the reality of life in Mauritius. In the early twentieth century, Mauritian writers began to write in a positive way about what they regarded as attractive or unique features of their island, while maintaining a degree of loyalty to and admiration for France and its literary trends. Mauritian writers sought to write in a

similar style to French writers and looked to Europe for inspiration. This “francotropist” writing, which reflects the trend for mimicry highlighted by Bhabha, dominated Mauritian literature in French until the mid-twentieth century when there was a shift from francotropist writing to one that reflects the diversity and insular identity of Mauritius. A more diverse literature emerged as cultural multiplicity and insularity became a focus for writers, who began to challenge the literary representation of Mauritius as a Lost Eden and preferred to explore relationships between character, landscapes, history and identity, in a rejection of the earlier tradition of the Exotic. Exotic portrayals in literature rely heavily on binary oppositions, thereby consolidating familiar imagery, especially in island narratives, of centre and periphery for example, (of civilisation of the metropolitan centre and unruly natural colony). Intended to represent otherness to readers in terms they would understand, the exotic tradition in literature was founded on western perceptions of unfamiliar cultures. Mauritius, as a faraway island offshoot of the French, then the British Empire was ripe for this exotic treatment in cultural production. The island, as we will see in Chapter Three, holds particular fascination for the reader with its related imagery of freedom and escapism; the island colony is therefore the ideal setting for pastoral and exotic evocations in literary texts, with its unfamiliar landscape and also its creolised society. Bernardin de Saint-Pierre’s *Paul et Virginie* has plentiful idealistic descriptions of the island décor and the protagonists’ apparent freedom in nature compared with the stricter social norms of the métropole.

According to Joubert (1991: 12) this emerging literature cuts the link (or “umbilical cord”, as he terms it) between the literature of the colonies with the colonial cultural centres in Europe. Kee Mew (2010) notes that early Mauritian literature and criticism

were concerned with the creation of a Mauritian national identity and that today, the question of Mauritian identity is still being addressed by writers and critics but remains difficult to define. Furthermore, quoting Magdelaine, Kee Mew notes that for today's writers and critics the notion of Mauritianness is a largely fictitious concept based on island identity, given the country's lack of any one unifying language or ethnicity (Magdelaine, cited in Kee Mew, 2010: 430). The present thesis stresses the importance of the island for Mauritian writing and identity, regarding as it does the island as a unifying motif in Mauritian literature. However, this is not to say that the island is the singular feature of Mauritianness expressed in literature, but rather one constituent part, alongside memory and others, in Mauritian identity formation.

Pre-1945 Mauritian literature in French had largely been the preserve of the bourgeoisie. Kee Mew (2010), in assessing the local critical discourse that emerged alongside Mauritian literature from its beginnings almost 200 years ago, concludes that the colonial elites sought to enlighten Mauritians in order to cultivate a sense of pride in their cultural output. This patriotic movement to create a literary heritage for Mauritius was supported by local literary journals, which have been highly influential in the development of local critical discourse in the past two centuries. Kee Mew identifies two major trends in this discourse: francotropism and "mauricianisme".

La première loyauté se place du côté des valeurs françaises tandis que la deuxième loyauté se tourne vers des valeurs propres à Maurice. Il est donc intéressant et important de noter comment le discours critique sur la littérature mauricienne affiche, dès ses origines, des préoccupations liées à la constitution d'un champ littéraire divisé entre le francotropisme et le mauricianisme (2010: 423).

The democratisation of literature resulted from the administrative and political changes that came in the wake of World War II, from improvements in communications and technology, as well as increased access to education, and concomitant increased literacy rates. After 1945, there were moves towards representing a particular Mauritian

identity, proposing a class-less and race-less idyll through the medium of French, but with the goal of making the language more “Mauritian”. Ramharai (2006: 174) notes that in the second half of the twentieth century, and particularly in the post-independence period, Mauritian writers’ choice to write in French was largely aesthetic, rather than ideological. In fact, Mauritian writers were not part of the literary movements that characterised other Francophone nations in the twentieth century, such as “négritude”, in the French Caribbean. Some aspects of these movements were embraced by Mauritian writers at a later stage, but Mauritian literature is distinguished above all by its diversity and eclecticism. It represents many different currents in ideological, philosophical and religious thought, for example mysticism, political commitment, “indianocéanisme”, postcolonialism, amongst others. Fanchin (1993: 46) also noted that a sense of humanism was a common element of such influences.

In the early twentieth century, writers such as Charoux, Martial and Mérédac, who had worked in administration or engineering within the sugar industry, employed idyllic depictions in celebrating the almost sacred qualities of the plantations. Their overriding preoccupation in their writing was with describing life in Mauritius and portraying the different ethnic groups on the island, as seen in Charoux’s *Ameenah* (1938) and Martial’s *La poupée de chair* (1932) and *Sphinx de bronze* (1935). Hookoomsing (Issur *et al* 2005) quotes Mérédac who prefaces Martial’s 1932 novel by recognising both Mauritian and French elements in his compatriot’s writing, declaring that Martial was Mauritian and that his works belonged “certes à la littérature française, [mais elles] appartiennent aussi et plus spécialement, à notre littérature. Car nous avons une littérature” (Mérédac, cited in Issur *et al* 2005: 48). Mauritius was not yet independent; Mérédac’s comments therefore highlight the duality of Mauritian writing at this time.

André and Loys Masson also set some of their narratives on the sugar plantations in Mauritius and evoke exploitation and social upheaval. Loys Masson's *L'étoile et la clef* (1945) is a dramatisation of social conflict in 1937 representing struggles between White Mauritians and Indo-Mauritians. André Masson, whose oeuvre comprises mainly mystical novels, is more radical in his novel *Le Chemin de pierre ponce* (1963), when he depicts the plantation as a hellish place.

Robert-Edward Hart was one of the most prolific and accomplished Mauritian writers during the early to mid-twentieth century. A novelist, poet and journalist, he is best known for his *Cycle de Pierre Flandre* and his espousing of the myth of La Lémurie, based on the belief that Lemuria was a legendary lost continent and cradle of humanity stretching from southern India to Madagascar, encompassing parts of both Asia and Africa. The concept of Lemuria would be explored later by Malcolm de Chazal. Chapter Six of this thesis assesses the impact of this foundation myth on contemporary Mauritian writing and the forging of Indian Ocean identity.

Marcel Cabon's novel, *Namasté*, published in 1965, represents the transformation from francotropist writing to cultural plurality by highlighting the Indian and African origins of the island's population. A groundbreaking novel, it deals with the land, hostilities between the island's different ethnic communities, and the concept of Otherness. The text has added realism through the inclusion of dialogue in Bhojpuri and Creole, thereby highlighting the postcolonial author's deliberate choice of language. Cabon challenges this problematic by code-switching within the text. Carl de Souza, whose oeuvre is examined in this thesis, uses a similar technique in the 1990s and 2000s.

The first Mauritian novel by a female author, *La Diligence s'éloigne à l'aube*, by Marcelle Lagesse, was published in 1959. Lagesse, who mainly wrote historical fiction, would later become an active presence on the arts scene in Mauritius throughout the 1960s and 1970s. From the post-independence period to the turn of the twenty-first century, female novelists have become more prolific, as is evident in the corpus of this study in which no fewer than five female authors are represented. Three of Marie-Thérèse Humbert's seven novels to date are set in Mauritius. In each, the action takes place in pre-independence Mauritius. *À l'autre bout de moi* (1979), set in the 1950s, highlights diverging points of view on race in Mauritian society. The protagonists' determination to establish distinctly separate identities as twins can be read as representative of the wider Mauritian identity crisis. Humbert's novel has added significance in that the central protagonists are female. While Ananda Devi, writing in the 1990s and 2000s, also explores women's situation in Mauritius, but specifically within the Indo-Mauritian community, Humbert's work shows an awareness of the constraints of gender, class and race for all women in Mauritius. Humbert's novels are set pre-Independence but mark the arrival of a contemporary Mauritian novel that represents the complexity of Mauritian society. *À l'autre bout de moi* is widely acknowledged as a turning point in contemporary Mauritian fiction.

1.2.2 Mauritian writing and francophone literatures

Due to the British influence on the island after 1815, and because Mauritius became part of the British Commonwealth upon gaining independence, Mauritians do not necessarily identify with the French *métropole*. Corcoran (2007) for example, acknowledges that "Francophonie" remains just one part of the composite identities of these islands; in fact, homogeneity related to France and the French language has not imposed itself as the common denominator or the dominant element in island societies.

Mauritius has, therefore, a problematic relationship with France, and in particular with the “francophone” label. While French is the language of cultural expression and is used in the media, politics and education, English dominates as the official language and as the language of the Mauritian parliament. For this reason the term “Mauritian novel in French” is preferred to the term “francophone” in the title of this thesis. This title avoids the problematic francophone epithet, which infers something peripheral, subaltern or an offshoot of French. A categorisation that denotes more than simply “of the French language” or “French-speaking”, it is a loaded term, full of historical and cultural significance, a term that suggests otherness and marginality and a certain position in relation to France. As such characteristics cannot all be ascribed to recent Mauritian writing in French, the term would appear inappropriate in this context.

The term “francophone” is further limited in its relevance and usefulness in the Mauritian context because the linguistic situation in Mauritius does not echo the diglossic or triglossic situation in other former French colonies (with French as the language of administration and education and Creole, or indigenous language/s, as the vehicular language). The presence of English and other languages such as Hindi, Tamil or Bhojpuri complicates Mauritius’s sociolinguistic landscape. Although literature published in Mauritius is predominantly written in French, and some of the novelists included in this study publish and have won prizes in France, this thesis takes the position that “Mauritian writing in French” and “the Mauritian novel in French” are preferable appellations as they take into account the linguistic particularities of Mauritius, as well as acknowledging the presence of other languages that have begun to gain ground in Mauritian literature, notably Hindi, English, and, to a lesser extent, Mauritian Creole. This thesis nevertheless recognises the relevance of francophone

studies, and will refer to critical works from this theoretical area, using concepts and harnessing arguments employed by francophone postcolonial criticism where appropriate.

Corcoran (2007) and Ramharai (2006), both note that non-French writers writing in French have gained recognition in France, becoming more widely published and winning prestigious literary prizes in the past number of years. Corcoran is sceptical of drawing a “tenuous link” between the increasingly dynamic literary output of these authors and what is considered the “national space”, seeing the relationship between author and national origin as the defining characteristic of what is known as “Francophone literature”. Corcoran also examines the meaning of the term “Francophone literature” insisting that the term has been increasingly used as a lazy catch-all label that “often masks as much as it reveals” (2007: 1). He contends that francophone literature (if it can be considered a single category or body of literature) is “first and foremost a *postcolonial* literature” (2007: 22). Corcoran explores and celebrates the diversity of such literature, and, where necessary, contextualises it within a postcolonial theoretical framework.

Ravi (2007) assesses the value of recent Mauritian writing as an emerging literary canon distinct from the “Francophone literary convention” that tends to place Mauritius in a regional context emphasising the similar colonial heritage of islands of the Indian Ocean. She notes that Prosper’s evaluation of Mauritian writing, that literature in French is most representative of Mauritius, still rings true today. Ravi asserts that early Mauritian novels in French, such as those by Mérédac, Charoux and Martial, can be considered “Mauritian” only because they were set, geographically and culturally, in

that country, when in fact, they represented colonial world views. Ravi identifies the post-Second World War period as important for the development of a literary scene in Mauritius. During a period of erosion of French domination over Mauritius and the emergence of a new mixed-race élite as the country moved towards independence, a more vibrant literary scene began to take hold, characterised by an emphasis on French as a unifying language accessible to all members of Mauritius's pluri-ethnic society. French had managed to retain its cultural prestige and was favoured as a language of literary expression, in spite of the importance of English in education and politics (Ravi, 2007: 3). However, Ravi is reluctant to impose a framework that presupposes the existence of a fixed Mauritian identity in literature, and is critical of the tendency to define Mauritian literature as a distinctive unit within a "regional body of literatures". Nor does she place Mauritian writing in French in the wider context of francophone literatures, an approach that distinguishes French writing outside of France from writing from the *métropole*. Rather, she analyses those original aspects of Mauritian literature that reflect the author's environment and society.

1.2.3 Mauritian literature and postcolonial theory

Mauritian literature is given some attention in recent scholarship on postcolonial francophone literatures and cultures. Hawkins (2007) examines the literatures and cultures of the francophone Indian Ocean from a postcolonial perspective. Noting that the Caribbean has been comprehensively assessed within francophone studies notably as a "hybrid" region of cultural mixing, Hawkins stresses the unique cultural mixing of the islands of the Indian Ocean region (ie. the "Other Hybrid Archipelago" of the title). He redresses the gap in scholarship, in particular in the English language, on Indian Ocean literature, and surveys the importance of cultural production of the region,

adopting postcolonial criticism and its key topics. Hawkins notes that the islands of the Indian Ocean region share many characteristics, yet retain certain distinctive features. While Hawkins presents a concise introduction to the region's societies and cultures, and examines the region as a culturally-distinct entity, his work, out of necessity, does not delve into Mauritian literature in great detail. The francophone literary heritage of Mauritius is stressed and "expatriate" and "insular" writers in particular are referred to, but Creole cultural forms, literature in Hindi and the use of English that are the other important features of cultural expression in Mauritius are also examined. Hawkins's contribution is useful in situating Mauritian writing within a wider geo-cultural context, and in particular in relation to the Indian Ocean region. This study, in contrast, constitutes a detailed and profound examination of individual works whilst situating these within the context of Mauritian literature in particular.

Corcoran sees the examination of identity as particularly important in postcolonial studies because of the assumption that metropolitan culture was inherently superior and refused to value indigenous cultures (2007: 23). He notes that postcolonial theory has tended to reject binary approaches that simplify relationships into a "them and us" perspective, because such perspectives are in fact echoes of the assumptions that characterised colonialism itself. Perspectives on negotiation of identity and exchange, such as the work of Maalouf, allow us to examine how colonialism had an impact on individuals and communities and are an intrinsic part of postcolonial francophone literature, according to Corcoran (2007: 24). Maalouf (1998), who asserts that identity is made up of many components, with no single element of these defining the individual, is certainly useful in relation to Mauritian writing. Asgarally, a Mauritian advocate of interculturalism, elaborates on Maalouf's concept of identity and places it

in the context of Mauritius, where the notion of “*identité plurielle*” is particularly significant, as the country is a meeting ground of cultures and ethnic groups, perhaps more so than any other country in the world. Interculturalism, according to Asgarally, is about replacing “culture” used as a justification for war and violence, with “culture” as a means of living together peacefully. This concept can be considered as a new way of framing identity, moving towards real cultural exchange and by-passing multiculturalism; it involves reassessing established opinions and existing myths and stereotypes (Asgarally, 2005: 9-10). Moreover, as interculturalism rejects rivalry and hierarchies of cultures, according to Asgarally, real exchange cannot take place between a dominant culture and a dominated culture (2005: 27). Asgarally’s work is helpful in applying theory to a local context. Some of his reflections on language, however, border on the alarmist (that notions of language purity can lead to ethnic cleansing) or the utopian (that if we learn to love language then we will love all mankind). Asgarally’s work is certainly an interesting commentary on pluralistic societies, but, while he assesses the importance of literature to such societies, the role of translators, or readers’ responses to writing for example, he does not refer to Mauritian writers in particular.

Asgarally’s notion of interculturalism is reflected in Corcoran (2007), in which hybridity is identified as a key element of postcolonialism:

[...] Creole cultures exemplify a canonical form of hybridity just as theories of creolisation are eminently postcolonial, decentering as they do the symbols and discourses through which we construct and articulate myths of cultural identity (2007: 24).

The Indian Ocean region distinguishes itself from other francophone regions because it defies the generalisations that are often used to clarify the differences between other francophone regions of the world, as they are usually seen as distinct cultural or linguistic blocs, according to Corcoran (2007: 109). Corcoran states that discussions

concerning the islands of the Indian Ocean inevitably centre round the concepts of heterogeneity and diversity. Identity tends to be conceptualised in terms of forms of hybridity and creolisation because myths of pure cultural origin, such as those myths of African roots of former slaves of the Caribbean region, are absent in these societies (2007: 110). Corcoran argues that too much emphasis is placed on the postcolonial aspect of postcolonial literature, or the francophone element in literatures in French, and not enough recognition given to either as actual literature, all of which risks the creation and reinforcement of simplistic categories that ghettoise any non-metropolitan literary works. He therefore proposes a postcolonial poetics that would allow for the appreciation of the literary value of texts that are considered “postcolonial” or “francophone”, instead of the political, economic, or cultural analysis that tends to dominate literary criticism more recently (2007: 239). Corcoran is certainly justified in his contention that the literary quality of texts deemed either postcolonial or francophone, or both, is frequently overlooked in favour of discourses related to contemporary debates in postcolonial studies. While postcolonial criticism is considered in this thesis, the intention is not to overshadow the work of the writers concerned by consigning them to specific categories. Indeed, the argument is made that in plural societies such as Mauritius, with its interesting history of inward and outward migration, literary production often defies categorisation.

Corcoran also suggests that we should acknowledge the positive role that cultures in contact have played in enriching and creating diverse contemporary francophone literatures, rather than being regarded as contaminating literature (2007: 241). It must be noted, however, that most critics and scholars of Mauritian literature are in agreement that this is the case, for example Ramharai, who notes that Mauritian

literature continues to evolve because of contact with other local cultures in the Indian Ocean. Furthermore, Ramharai explains that contemporary writers and their younger readers have an entirely different relationship to the island and its languages than that of their ancestors. Ethnic diversity is less taboo for contemporary writers, who, with no memory of colonialism and having always known Mauritius as a meeting ground of cultures and languages, take interculturalism for granted (Ramharai, 2000: 174).

Ramharai (2006) also considers the motivations and reception of non-French writers, including Mauritians, publishing in French, who, he asserts, seek to be published and recognised beyond the limits of the French canon, not wanting their writing to be categorised as different or exotic. Their work has links with postcolonial literatures, in which the specificity of their text and their own particular life experience matters more than ethnic affiliation or choice of language, according to Ramharai (2006: 182-183). Undoubtedly, the writers interviewed for this study demonstrate a desire to be considered as writers first and foremost, and not to be labeled as postcolonial writers, francophone writers, exotic writers and so on. While their novels reflect local concerns, with representations of Mauritian history, geography and society, the themes broached are frequently universal and not solely destined for readers familiar with Mauritian society.

Contemporary Mauritian writing in French is mostly read through the filter of postcolonial theory, as it represents aspects of postcolonial identity central to such a theoretical framework, such as its hybridity, migration or “métissage”. Yet, Mauritius has a complex postcolonial society, with relationships with many continents and former centres of Empire, only one of which is France. It must be remembered that although

French is the main language of literary expression in Mauritius, and many contemporary Mauritian authors are published in France, the writers featured in this study do not position themselves in relation to France or the French literary canon. When Mauritius, an already well-established and functioning colony, was eventually ceded to Britain, the colonial dynamic changed considerably. The British administration looked to India to provide labour for Mauritius's sugar plantations, thereby transforming the country, whose majority population today is of Indian descent. Appanah, Devi and Patel, Indo-Mauritian authors, write in French, but their novels could just as easily find a niche within contemporary anglophone Indian literature if written in or translated into English.

Racault (2007) questions the English-speaking academy's tradition of treating postcolonial theory as an essential tool of analysis: ([la] "nouvelle orthodoxie universitaire dans les pays anglo-saxons dont on a un peu de mal à comprendre le succès et même à saisir le sens" (2007: 11), arguing that most states have had an experience of some form of colonialism at some point; are we not all therefore entitled to consider ourselves postcolonial and all literature as postcolonial? Racault's comments reflect the division that exists between approaches to Francophone postcolonial studies in France and the English-speaking world. While Racault is justified in questioning the over-reliance on theory that characterises much of this discourse, the fact remains that we still have some distance to go in our understanding of literature and culture of former colonies. Yet, Racault's observations are useful in condensing the debate around postcolonial theory between the French and English speaking worlds.

Colonised countries have had divergent experiences, hence the difficulty in applying a catch-all label of “postcolonial” to all former colonies and their literatures. Furthermore, when does this postcolonial situation end? Hawkins asked as much (“Until when shall we remain postcolonial?”) in an article concerning globalisation, nationalism and cultural self-determination in Indian Ocean literature: concluding that, given the dominance of English and French in global media and given publishing houses’ (based in major European capital cities) preference for major world languages, indigenous literatures are likely to remain marginalised and relegated to postcolonial categories (Hawkins, 2008). Hawkins notes that Mauritian literature is reliant on French publishers and that, with the exception of Lyndsey Collen, who writes in English and Creole, writers in Mauritius have considerable difficulty in establishing a sense of individual literary identity:

Mauritian literary production in general often seems stuck in a micro-nationalist time-warp. Writers there are still situating themselves in terms of allegiance to probably outdated notions of national and linguistic identity, even within the confines of one small tropical island (2008: 13).

Local writers, such as playwright Dev Virahsawmy, remain well-known in Mauritius but largely unknown abroad due to the choice to write in Creole. Hawkins notes that Virahsawmy’s work sometimes adapts, and indeed subverts, canonical works for a local audience. Such a strategy places the writer within Bhabha’s theory of subversive mimicry, according to Hawkins, thereby fixing him firmly within the realm of the postcolonial. The mimicry of French literature in its use of language and narrative strategies so common in Mauritian novels in the early twentieth century and period immediately following independence is not generally observed in more recent literature (with the exception of Virahsawmy) in which a distinctly local voice expresses the linguistic and ethnic richness of Mauritius.

Is contemporary Mauritius and contemporary Mauritian writing postcolonial? The ethnic situation in Mauritius differs from other post-colonies in which a major European power subjugated a homogeneous indigenous population. While the French administration created a landowning class that quickly gained a foothold in the sugar industry and continued to exert influence in this industry and others throughout recent Mauritian history, the subsequent British administration never created a settler population in Mauritius. This does not preclude us, however, from adopting the tools of postcolonial studies in our criticism of recent Mauritian writing. Slavery and subsequently indentured labour brought Mauritius into the workings of Empire; the British recruited indentured workers to continue the work on the Mauritian sugar plantations previously done by slaves brought from Africa by the French administration. The descendants of these indentured Indian labourers constitute the largest ethnic group in Mauritius today. Whilst postcolonial concepts are useful in analysing the literature there is nevertheless a limitation as Mauritius falls outside the traditional colonial situation. Other situations highlight the repetitive pattern of colonialism, but Mauritius sometimes highlights its exceptions. Mauritius is, nonetheless, marked by the colonial period and the aspects of colonial expansion experienced elsewhere, in particular with the movement of peoples to and from the island, the importance of the colony for trade, and the resultant reliance on slavery and indentured labour. The communities of Mauritius do not share the same pre-colonial experience, having come to Mauritius from different continents under differing conditions. Their places within contemporary Mauritian society are therefore markedly varied.

A useful approach to reading literature of postcolonial islands of the Indian Ocean, in particular, Mauritius, is Khal Torabully's "Coolitude". Coolitude is Mauritian poet's transcultural vision, which acknowledges the neglected or forgotten aspects of Indian Ocean history and looks to build a composite identity drawing on Indian migrant, European and African cultures. Reclaiming and de-stigmatising the term "coolie", Torabully's coolitude draws on India as a reference point, but he acknowledges that searching for mythical ancestral homelands can "create barriers in the elaboration of a wider identity" and to remedy this "Coolitude posits an encounter, an exchange of histories, of poetics or visions of the world between those of African and Indian descent without excluding other sources" (Torabully, 2002:149). Inspired by Césaire's concept of *négritude*, Torabully seeks to redress the imbalance in remembered and forgotten history; to foster an awareness of indentured history in particular, but not exclusively, and interaction between all immigrant groups on the island. Like Césaire, Torabully appropriates a long-considered pejorative term ("Nègre", "Coolie") to give it new value and meaning. However, Torabully underlines that coolitude is not simply an Indian version of *négritude*. It centres, moreover, on the voyage and subsequent interactions in the colony. Highlighting the composite nature of coolitude, which he considers non-essentialist unlike other concepts such as *négritude* or *antilléité*, Torabully's coolitude is more resonant, therefore, of Glissant's *créolité*. (2002, 144-145). Torabully's vision is valuable in particular when discussing the centrality of the ocean voyage and related symbolism in indentured narratives.

As Mauritius has experienced considerable levels of inward and outward migration it is also fitting to refer to migrant literature when discussing contemporary Mauritian writing. Indeed, Nathacha Appanah has referred to migrant literature to help situate her

work in relation to contemporary literature and in response to questions about whether her writing could be classified within postcolonial or francophone literature.³ Appanah therefore recognises the influence on Mauritian writing of the broad diversity of social and cultural history and influences, the multiplicity of the historical occupation of Mauritius, and the waves of willing and unwilling migration and settlement, and later, emigration. While migrant literature demonstrates some interesting overlap with postcolonial literature (such as its emphasis on displacement and hybridity, for example), it is essentially literature by migrant writers, or about migrants, who have undergone a significant change of location or language. Migration is not, and has not been, limited only to colonial and then post-colonial settings, but has, moreover, become a feature of our increasingly globalised world and therefore an increasingly common aspect of world literatures.

Scholars must exercise caution when celebrating the apparent diversity of Mauritian society and its literature. It must be noted that the voices of one major community, those of the Mauritians of African descent (Creoles), remain silent in fiction in French, in terms of narration and characterisation, and that Creoles remain significantly under-represented in Mauritian fiction in general.

1.3 The evolution of scholarship on Mauritian literature

Mauritian literature has been the subject of some academic scholarship within the area of French studies, but only in the past two to three decades has it developed a significant profile and attracted widespread attention. Until recently criticism was centred on literature published before 1990, especially with regard to general studies on Mauritian

³ Appanah, during a public lecture at the University of Limerick, 2005.

literature and the history of literature of the francophone Indian Ocean region. Prosper and Joubert have been the most prominent in the area of the history of Mauritian literature in French, having written leading works on the subject. As such, Prosper's *Histoire de la littérature mauricienne de langue française* (1994) and Joubert's *Littératures de l'Océan Indien: histoire littéraire de la francophonie* (1991) are recognised as useful sources for any work on Mauritian literature. While reference is sometimes made to the Indian Ocean region in works relating to francophone African Literature, or in general works with reference to francophone literature, current research in francophone studies rarely examines Mauritius as a separate geographical entity. The works of Joubert and Prosper are the exception, as well as some more recent work by British and American scholars, as we will see below. While Joubert and Prosper are concerned with the general area of the proposed topic and are valuable sources of information, they do not refer specifically to the more recent authors chosen for this study.

The 1990s and 2000s have seen increased scholarly activity in the area of literature from the Indian Ocean region, and from Mauritius in particular. Mauritian academics such as Lionnet, Fanchin, Issur, Hookoomsingh, and Ramharai have made a notable contribution to this area, with articles on specific authors from the region and on literary production in Mauritius. Reunionese scholars Marimoutou and Magdelaine-Adrianjafitrimo have published on francophone literatures of the Indian Ocean region, specifically on Reunion and Mauritius, and offer useful comparative analysis. *L'Océan Indien dans les littératures francophones. Pays réels, pays revés, pays révélés*, (Issur and Hookoomsingh, 2001), followed a conference held at the University of Mauritius in 1997. The contributions on anthropology, culture and literature range from early

encounters in the Indian Ocean region to present day Madagascar and Reunion, as well as contemporary Mauritian literature and identity, and include some comparative studies with the Caribbean region, with the result that the islands of the Indian Ocean region are considered in a historical and social context and the relationship between the islands and the continents are explored.

A conference in Bristol in 2006, “Literatures and Cultures from the Francophone Indian Ocean”, provided a forum for researchers from that region and from around the world to investigate literary and cultural production from the area. The proceedings were published in an on-line journal in 2008.⁴ In 2007 in Louvain-la-Neuve, researchers focused on the work of the prominent novelist Ananda Devi under the theme of “Alterité”, the proceedings of which have been published.⁵ In 2009, the topic of “Hybridation/Hybridité” was discussed in relation to the Indian Ocean region at an International Conference in Barcelona. At present a network of researchers work on issues related to Indian Ocean literature, notably in a postcolonial context, across the United States, Canada, Europe, Mauritius, Réunion, Madagascar and Australia. Volume 48 of *Francofonia* (Issur *et al*, 2005) was entirely dedicated to Mauritian literature in French and more recently, *The International Journal of Francophone Studies* dedicated two issues to Mauritius⁶, an indication of the interest in, and expertise on, Mauritius that now exists amongst researchers working within the area of francophone studies around the world. These issues address the originality and diversity

⁴ See eFrance, (an online journal based at the Department of French at the University of Reading), Volume 2, Special Issue ‘*L’ici et l’ailleurs*’: *Postcolonial Literatures of the Francophone Indian Ocean*.

⁵ See Bragard, V. & Ravi, S. (eds) (2010) *Ecritures Mauriciennes au féminin: penser l’altérité*. Paris : L’Harmattan.

⁶ See Lionnet, F. and Spear, T. (2010) *International Journal of Francophone Studies, Between Words and Images*, Volume 13, Issues 3 & 4.

of Mauritian cultural production in this uniquely “multiracial, multilingual, multi-confessional, predominantly Indian diasporic and postcolonial nation” (Lionnet, 2010: 372) and place it within the sphere of world literatures rather than solely in the context of monolingual francophone literature.

Key themes in recent discourse on Mauritian literature include hybridity, identity, representations of slavery and indentured labour, social deprivation and injustice, representations of women, representations (or lack thereof) of Creoles, and others. Because of the nature of Indian Ocean history, with its movement of peoples from continents to the islands of the region and emigration from the islands to the continents, identity has been a particularly popular subject of investigation amongst literary scholars from the region. Issues related to memory have featured in single articles on Mauritian literature and literatures and cultures of the wider Indian Ocean area, (see 1.3.3) as have islands (see 1.3.1). However, no major study on the topic of memory and identity or specifically, on memory and island identity in contemporary Mauritian literature, has been undertaken to date. The present study will address this lacuna.

Cunniah and Boolell (2000) examine representations of Mauritian women in the Mauritian novel since Marcel Cabon, from feminist and psychoanalytical perspectives. Dealing with pre-independence, post-independence and more recent writers, their study is divided into analyses of representations of Mauritian women according to race and ethnicity, for example Indo-Mauritian women, Franco-Mauritian women, mixed-race women, Creole women and non-Mauritian women, in different literary texts by Mauritian writers, but not exclusively limited to women writers. Cunniah and Boolell (2000) argue that the moralising evident in much women’s writing in Mauritius in the

discussion of women's place in Mauritian society, and the analysis of Mauritian society (to date the main preoccupation of female writers), have rendered Mauritian writing bland. They suggest that Mauritian writers, either male or female, may have sacrificed art and creativity for social commentary and an obsession with insular issues, and that their writing is the poorer as a result of the need to constantly call into question the clichés and romanticised ideas that surround the myth of multiracial Mauritius. This thesis will show, however, that while exploring identities and managing to dispel preconceptions held by the non-Mauritian reader, contemporary Mauritian fiction, including that written by women, is diverse in theme and form. Admittedly, less experimental than could be the case, such writing nonetheless challenges stereotypes and contributes to a realistic representation of a complex society. It must be noted, furthermore, that since Cunniah and Boolel's 2000 study, Nathacha Appanah has published four novels, Ananda Devi, six, Shenaz Patel, three and Lilian Berthelot, two. Women novelists are more prolific than ever before in Mauritius and are producing texts more diverse and complex than those of their predecessors. Lionnet (1993, 1995, and 2001) has also made valuable contributions to the study of representations of women in postcolonial texts by women writers, in particular in relation to Devi and Humbert.

Ravi (2007) emphasises the ethnographic aspects of Mauritian society, assessing what she terms Mauritian "ethnotopographies" in the context of novels by Devi, Loys Masson, de Souza, Humbert, Lagesse and Le Clézio. Exploring "how literature as a discursive practice constructs a cultural topography of an island through the dismantling of a homogenizing concept of Mauritian multicultural identity prevalent in official discourses" (2007: 6) and more generally, the relationship between ethnicity,

identity and nation in Mauritius, Ravi's approach aims to reject a "totalizing notion of culture". Her thematic approach also, by her own admission, reduces the need to dwell on criteria of period and authors in the corpus used (what constitutes a "Mauritian writer", for example) and her analysis examines works from *Paul et Virginie* to Le Clézio's *la Quarantaine*, taking account, therefore, of the richness and variety of literature and culture on and about the island of Mauritius. The themes and critical approaches are varied. The concluding chapter, in particular, examines the very specific theme of violence in literature and discusses a Mauritian novel in the context of narrative ethics, which seems misplaced in a book that hitherto treats ethnic and national questions in Mauritian literature. This chapter weakens the cohesion achieved earlier. Ravi justifies this subject matter with the (widely held) observation that Mauritian literature is moving beyond the ethnically specific concerns that once occupied a central place in novels towards more universal themes. Ravi does not address the black Creole in Mauritian literature, dividing her analysis into the three communities or "ethnies" of Indo-Mauritian, *métis* and Franco-Mauritian or *Créole blanc*. The Creole of slave descent is absent from these three distinct groupings, although this group may fall under the *métis* banner. While Creole voices are certainly less evident in literature than other ethnic groups, there are nonetheless many Creole characters in Mauritian literature, as Cunniah and Boolel (2000) have previously outlined.

Issur (2005) regards contemporary Mauritian literature in French as a meeting ground of individual voices. Noting that contemporary writers are not preoccupied with trends in theory, or adding their voices to movements or manifestos, Issur acknowledges that some contemporary novels seem appropriate for discussion under theoretical areas such

as postcolonialism, postmodernism or creolisation (2005: 121). Nonetheless, a small number of contemporary writers have adopted the framework of the “traditional” (ie. historical) Mauritian novel, in terms of structure and theme. However, authors are increasingly breaking with tradition in an attempt to reveal the often tragic truths at the heart of Mauritian society. Issur emphasises novels published since the 1990s in particular, which deconstruct the dominant image of Mauritius as a tourist paradise and a place of racial harmony and economic success, in what Issur terms “une écriture du désenchantement”. Rather than reinforcing stereotypes or expressing blind optimism in the newly independent state, authors reveal what is wrong or lacking in Mauritian society and give voice to people’s aspirations and goals (Issur, 2005: 121). In an effective summary of today’s most accomplished Mauritian novelists in French Issur identifies daring description, unflinching examination of identities and a willingness to experiment with aesthetics as the key characteristics of this new literature by authors such as Humbert, Devi, de Souza, Pyamootoo and Appanah (2005).

Some critics have reflected on the specificity of Mauritian literature, such as Ramharai (2006), who asks whether a Mauritian literary field exists. Ramharai concludes that coming to a definition of a Mauritian literary field is particularly difficult because the term cannot be applied in the same way to Mauritius as elsewhere, notably France, where literature is legitimised institutionally. In addition, because of Mauritius’s linguistic diversity, the complexity of its society and a literary scene no longer the sole preserve of male writers, Mauritian literature does not have a clearly defined and fixed literary canon (2006: 192). This thesis also shows that while some writers have similar concerns and express a distinct desire to give voice to specifically Mauritian matters, the diversity of their narrative strategies and characterisations, as well as the pluralistic

society they represent, means that it is difficult, even undesirable, to impose the notion of a fixed category of contemporary Mauritian literature. The work of Devi, Appanah, and de Souza is well-recognised and as Mauritian literature continues to attract the interest of researchers and the reading public this trend is likely to continue. It is conceivable that a Mauritian literary field or literary canon may well soon be legitimised, notably by academic discourse abroad, as this interest and attention continue to grow and the work of Mauritian novelists features more prominently on school and university programmes worldwide.

Ethnic identity is of particular relevance to Mauritian literature and has therefore come under scrutiny by researchers such as Beniamino (Issur *et al* 2005). Beniamino believes ethnicity to be the central concern in Mauritian writing and identifies three particular movements in Mauritian literary history. Firstly, he identifies a period he terms “l’ethnicité triomphante”, during which writing is descriptive about different ethnic groups in Mauritius, portrays certain groups in a sympathetic light and includes more contemporary narrative features such as a quest for identity. However, such writing relies heavily on ethnographic descriptions of the Other. The second period, “l’ethnicité bloquée”, denotes a time when narratives merely reinforced already established compartmentalisation of Mauritian society. The final stage, deemed “l’ethnicité ébranlée” is when postcolonial texts assess the changes taking place within society and the resultant consequences for Mauritian identities (Beniamino in Issur *et al* 2005: 63). Beniamino’s analysis of the ethnicisation of Mauritian literature is insightful, in particular because it recognises de Souza for his contribution to the examination of the problematic surrounding changing Mauritian identities in the wake of independence. Beniamino (2005: 69) identifies de Souza’s début novel, *Le Sang de l’Anglais*, as one

of the key texts that demonstrate a break with the traditional schema of ethnicity in Mauritian literature. When the de-ethnicisation of Mauritian fiction manifests itself, according to Beniamino it can be attributed more to external forces, such as globalisation, than any inherent desire on the part of writers or the society in which they live. Issur and Beniamino are amongst the few scholars to recognise de Souza's contribution to post-independence Mauritian writing. This thesis considers de Souza a literary figure of considerable importance in Mauritian literature, not only for the complexity of his narratives and the manner in which they depict the many facets of Mauritian identity, but also for the literary quality of his writing, arguably the most accomplished to emerge from Mauritian novelists writing in French in many years.

In their edited volume *Multiple Identities in Action: Mauritius and Some Antillean Parallelisms*, Hookoomsing, Ludwig and Schnepel *et al* (2009) highlight issues in culture and identity in Mauritius, using a comparative framework in which Mauritius is studied in relation to other Creole-speaking societies and former French colonies. The discussions focus largely on identities in the fields of politics, linguistics and cultural studies, from the earliest colonisation of the island to the contemporary boom in tourism. The "in action" of the title refers to the negotiation that takes place within and across the fluid boundaries of identity; defending one's own culture and referencing another. This comparative work is useful in situating Mauritian cultural identities within wider geographical and political contexts.

Mauritian culture and literature have therefore gained more attention within scholarship on literatures in French in recent years. Scholars in the area of francophone studies, in particular, have looked to Mauritius as an interesting case study, while specialists in

Mauritian literature have assessed the themes and narratives in contemporary Mauritian writing in the wider context of interplays between gender, ethnicity and identity.

1.4 The island

Much contemporary writing from Mauritius in French is dark in theme and tone, probing the realities of life in Mauritius in the present day, or at key moments during its history. In writing about a divided society, the island is a useful motif and common reference point for contemporary novelists, as it can reinforce the sense of a common identity and inscribe Mauritian identity and literature within Indian Ocean culture and the wider canon of island narratives. Representations of the island, both literal and figurative, are complex and varied in the contemporary Mauritian novel. Island imagery embodies the diversity and complexity of Mauritian society and Mauritius's unique topography is evoked throughout these writings.

1.4.1 The island in literature

The island is a captivating subject in literature particularly because it is seen to embody qualities that reflect the human condition. Analysis of the island as theme, or as a trope in literature, tends to rely heavily on this notion. Discourse on islands in literature refers in some capacity to the so-called "island paradox", which evokes the duality inherent in the island condition. This notion holds that the island represents two opposing characteristics at once, such as exile and homecoming, or freedom and limitation. This thesis eschews borrowing or adapting this binary oppositional vocabulary into a discussion of the poetics of insularity or on the relevance of the island to the literature of Mauritius. It is acknowledged here, nonetheless, that this island paradox, or duality, is itself the distinguishing feature of the island, and is what makes islands unique. Rather than examining Mauritian fiction for proof of such stereotypes being recycled

and perpetuated, this thesis will highlight how the island is a central focus and undeniable influence on Mauritian writers, but also how their writing rejects or reformulates clichés related to islands in literature and contemporary discourse and proposes innovative formulae to reflect on the past, to vigorously portray the present and project the future.

Literary critics have long examined the motif of the island in literature. Baldacchino (2006: 5), for example, is concerned by the simplification of the island's various paradoxes in discourse on islands, and finds that Western literature, past and present, has contributed to the reinforcement of island myths through the representation of characters that have been transformed by their stay on an island. Hay (2006) examines the significance of continents in relation to islands and stresses the connectedness between island and continent or island and sea that is as much an element of "islandness" as separation from the continent. Hay also regards the island as a site of cultural exchange, facilitated by ocean travel (Hay, 2006). In the present study, we observe similar notions of the island as meeting ground and place of cultural and economic exchange in studies related to Mauritius and other islands of the Indian Ocean region (see Racault, Ramaharai, Magdelaine etc.)

Baldacchino (2006), Hay (2006), Péron (2004) and Racault (2007) also refer to the visible boundaries of the island that influence how the island is conceptualised and represented in literature. According to Péron, inhabitants of islands have a "monolithic" view of identity, reinforced by their common experience of being from a unique place (2004: 331). In considering the appeal and the difficulties of island life, Péron contends that the limitation of space and the distinctive environment influences on the lifestyle

of its inhabitants and on how they regard themselves. Péron's viewpoint is relevant when applied to creolised island societies, whose islands are meeting grounds of different cultures and histories. This thesis proposes that the island is a defining feature of contemporary Mauritian society and, by extension constitutes a reference point in the eventual construction of a wider Indian Ocean identity. As such, Péron's theory on the monolithic nature of island identity is pertinent to the case of Mauritius, in that arguably the one singular unifying element of contemporary Mauritian identity is identification with the island.

Brinklow *et al* (2009) support the argument for the inclusion of certain works in a small island literary canon, suggesting that island writers and texts have definable and distinctive elements in common with each other. Islandness can be seen as a defining feature of certain texts, or indeed be defined as a concept by such texts. They also suggest that island texts (from Caribbean and Canadian literature) show protagonists who wish to re-territorialise their islands of origins, as well as a new home place in order to reclaim and reevaluate their situation as part of minorities. This notion finds echoes in Mauritian literature in which we observe a conflict between an attachment to an ancestral homeland and to one's identity within contemporary creolised Mauritian society.

For Bongie (1998), the duality represented by the island space - islanders have both a sense of belonging to a very particular environment, and of being exiled from a greater landmass - "perfectly conveys the ambivalences of Creole identity" (1998: 18). Reflecting on memory in the context of Creolised islands, he suggests that the island is only part of a wider identity for the islander in a hybridised world of transcultural and

transnational relations. Yet, this changing identity has not been adequately explained or recorded, leading the islander to look to the past to reclaim what has been lost (*ibid*). Such a framework will prove useful for the study of Mauritius, itself a creolised island and now subject to mass tourism. Mauritian communities look to the past to carve out a sense of identity within the plural ethnic landscape of their island country. The literature studied here demonstrates the link between Mauritius and an ancestral homeplace as a key marker of Mauritian creolised identity, most notably India.

1.4.2 The island in Mauritian fiction

Racault (2007: 19) identifies features of island imagery in older and contemporary European texts and texts by writers from the Indian Ocean region, which constitute symbolic values attributed to the island, and are usually employed in terms of opposing or contrasting physical qualities. Racault's analysis (outlining five principal island symbols which follow a certain chronology through the history of islands, particularly in a colonial and postcolonial context) is useful in showing how islands, and specifically the islands of the Indian Ocean, have been regarded by outsiders, and how the resultant island imagery in contemporary Mauritian and Reunionese literature is largely influenced by Eurocentric representations of islands constructed over the centuries. (2007: 13). Much like Hay (2006) and Baldaccino (2006), or indeed Rousseau, Racault's analysis shows that the island is regarded as a playground of possibilities for the present and future, and yet, a reminder of the origins of our history.

Ravi (2007) takes on board the literal and metaphorical imagery that Mauritius's geography presents to the writer in its isolation but also its interconnectedness to other landmasses through the same ocean that separates them. Ravi identifies a "cultural geography of insularity" and attempts to apply a geographical analogy to this island

society. However, she does not investigate this literal or metaphorical insularity in depth beyond this introduction, focusing more on the ethnic communities in Mauritius and how the intricacies of Mauritian identity, or identities, play out in Mauritian literature. Ravi regards ethnic communities (which she terms “ethnocultural spaces”) as islands within Mauritius’ island geography and therefore coins the term “ethnisle spaces” for the purpose of her study.

Lohka (2008) addresses the relationship between Ananda Devi’s writing and her island, in particular the resonance between character and environment in three of Devi’s novels, *Pagli*, *Soupir* et *La Vie de Joséphin le Fou*. Lohka employs Braidotti, (who argues that the subject is an ecological entity which has a symbiotic relationship with the environment), and Danserau (who considers that we have an “inscape” and a “landscape”) (2008: 149) and suggests that the internal and the external become one in Devi’s novels, to the extent that the character’s personality is derived from her environment. The female voice is entwined with that of her island environment and the elements. Lohka considers the island space as a mirror of the female character, and further, that it becomes a character in its own right. The interaction between character and island therefore establishes the identity of both the individual and her physical environment. Lohka’s analysis is useful when assessing the relationship between writer, character and place, and echoes the assertions made here in Chapter Three, namely that the female protagonist completely merges with her island environment. In Chapters Two and Three of this thesis we also see that the island environment itself can reflect the physical and emotional marginalisation of women within society. Indeed, the island’s claustrophobic nature can be regarded as exacerbating the postcolonial situation.

Tranquille (2000) has examined the island space in the Mauritian novel, but the choice of corpus (Devi, de Souza, Le Clézio and Humbert) is significantly different to the corpus of the present study, which includes a wider selection of writers and some of the more recent important novels published by Mauritian authors. While Tranquille does analyse the island space in Mauritian texts, her thesis puts forward an interpretation of the island through an intertextual reading of Le Clézio, Humbert, Devi and de Souza. The present study, on the other hand, considers the island in terms of a real space, an imagined space and in particular its link with memory in the representation of a unique Mauritian identity and includes the writers Nathacha Appanah, Lilian Berthelot, Shenaz Patel and Barlen Pyamootoo, in addition to the authors alluded to by Tranquille and other critics.

Lastly, a recent doctoral thesis by Poddar (2010) focuses on interstitial maritime sites (the beach, the port capital, the boat) in an exploration of the poetics of insularity and the island space. As in the present study (in Chapter Three in particular), Poddar highlights the destabilisation of the positive metaphor of the island in Mauritian writing, as well as the island paradox. Poddar's work differs from the present thesis, however, in that it focuses in particular on the dystopian and negative aspects of the island in Mauritian fiction. While the island is central to this thesis, this project also assesses it in terms of its link with memory, and in terms of a specific island memory and island identity.

1.4.3 Mauritius and the islands: Indian Ocean cultural memory

Researchers are increasingly examining islands such as Mauritius in a wider cultural context, towards an awareness of the island's place in a wider Indian Ocean geography, history and culture and recognising the islands of the Indian Ocean as a distinct sphere of influence or a defined place of origin. Mauritius, for example, is now regarded in terms of its relationship with other islands of the francophone Indian Ocean region (Hawkins, Racault, Marimoutou, or Magdelaine) and also with the Indian subcontinent (Ravi, Bragard, Magdelaine). In such studies, emphasis is placed on the region's hybridity, and on a shared history in the movement of peoples across the ocean, moving from continents to the islands.

Racault discusses the origins of literary representations of the Indian Ocean and more particularly with the birth and development of francophone literature of the Mascarene Islands (Réunion and Mauritius), as inspired by the travel writing of voyagers in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Firstly, he draws on history and in particular on memory, which he defines for the purpose of his study as: "la persistance consciente ou subliminale de structures mentales se perpétuant dans la très longue durée" (Racault, 2007: 7). Racault focuses on the continuity (rather than on separation) between the eras of exploration, colonisation, decolonisation and the emergence of new societies. Secondly, he applies a geographical and cultural perspective to an examination of the myths that link the island to the rest of the world. Racault shows the Indian Ocean as a site of multifaceted exchanges between different worlds: Europe, as the provenance of explorers and colonisers, Madagascar, as the main location of French colonial power in the region, and the smaller islands which become independent and constitute the real centre of the region.

Racault highlights the different ways of regarding the Other, noting how this was initially one-way, given that the Mascarene islands were uninhabited at the time of discovery. The first body of writing on the islands, by seafarers and colonial administrators, reflects writers' appreciation of the aesthetics of the island. Attempts at objectivity are, therefore, hampered by this tendency to engage in what Racault deems "une rêverie d'ailleurs qui nourrit les mythes et les utopies". A second phase, during which the islands were populated, led to a new distinct cultural personality in the islands, different from the *métropole* and characterised by métissage and créolisation. This would lead to the emergence of what was termed island literature ("une littérature insulaire"), an ambiguous term because this literature was written by outsiders as well as local writers and required a new type of analysis and definition. (2007: 8-9).

Racault recognises Bernardin de Saint-Pierre as the pioneer of how the island was viewed from within and how islanders looked back towards Europe. *Paul et Virginie* has since been subject to rewriting and re-interpretation, for example in the creolised version of Loys Masson's *Les Noces de la vanille* (Racault, 2007: 9). Racault is not alone in regarding Bernardin de Saint-Pierre as the founder of Mauritian literature. Many regard *Paul et Virginie* as having an enduring legacy in Mauritian literature and stress that most contemporary writers are heavily influenced by this work (Valaydon: 2001, for example). The novel tells the story of two children, Paul and Virginie, who are brought to the island of Mauritius after both their mothers leave France when one is widowed and the other abandoned by her lover. The two mothers decide to live near each other and raise their children together, along with their slaves. The children grow up in a tropical idyll, seemingly free from any corrupting influences and entirely in

harmony with nature. When they begin to fall in love, Virginie is brought back to France by a rich aunt who promises to provide her an education and make her an heir to a large fortune. On her return from France her ship begins to flounder just off the coast of Mauritius. Reluctant to remove her heavy European clothes in front of a male sailor, Virginie drowns. Paul then dies of a broken heart. It is a pastoral, romantic novel and richly descriptive of the island environment.

In choosing writers who have lived away from their place of origin, or those texts by European writers based in the Mascarene Islands, Racault emphasises the link between the Indian Ocean islands and Europe, thereby placing the Indian Ocean region within the sphere of European dominance. While it is valuable to examine the work of writers who live in Europe and “remember” Mauritius from a position of self-imposed exile, we must also consider how to incorporate other writers from Mauritius into Racault’s framework. We propose that it is also possible to explore myths, memory and insularity in relation to recently published novels by Mauritian writers, although they may focus almost exclusively on local life on the island. It will also be necessary to consider the links between Mauritius and the Indian subcontinent in order to assess the impact of India on contemporary Mauritian identity formation. This thesis, therefore, addresses the significance of India and the memory of the experience of indentured labour as represented in Mauritian novels.

Marimoutou (2008) argues that the island societies in the Indian Ocean region are founded on a deliberate forgetting of the notion of origins and yet also on a desire to return towards those origins in cultural practices. This is why memory is crucial to an appreciation of Mauritian literature. Marimoutou, therefore, underlines the process of

creolisation and its role in breaking with the past and looking towards a common future. He assesses the role of memory in literary texts from the region, regarding them as living texts, and underlines how the unique poetics of Indian Ocean regional literature, when coupled with the questioning of boundaries, allows authors to transcend nationality. However, Ranaivoson (2006), who also considers literature of the islands in their wider Indian Ocean context, notes that the cultural complexity of these islands has not been taken on board by collective memory, which prefers to rely on one particular identity to forge distinct forms of nationalism.

1.5 Memory

As this thesis considers the weight of Mauritian history and its bearing on contemporary novelists and their work, reference is made to memory, and in particular to how it is inscribed in fictional writing, becoming an integral part of the literary text. Memory is a significant aspect of narrative strategy and is thematically omnipresent in contemporary Mauritian literature. Theory related to memory studies, particularly memory in literature, is therefore given due attention in this thesis.

1.5.1 Memory in literature

As memory is used to help define a community's place within society, it becomes a marker of identity and a divisive force in a pluralistic country such as Mauritius. The work of theorists of memory and memory in literature is pertinent to this study. Warnock (1987) on the workings of memory, Sheringham (1993) on autobiography and memory, Robin (1989), Rigney (2005), Aleida Assmann (in Rigney, 2005), Jan Assman (1992) and Halbwachs (1992, 1994) amongst others, have made valuable contributions to this field and are considered here for the significance of their work on memory in fiction.

In an approach using literature as a valuable resource for the neuroscientific study of memory, Nalbantian (2003) asserts that authors, their characters, imagery and artistic qualities reveal to the reader and critic the workings of memory, that the “literature of memory” has much to offer the study of episodic memory.⁷ In turn, literary criticism can learn from scientific research into memory’s link with human behaviour as illustrated by the images in the literary texts. Nalbantian’s work pertains to Rousseau, Proust and more recent writers such as Woolf, Joyce or Faulkner and provides useful insights into how personal memory is articulated in literary texts. “Sites of memory” (Nora’s *lieux de mémoire*) refer to actual or imagined places or objects that store memories and can be accessed by visitors willing to remember the significance of the events or people to which they refer. We see the island as a physical site of memory in the work of Le Clézio in Chapter Four.

Collective memory can refer to the ability of a group to remember people or events from the past, or can refer to the important events that have shaped its political and social history. Referring to the collective nature of memory and identity, Halbwachs (trans. 1992) notes that because recollections depend on others they are reinforced by the framework of society’s memory. Jan Assman (1992) examines the concept of “cultural memory”, whereby societies preserve collective knowledge from one generation to the next, thereby allowing successive generations to construct their cultural identities. Through references to the past they forge a consciousness of shared history. According to Rigney (2005) Jan Assman’s cultural memory theory refers to a

⁷ Episodic memory refers to our unique personal memory of autobiographical events, a collection of specific personal experiences that can be explicitly articulated.

longer-term practice than Halbwach's notion of collective memory. Rigney also highlights the representative nature of cultural memory; it reflects representations of the past and not merely actual lived experiences. Cultural memory is less internal than external; it allows for negotiation and transfer between groups. Literature and art, Rigney asserts, are possible mediators between communities, because they are essentially transnational (2005: 26).

1.5.2 Memory in Mauritian fiction

Mauritian authors demonstrate a keen awareness of the reliance on memory that forms the basis of identity for various groups in Mauritian society. In many Mauritian novels published since 1979, by Humbert, de Souza, or Appanah for example, the scene is set in the past, showing a desire to investigate and reconcile their country's difficult history. Some novels present the reader with protagonists that cling to their past at all costs as a means of reinforcing a sense of self in a pluralistic state. Other novels highlight the migrant experience of the ancestors of today's Mauritians. Others still set their action against the backdrop of key events in Mauritian history.

Magdelaine has contributed significant and stimulating articles to the area of memory in fiction from Mauritius and Reunion, as well as the French and Francophone Caribbean region. Magdelaine (2006) considers the importance of the ancestor and lineage in the Mauritian and Reunionese novel. The representation of ancestry and lineage can often be interpreted as a return to the myth of purity of origins or used as a method of ethnic exclusion. Conversely, contemporary texts by Mauritian writers seem to be informed by a sense of creolisation, according to Magdelaine. This may represent a break with pathological memory and a move towards the building of a new memory

for the future. Creolisation, in this case, concerns a process of constant renewal and evolution, whilst allowing for an acceptance of history's role (Magdeleine, 2006: 211).

Magdelaine (2008) later examines how the slave trade is represented in Mauritian and Reunionese novels, and in particular, the echoes of slavery in representations of other mass migrations to Mauritius (indentured labour from India, the deportation of the Chagossians, the voluntary immigration of Chinese), noting that in Mauritian texts an original event is relived through the repetition of a tragedy of history in different eras and different locations. Magdeleine argues that the image of the ocean crossing is powerful enough to eclipse the very realities of each experience, and concludes that acknowledgement of the suffering caused by slavery and the study of this schema of victimhood, can allow for a clear re-reading of origins and a shared founding memory. However she acknowledges that such an analysis may also reveal the difficulty in applying a conclusive postcolonial reading that relies less on the study of origins by placing more emphasis on creolisation.

Magdelaine (2006) also considers representations of India in a comparative study of Caribbean and Indian Ocean francophone novels about indentured labourers. Referring briefly to Mauritius she examines how India and the period of indentured labour in Mauritius are represented in Appanah's *Les Rochers de Poudre d'Or*⁸. How Mauritius differs from other Creole islands in relation to its memory of India is also outlined. Because Mauritius has maintained close ties to the Asian sub-continent, its writers should, as a result, be capable of creating realistic representations of India in their work.

⁸ Nathacha Appanah's *Les Rochers de Poudre d'Or* (2006) follows the contrasting stories of indentured labourers who leave India for Mauritius, exploring their motivations for leaving, their experience of the ocean crossing on board the Atlas ship and their fortunes in the colony.

Magdelaine argues, however, that some novels evoking India reveal that local authors tend to rely on similar clichéd imagery of India as non-local writers (2006: 210). Therefore, difficulties remain in how to represent the real India, and in the absence of such realistic representations, myths and distortions become the norm and can actually contribute to reinforcing an Orientalist view of India, in which that country itself becomes a mythical place (Magdeleine, 2006: 218). We see, therefore, how such historical narratives can be regarded as part of a process of cultural memory in how they are essentially performative and negotiated.

While Mauritian literature is predominantly francophone, Franco-Mauritians are no longer the dominant force in literature and the arts. Contemporary Mauritian literature draws on other non-European influences, mainly from Indian and African literary traditions (2007: 10). Even in cases when the literature from these islands looks to free itself from the European gaze and to divert from the literary norms of the *métropole* by adopting an island-centred viewpoint, it is still inspired by the travel writings of recent centuries or of even older typical representations according to Racault (2007: 17). In choosing writers who spent periods of time living in exile from their place of origin, or those texts based in the Mascarene Islands by European writers, Racault emphasises the Indian Ocean's link with Europe. How then do we incorporate recent writers into Racault's framework? Is it possible to examine myths, memory and insularity in relation to recently published novels by Mauritian writers most of whom make almost no mention of life outside Mauritius and focus almost exclusively on local life? This thesis argues that it is possible and indeed desirable to do so.

Ranaivoson (2006) acknowledges that literature borrows those elements it needs from history, in order to reclaim roots, legitimacy and forgotten identities, and uses historical events in a creative or fantasist way. Like Marimoutou (2008), Ranaivoson highlights literature's role in cultural memory and addressing gaps in real historical sources. Certain works transform oral history into literature by making public the elements of history inherited by contemporary societies but not regarded as "official" history. Novels such as *Les Rochers de Poudre d'Or* or *Le Silence des Chagos*, in the case of Mauritius, question the prevailing certainties of identity in narrative, according to Ranaivoson, who underlines the reader's need to exercise objectivity when reading such fiction, noting that such novels are not legitimate historical documents and actually call into question the legitimacy of historical fact. Ranaivoson therefore highlights fiction's function as a commentary on the official version of historical events.

Memory is itself a recurring theme in contemporary Mauritian novels in French. Bragard (2001) regards Ananda Devi's novels *Le voile de Draupadi* (1993) and *L'arbre fouet* (1997) as allegories of memory, drawing parallels between the position of Indo-Mauritian women in society and the exile of their ancestors. For Bragard, Devi's novels show that individual and body memory are an extension of community and family memory. The quest for the past is significant, but extricating oneself from the past can be liberating, especially for the female characters who are isolated by patriarchal rules and gender roles. Bragard (2008) also examines Patel's *Le Silence des Chagos* in terms of memory, and identifies a significant metaphor for memory in the shape of the ship that carries the deported islanders to Mauritius.

Indian heritage is significant in the representations of memory in Mauritian literary texts. The Indian diaspora of indentured labour in literature is examined by Mehta *et al* (2010). Ravi assesses national and postnational identities in Mauritius, suggesting that de Souza, Pyamootoo and Appanah subvert nationalist narratives and hint at a dual identity of both distinctiveness and unity. Mehta (2010) examines memory in relation to Pyamootoo's *Bénarès*, both the novel and the film, in which connections are made between India and its diaspora through the Mauritian town bearing the same name as holy city of Bénarès in India. Bragard (2010) compares representations of the *kala pani*, (the "black waters" of the ocean, in the Hindu belief system) in Mauritian literature with those of Caribbean texts and notes that in both cases rewriting the ocean crossing has been a necessary step in the consolidation of Creole cultures in both regions.

1.6 Conclusion

Mauritian literature is at present the subject of increased interest from readers, literary critics and scholars of francophone and postcolonial literatures. This chapter has indicated that, while some key thematic and theoretical aspects of this thesis are researched by other scholars in the field, the central focus of the thesis, that in Mauritian literature there exists a specific island memory, a unique interplay between memory and the island space, has not yet received due attention elsewhere.

With the above analysis of existing research, this chapter has identified the key theoretical areas on which the thesis is based, such as postcolonialism and francophone literature, memory in literature, representations of place, and islandness. We have seen how Mauritian literature has a problematic relationship with French and francophone writing, and in particular, how insufficient and reductive the term "francophone" is

when applied to a dynamic body of work by such diverse writers who happen to use the same language as the vehicle for their literary expression.

It has been shown that Mauritian writing has become progressively more important in scholarship on contemporary francophone and postcolonial studies by scholars in the Indian Ocean region, in France or in Britain and the USA. Since 2000 alone, a wealth of articles has been published on Mauritian literature and conferences dedicated to this small island's literary value have taken place. This thesis is situated within such recent discourse on Mauritian writing and will add to the understanding of its importance and impact in terms of world literatures in French.

**CHAPTER TWO - INSULARITY, TOPOGRAPHY AND LOCATION IN
MAURITIAN ISLAND NARRATIVES**

2.1 Introduction

This chapter explores the effect of the island environment on writers of fiction and on their protagonists. It examines how the island's topography (its surface features, both natural and man-made) and location are defining elements of contemporary Mauritian literature. The island features as décor or as a conduit for representations of Mauritian society and history, while facilitating character development. In these novels, or "island narratives"⁹, the island is evoked in terms of its defining geographical features, which provide a dramatic spatial backdrop for the developing plot. We examine how contemporary Mauritian novels in French emphasise the stifling island environment and its effects on behaviour as well as its role in identity construction. The island's topography is associated with imprisonment, due to its mountainous landscape, dense undergrowth and geographical isolation. Within this island-prison are postcolonial urban enclosures that simmer and echo with noise, violence and scenes of deprivation, such as the shantytowns of Port Louis¹⁰ or the busy outlying towns which are contrasted with the Mauritian countryside. Islanders also look outward and consider their place in relation to outlying islands or faraway continents. The postcolonial island of Mauritius is an island on the periphery of its former imperial centres in Europe, or other larger or important former colonies, such as India, Australia or Canada. Yet, Mauritius can also conceivably be considered as the centre to another island's peripheral situation, and furthermore, in a significant reworking of the postcolonial centre-periphery relationship, the centre to the ancestral homeland or *métropole*, which becomes peripheral. This centre/margin duality is therefore a striking element of Mauritian island identity expressed in the contemporary novel.

⁹ "Island narratives" is a term that designates literature based on islands or inspired by islands, as opposed to the term "narratives of the island", which concerns theoretical and critical writing about island narratives (Garuba, 2001: 64-65).

¹⁰ Note the difference between English (Port Louis) and French (Port-Louis) forms.

2.2 Topography and location

Mauritius is a small island (45 kilometres wide and 65 kilometres long) situated in the Indian Ocean, with an area of approximately 1865 kilometres squared with 330 kilometres of coastline. It covers a total area of 2040 kilometres squared when its other island territories are taken into account.¹¹ Mauritius is located to the south east of the Seychelles islands, approximately 800 kilometres east of Madagascar and 2000 kilometres off the south-east coast of Africa. The state of Mauritius comprises the island of Mauritius and also the outlying island territories of Rodrigues, Saint-Brandon (also known as the Cargados Carajos Archipelago), Agalega and Tromelin. Mauritius also claims sovereignty over the Chagos islands, which are situated approximately 2000 kilometres to the northeast. The island of Réunion, a French *département* and the third island with Mauritius and Rodrigues of the Mascarene Islands, is approximately 225 kilometres to the southwest.

The capital of Mauritius, Port Louis, is located in the northwest coast of the island. Port Louis, the main harbour and the only commercial port in Mauritius, is also an important financial centre. Port Louis is a busy city and the largest on the island, with a population of approximately 150,000. The city is enclosed by the Port Louis Moka mountain range, and covers an area of approximately 6.3 kilometres squared.

Mauritius has a diverse landscape. It is a volcanic island and sheltered by coral reefs, which provide a natural barrier in the north and east of the island's coastline in particular. The western and southern coastlines are more vulnerable to the elements, as

¹¹ (www.commonwealth.org) Note: these figures vary slightly by some kilometres depending on the source.

they lack the protection of lagoons and reefs. The island's landscape is marked by its volcanic origins, with mountains, broad fertile plains and the central plateau. For example, Grand Bassin and Beau Bassin, the two natural lakes on the island, were formed in the craters of extinct volcanoes. The mountain ranges, including the largest, the Port Louis Moka range, ring around the central plateau, which is home to valleys, gorges, rivers and waterfalls. There is dense vegetation in parts of the island, and much of the land is planted with tea and sugar cane, the latter of which constitutes one of the most vital exports for the country's economy.

Much of Mauritius's flora was introduced from Africa, Asia and Madagascar by successive Dutch, French and British settlers. While there is a high level of endemism in Mauritius, thought to be amongst the highest in the world, many of the most recognisable flora on the island are not endemic but were brought to the island by the settlers. The coastal casuarina trees or *filas* are a prominent feature of Mauritius's coastline and were introduced by the French in the late eighteenth century. The *badamier* and the *flamboyant*, or flametree, are originally from India. Other non-native plants and trees include pine, eucalyptus, acaia, Chinese Guava, African tulip, coconut palm, bougainvillea, bauhinia, jacaranda and anthurium. That so many flora were introduced to Mauritius by successive visitors and settlers to the island serves to underline the man-made quality of the island which had no indigenous population before the first attempted settlement by the Dutch in 1638. Mauritius today bears little resemblance to the island that was almost entirely covered in ebony forests when it was first settled. Only approximately one percent of the original forests remain. Today, forest covers approximately 18% of the surface area. Sugar cane fields cover between 40% and 45% of Mauritius' surface area and account for approximately 90% of the

island's arable land. Mauritius has a tropical climate and is prone to cyclones from November to April.

In a geopolitical context, Mauritius is invariably regarded as either African or Asian, the former because of its relative proximity to the African continent, the latter due to the island's location in the Indian Ocean and to its Indian heritage. Research on Mauritian culture and literature usually situates Mauritius within Africa or Asia. Islands of the Indian Ocean are frequently regarded as African; even basic internet searches will show Mauritius or Réunion grouped together under an African heading. Hybridity and ambiguity can therefore be perceived even at physical, geographical and political levels. Mauritius does not belong to any one continent, however, in spite of the perception that it is either African or Asian. Its geographical location in the Indian Ocean suggests that the island ought to belong to India or Southern Asia, whilst its proximity to Africa helps justify claims of the island being African. The island's ambiguous sense of belonging becomes problematic when categorising its writers, especially by non-Mauritian publishers. In the Éditions Gallimard's "Continents Noirs" collection, the Mauritian novelists Nathacha Appanah, Ananda Devi and Amal Sewtohul, and the Reunionese writer Pascal Benjamin, are categorised as African, and listed alongside writers from Congo, Gabon, and Mali.¹² However, the *Notre Librairie* journal, which focuses on literatures and cultures of francophone areas of Africa and the Indian Ocean, distinguishes between the different francophone zones of *Maghreb*, *Afrique noire*, and *Océan Indien* in its "Littératures du Sud" collection, thereby recognising the Indian Ocean region as a distinct entity within the French-speaking world. This editorial decision reveals an understanding of the differences and contrasts

¹² See: http://www.gallimard.fr/collections/continents_noirs.htm (Accessed 01/02/09)

between these francophone areas and expresses the publisher's willingness to engage with writers from the regions in question.

2.3 Writing place: the island's influence on island writers

Islands are fascinating geographical spaces, having provided inspiration to artists, writers, explorers and adventurers for centuries. They are frequently regarded as timeless places, unchanged by outsiders or visitors. Hay (2006: 31-32) notes that the characteristics of place are reduced and refined in islands. He underlines the need for the theory of place to be incorporated into the study of islands, acknowledging that place is a problematic and ideologically coded notion. The human body is often regarded as the site of place and transportable in the process of change. In this view, the meaning of place is removed from its connotation of "terra firma". Others view place as a specific type of physical space and a geographical terrain appropriated by the individual. Others again (such as Harvey, 1996) see place defined by the collective activity of its people through time. Hay (2006) suggests that place retains integrity if it remains constant throughout time and is regarded as the site of collective memory.

Furthermore, Péron holds that island identity is informed by and constructed through an awareness of being from a unique place. The island is the unifying element of such an identity; this is particularly true in our contemporary globalised world, in spite of differences between communities:

Island communities still have a sort of "monolithic" approach to their identity, based on belonging to a unique, inherited territory that they share in common. This highly developed sense of identity and pride in being different because of a distinctive place and culture is all the more acute now because many communities are becoming aware of a very real threat to their existence (Péron, 2004: 331).

This thesis argues that the island is a key defining element of contemporary Mauritian identity and a step towards the construction of an Indian Ocean identity, as reflected in

its literature. Péron's theory on the monolithic aspect of island identity is relevant to the case of Mauritius, where the unifying element of contemporary national identity is an attachment to the island.

The island can also be regarded as a cultural object. Cultural objects are objects of historical, architectural or archaeological interest, part of the cultural heritage of a place or of a people, usually art, artifacts, monuments, institutions. Culture is often described as a set of cultural objects, items that can be catalogued. Such objects do not have to be tangible; they can also be symbols, such as the island as imagined in literature. Péron argues that it is the:

[...] link between the constraints inherent in island geography and the construction of the island as cultural object that explains one of the reasons for the fascination that islands exercise on the modern mind (Péron, 2004: 334).

The island is at once a tangible place that shows evidence of the past in that it has been shaped and affected by both man and nature, and a symbolic place in the manner in which it is regarded and represented in culture. For many, the island has become a symbol of a certain way of life. For visitors it can embody otherness and freedom to create anew (as per Hay 2006); for the islander, however, it is often representative of constraints and limits, as we see in many of the narratives under discussion hereafter. According to Brinklow *et al* (2009), islands can be regarded as an essential part of the narrative's setting, of the writer's background or the imagination of the reader. Islands are shown to be definable entities, and spaces ideally framed as a microcosm for the projection of utopian or dystopian ideals.

Contemporary Mauritian novelists do not merely utilise the island environment as an attractive backdrop or a secondary element to plot. Rather, the island origins of the author are at the very core of expression (of metaphor and syntax, for example) and

perception. The island is omnipresent in such narratives, with abundant references to the sea and the distinct topography of the island space using geographical imagery and parallels drawn between character and place in island metaphors. Explicit references to “l’île”, “mon île”, “l’île berceau”, “l’île mère”, amongst others, pepper these island narratives. Place is explicitly evoked in terms of the island, rather than in terms of country, land or state.

The home-place is so culturally, historically and physically specific that the island space impregnates Mauritian narratives, both as a desirable place and a negative space. The variety of such representations from the islander perspective underpins the complexity of what the island actually represents to island writers. Such novelists do not adhere to simplistic dichotomies hitherto underlined by literary criticism of the island in literature, such as the island as paradise or hell. Their island is considered in a variety of meanings, taking account of its many complexities, and not simply in terms of one representation in opposition to another. For a writer born or living on an island, it has a deep-seated bearing on their world view, as the Mauritian journalist and author, Shenaz Patel¹³, explains:

Moi, je sais que je n’ai pas de problème qu’on m’appelle une écrivaine mauricienne. Parce que je sais que ce que j’ai vécu à Maurice, ça suit mon regard, et mon rapport au monde. Je pense par exemple que je n’ai pas le même rapport à la lumière, à l’espace que si j’avais vécu en Islande ou en Russie [...] même si je ne raconte pas Maurice, même si je raconte autre chose, le choix, même la façon de le percevoir, est conditionnée par mon regard, par cette luminosité-là, par ces couleurs-là, par cette sonorité-là [...] (Patel Jul 2007).

¹³ Born on July 29, 1966, Shenaz Patel is a Mauritian journalist, novelist, short story writer and playwright. Her novels are written in French and she has also written short stories in French and Mauritian Creole. Her novels *Le Portrait Chamarel* (2002) and *Le Silence des Chagos* (2005) are part of our corpus. She has also written *Sensitive* (2003) and in 2014 she published a novella, *Paradis Blues*.

Patel speaks of the importance of surroundings in the development of an author's literary representation of the world. According to Patel, the writer is influenced by light, colour and sound; perception is forever influenced by home, as its impressions are internalised and form part of the writer's being, whatever the setting or subject matter. Referring to both nationality and gender, Patel emphasises how writers are conditioned by their environment but also by cultural and social norms:

Le fait d'être une femme à Maurice conditionne mon rapport à l'espace ou à la nuit. Par exemple, je ne parle pas de la nuit de la même façon qu'un homme qui vit en France. Ici les femmes ne marchent pas seules ; elles marchent pas seules dans la rue la nuit. Mon rapport à la nuit est aussi conditionné par ça (Patel Jul 2007).

The subject matter in her novels and her very use of language are therefore influenced by her lived experience and culture.

Descriptions of the island's geography, and the frequent references to its natural environment serve to reflect the immediacy and closeness of the protagonist to his or her island space. Joubert comments on the relationship between island and inhabitant and believes that an awareness of nature and identification with the island space are characteristic of island cultures:

Dans les îles il n'y a pas de disjonction entre culture et nature: la culture est naturelle et on vit en harmonie avec les arbres, l'herbe, la mer etc... Les insulaires sont fils de leurs îles, il y a un rapport charnel entre eux et leur vraie mère, l'île : cette imagine maternelle très complexe entre l'île et ses enfants (Joubert, cited in Prosper, 1993).

Joubert's reflections on island identity refer to a profound visceral attachment between island, writer and protagonist, and in particular, a keen knowledge and awareness on the part of the islander of the environment that makes the island unique. While Joubert's comments appear to romanticise islands and perhaps over-simplify the relationship between islander and island, contemporary Mauritian island narratives show this analysis to be valid in that they highlight the physical closeness between inhabitant and

place. The word “charnel” is particularly relevant to the discussion of islands in literature. The island is conceived in the citation above as a Mother figure, a frequent image used to evoke the island as a sensual and physical presence, and discussed in more detail in Chapter Four, in which figurative interpretations of the island in Mauritian fiction are examined.

In our interview Carl De Souza reiterates the physicality of the relationship between island and islander.¹⁴ He acknowledges the deep attachment he has to his island, yet warns against romanticisation, which he regards as an obstacle to clarity of perception, thought and representation of truth:

Je suis profondément rattaché à ce lieu, l’île. [...] un fort attachement à la plage, à la mer, qui n’est pas mal je veux dire, mais qui peut aussi bloquer la pensée, dans un certain sens parce que l’attachement à un lieu c’est un peu romancé (de Souza Jul 2007).

De Souza also acknowledges that while place is undoubtedly important in his novels, he places more value on characters and events: “Le lieu est important dans la mesure où il est porteur, il emballe l’événement mais il n’est que l’emballage de l’événement. C’est plutôt les gens, que le lieu, finalement [...]” (de Souza Jul 07). De Souza’s work therefore concentrates on the reality of inhabitants’ lived experience. The island, as décor, will inevitably frame the action, but not necessarily become a conduit for the narrative or character development. While the author explicitly states his preference to avoid romantic representations of the island, he does nonetheless acknowledge that

¹⁴ Carl de Souza was born in Mauritius on March 4, 1949. He had a peripatetic childhood which he credits with having to come in contact with Mauritians of different cultural backgrounds. He studied for a BSc in Biology in the UK and later returned to Mauritius to become a teacher. An accomplished badminton player, he represented his country at international level and later became manager of the national team. An avid reader of fiction in English, he nonetheless prefers to write in the French language. He has published five novels: *Le Sang de l’Anglais* (1993), *La Maison qui marchait vers le large* (1996), *Les jours Kaya* (2000), *Ceux qu’on jette à la mer* (2001) and most recently, *En chute libre* (2012).

many diverse representations of the island exist. In fact, de Souza reveals layer after layer of significance behind the physical manifestation of space:

[...] je crois qu'une des choses que j'ai faites, et j'en suis assez heureux, c'est d'avoir un petit peu d'un lieu et donner un autre sens au paysage mauricien. Je dirais la mer, oui, mais la mer a un autre sens. Les champs de canne, oui, mais les champs de canne représentent peut-être un enfermement plutôt qu'un espace. Les maisons coloniales, certainement, mais il y a des maisons coloniales qui sont à la fois le rêve mais la prison. C'est un lieu extrêmement enfermé (de Souza Jul 2007).

For de Souza the island is, above all, an enclosed space. He regards the island more in terms of an unforgiving and hostile environment than a pleasant landscape for the islander or a beautiful destination for the visitor.

Ananda Devi¹⁵ acknowledges that the island is a source of inspiration for the writer. During the writing process the local becomes universal, which is a concept with some resonance with theories of the island as microcosm (which will be investigated further in the following chapter). Devi raises the issue of the possible representations of the island as a real or imagined space:

C'est la présence de l'île en moi qui me pousse à écrire - mais c'est l'île rêvée dont je parle toujours, l'île mystique qui a enveloppé et guidé mes débuts d'écrivain. Là-dessus sont venues se greffer les histoires à proprement parler, la société telle qu'elle était ou telle que je la voyais, et les personnages sont venus habiter cette île en porte-à-faux de la vraie en créant l'illusion que je racontais le pays véritable, mais de plus en plus, je sais que cela n'est pas tout à fait vrai. A partir d'un lieu véritable, au nom inspirateur, je tente de toucher à des préoccupations ou à des hantises universelles.¹⁶

¹⁵ Translator, anthropologist and prize-winning author, the Mauritian writer Ananda Devi was born in Mauritius on 23 March 1957 and began writing seriously from the age of 15. She studied for a doctorate in anthropology in London. A prolific writer of short stories and novels, she has lived in Switzerland for many years but Mauritius remains the focus of her fiction. Devi is the author of the novels *Rue la Poudrière* (1989), *Le Voile de Draupadi* (1993), *L'Arbre fouet* (1997) *Moi, l'interdite*. (2000) *Pagli* (2001) *Soupir* (2002), *La Vie de Joséphin le fou* (2003), *Ève de ses décombres* (2006), *Indian Tango* (2007) *Le Sari vert* (2009) and *Les jours vivants* (2013), five of which are part of our corpus.

¹⁶ Interview with Ananda Devi "L'écriture est le monde, elle est le chemin et le but", www.indereunion.net/actu/ananda/intervad.htm, (Accessed 27/03/07)

Devi's novels combine the real and the imaginary using real details to add authenticity, giving semblance of a narrative anchored in reality, such as references to the Hollanda cyclone or Port Mathurin in *Soupir*. Devi's corpus reveals a negative view of the island, which is frequently painted as an unforgiving environment in which the very worst aspects of humanity are played out. Devi may believe the island to be a mystical place that inspires the writer (and mysticism is evident in some of Devi's works such as *Le voile de Draupadi*, *Ève de ses décombres*, *Moi l'interdite* and *Pagli*), but ultimately Mauritius is represented as a problematic place, a difficult society in which to live, in particular for women from marginalised and impoverished communities. Where the island itself is not shown as a mystical place, we observe the individual characters' mystical experiences. When mysticism is present in the island, it is seen through a protagonist's own awareness of the sea and its power to soothe, destroy or isolate, such as in the conclusion of *Le Voile de Draupadi*, which is also discussed in the following chapter. Often, Devi's dystopian vision of the island is embodied in the postcolonial urban space which is represented as an unforgiving environment, especially for its female inhabitants.

As we see in the following chapter, in many Mauritian novels, the central protagonist identifies with the island topos, or regards the island itself in terms of its human qualities. Echoing Joubert's earlier analysis, Lohka (2008) goes further still in emphasising the link between character and island environment in Devi's novels, suggesting that Devi's narratives move beyond mere personification of the island towards representations of characters as an extension of their island environment (Lohka, 2008: 151). She asserts that the island character is derived from her environment to such an extent that the internal and external merge to become one. For

example, Pagli, the eponymous heroine of Devi's 2001 novel, will later become part of the earth, revelling in her otherness (Lohka: 153). Another example is Noella, in *Soupir*. Already physically disabled and then subjected to terrible acts of violence, she appears to merge with the island's earth.

Brinklow *et al* (2009) contend that some island texts figure the island as a site conducive to self-exploration, making its ancient history and its future a part of the self in a type of internalising process. Writing therefore results in the creation of a space capable of expression and acceptance of hopes and fears. Patel, for example, suggests that writing is synonymous with crossing a border in the mind. The sense of enclosure and imprisonment is not only an essential element of the work of island writers, but constitutes the source of motivation for literary creative activity, as Patel acknowledges in interview:

Je crois que l'enfermement est toujours là... Il est dans chacun de nous...l'écriture est toujours une réaction...un échappement à un enfermement, peu importe si cet enfermement est géographique ou plus largement humain. Je ne sais pas. Je n'ai pas l'impression qu'il y ait plus d'écrivains dans les îles qu'ailleurs. Peut-être que l'urgence est plus forte. L'écriture est perçue comme un moyen de transgresser aussi cette frontière-là [...]. Je crois que la littérature c'est une volonté de transgresser, et d'échapper (Patel Jul 2007).

Because writing is a solitary pursuit entailing separation from others and periods of loneliness, the writer can empathise with the literal and metaphorical separation associated with the island. According to Devi, there are more profound parallels between writer and island, as she notes in an interview:

On vit vraiment dans un lieu, dans sa tête. C'est un travail où on est seule mais où on est en contact avec ses personnages. D'une certaine manière l'écrivain est l'île. Il y a des personnages qui vivent sur cette île. C'est vrai que... c'est très profond (Devi Jun 2007).

However, other writers place less emphasis on the link between the island and the act of writing. Lilian Berthelot, who acknowledges the island as a source of inspiration for writers and artists, nonetheless expresses reservations about correlations between writer

and place: “[...] je crois que cette notion est un peu artificielle” (Berthelot Jun 2007).¹⁷

Devi, however, acknowledges that home remains a source of inspiration and is carried with the writer throughout his or her life. Yet, like de Souza, Devi notes that writers risk compromising objectivity when writing about their home place:

On a des lieux très forts en soi. On ne peut pas écrire avec un grand détachement d’où on vient. Tout sort de là au plus profond...île Maurice, ça reste cet ancrage, cette inspiration (Devi Jun 2007).

To conclude, the island provides inspiration to Mauritian writers to differing degrees and in different ways: as mere artistic inspiration, as setting and décor, as indissociable from the narrator and protagonist, and as an effective narrative strategy which inspires metaphor and influences character development.

2.4 Boundaries and insularity in Mauritian fiction

Rural and urban spaces reflect the unforgiving nature of the geographically isolated, small postcolonial island of Mauritius. The island, due to its visible boundaries and limited space, provides the writer with an intense and sometimes claustrophobic environment in which to develop narrative and characterisation. The coastline, the visible edge of the island, leads to an awareness of boundaries and a sense of containment. According to Hay (2006) this containment, or isolation, makes the island population, or the visitor to the island, conscious of limits and boundaries. The imagination is shaped by geographical surroundings. Personal experience of living on the island therefore shapes an individual’s sense of self. A sense of shared isolation

¹⁷ Historian, trade unionist and writer, Lilian Berthelot was born in Mauritius. Berthelot studied at Sciences Po in Paris and returned to establish what would become a varied career in Mauritius, working in the statistics office, becoming involved in the trade unions eventually leading the Mauritius Labour Congress and then the sugar producers’ union. She also worked for the American Embassy in Mauritius. She wrote many short stories, local histories and the novels *L’Outre-Mère, ou les eaux de Mériba* (1996) *Le Désamour* (2004) and *Aujourd’hier* (2009). Lilian Berthelot died on 16 August 2012.

reinforces the feeling of difference and becomes a source of pride and resilience (2006: 34). However, the dominant representation of the island relates to elements of the so-called “island paradox”, the duality that embodies the island, for example that islands both separate and unite.

Hay (2006: 34) argues that islands are unique or special places because their characteristics of space, place and culture are magnified in a smaller landmass surrounded by water, as compared to a continent, and are therefore easier to articulate and defend. There is no single meaning of island place, however. Indeed, island life is full of conflicting experiences. It may be defined in terms of geographical space as a specific physical entity, when the edge of the island is seen as the natural boundary. Hay acknowledges that scholars who stress the existence of the visible edge of the island emphasise the resultant sense of containment as an essential component in the construction of island identity and that islanders are united in their shared sense of isolation. According to Hay, some commentators disagree that this isolation is a defining feature of the island experience and prefer to see the boundary as a representation of possibility or uncertainty, while others see it as an in-between space. Hay prefers to stress the connectedness of islands, suggesting that boundaries are liable to transgression. He asks whether “islandness” is a state of physical isolation or of personal disconnection. The literary island metaphor is normally one of disconnection, according to Hay (2006). In fact, in the contemporary Mauritian novel, the sea, the visible boundary of the island space, is portrayed both as an agent of exile, of disconnection and also as a source of comfort and of belonging for the protagonists. Such representation reinforces the notion of the island paradox: the island is a site of both belonging and exile depending on how the “border” is interpreted. The term

“insularity” pertains to being from a country or territory constituted of an island or many islands. It can also relate to the social, cultural or economic nature of islands themselves. Yet, the term also relates to a person’s tendency to isolate him or herself. “Islandness” is the fact of being from an island, or relates to, as Hay suggests, either or both a state of physical isolation or of personal disconnection. In some contexts, “islandness” can therefore be considered a synonym for “insularity”.

Islandness is, nevertheless, more than a simple representation of isolation, just as isolation is not the sole defining characteristic of islandness. This point is even more interesting in the context of the French language, which has no translation for “islandness”, other than *insularité*, which also means “isolation”. A solution proffered by Péron is *iléité*. See Péron, F. (2004). Rather than conceptualising islands as separate entities, they might be considered integral to continents. For example, Hay suggests that the term “connectedness” may be more appropriate, since outside influences are inevitable, and these influences connect the island to the outside world. If we see boundaries as penetrable, then we imply that both islanders and outsiders feel compelled to explore the island space. The surrounding ocean also has an important function in connecting the island to other islands, that is, the ocean is an agent of both isolation and connection. Islands in a large ocean space facilitate, rather than hinder, cultural exchange (Hay 2006: 22-23). Also related to the concept of connectedness is the notion that islands are connected to mainlands under the sea, and so they are not, in effect, separate entities at all. Racault also considers islands in relation to other spaces, and he emphasises in particular, the link between the island and the continent. He asserts that all discourse on the island has its roots in the island-continent dialectic (1995: 13). Because islands have varied terrain, and due to the wealth of sites and

cultures compressed within a small space, the island is often considered a microcosm of society:

[...] le motif de l'île déserte condense ces deux polarités antagonistes (paradis, enfer). Il focalise un désir, celui d'une souveraineté sans partage et d'un retour à la pureté des origines que l'ordre contraignant d'une existence continentale immergée dans l'histoire ne peut pas satisfaire (Racault 1995: 12).

Certainly, the very word “microcosm” is frequently used in reference to Mauritius and usually in relation to its pluri-ethnic society with origins from different continents. From Rousseau's *Rêveries du promeneur solitaire*, Racault suggests that “L'île elle-même [...] constitue une projection microcosmique de l'univers entier. Espace infime, mais autosuffisant, elle condense en elle toute la variété du monde devenue pensable et classable” (1995: 12). Racault also suggests that an island is marked out as “Other” because it is an easily-defined different space, a landmass with clearly-defined borders. This otherness, as featured in tourist brochures, is the desired condition of continentals who wish to inhabit the smaller island space (1995: 10). When conceived of thusly, the boundary may come to define the island in both a physical and metaphorical sense.

Patel notes that islands and continents relate to the notion of boundaries differently; the notion of personal space is particularly important in small island societies, the limited spaces of which tend to amplify the differences and tensions between inhabitants:

Dans les grands espaces, en Europe...on prend un train, et nous ici, on n'a pas cette possibilité. Donc l'espace... ça nous enferme, c'est assez violent. [...] Et le fait même de séparation géographique... dès le départ il y a la notion de champs gardé [...] Je pense cette question se pose dans les petites sociétés. Mais ici ça prend une ampleur...ça résonne, et ça étouffe (Patel Jul 2007).

Patel echoes Péron in highlighting the suffocating nature of small island societies and the resultant difficulty in finding and asserting one's place in relation to others:

[...] ici c'est un peu exacerbé de par la petitesse et le fait que bon, c'est petit mais ça prend une résonance. C'est ça un problème dans toutes les petites sociétés, les petites îles. De trouver sa place devant les autres, en dépit des autres ou avec les autres [...] L'espace insulaire concentre,

en fait, la difficulté qui se pose à toute personne qui veut trouver son espace par rapport aux autres (Patel Jul 2007).

Throughout history, inaccessibility has fed into the island's reputation as unreachable, therefore unfamiliar, largely because the majority of the world's population lives on continents. As such, to the non-islander, the island embodies all that is different. Indeed, Péron (2004) acknowledges that islands are frequently referred to in terms of their difference, that is, as a geographical space separate from the mainland. Because islands were accessible only by long, difficult, and rare journeys from the mainland until relatively recently, they remained largely unknown to the general population on the mainland who noted the distinctive customs of islanders. However, as Péron notes, in contemporary times, there is little to visibly distinguish the island from its so-called "mainland" as we generally find most modern conveniences and infrastructure on both. Furthermore, the great distances between small islands or between a small island and the mainland have been significantly reduced with more efficient transport links so that small islands no longer seem cut off from the rest of the world (Péron, 2004: 328). Islands ought, therefore, to have lost some of the aspects that distinguished them from other spaces.

Nevertheless, Péron also notes that the public imagination still regards islands as different. This distinctiveness is powerful to the extent that it accords those living on islands a separate and distinct identity, which in turn is what draws visitors to the islands. She notes that the island is a finite space, almost to the point of being folded in on itself, a characteristic that heightens the value of local specificities. The islander does not, however, always regard the island in terms of its attractiveness. The limitation of space impacts on the lifestyle of its inhabitants; they are vulnerable to the elements,

and are conscious of the difficulties in leaving the island for practical reasons (such as inclement weather or lack of transport). Loneliness and vulnerability are the consequences of having to stay in a confined island space unintentionally because of the limited possibilities for transport and difficult weather hampering efforts to leave. The sea, omnipresent, as the barrier, dominates the island space and strengthens bonds between the inhabitants (Péron, 2004: 330). This is evident in such Mauritian island narratives as Ananda Devi's *Soupir* (2002), in which a group of islanders move to a remote part of the outlying island of Rodrigues in the wake of the destructive Hollanda cyclone, or Shenaz Patel's *Le Silence des Chagos* (2005), which is based on the true story of the deportation of the inhabitants of the Chagos archipelago to Mauritius. The sea, while an agent of their separation is also their protector and saviour. Omnipresent, it recalls happier times on their islands. A complex relationship with the sea is depicted in the aforementioned novels, where it highlights separation and isolation, but also offers refuge and regeneration. In *Soupir* the sea is presented as a protector, a type of amniotic fluid that shields the island from harm. Appanah, Devi and Patel use the sea as a refuge in which female characters can submerge themselves, unite with nature and be reborn. The closing pages of their novels *Blue Bay Palace*, *Le Voile de Draupadi*, and *le Portrait Chamarel* evoke the sea as a calming presence to which the female protagonists belong, when the rest of society has rejected them. This is examined further in the following chapter.

In Appanah's *Blue Bay Palace*¹⁸, Maya finds the island space of Mauritius, and particularly the area of Blue Bay, a stifling and closed environment.¹⁹ Like the adventurers of the past who saw in the island a knowable and limited space, or the tourists who are influenced by island myths, Maya desires to conquer an uninhabited space. When the surrounding sea and the mountainous landscape become too familiar, and the accepted norms of its society become too suffocating to bear, the islander seeks out another space to inhabit, even though s/he may already inhabit a space considered a utopia by others. However, in Maya's case, the desired space has to be devoid of visible shoreline, of mountains and even devoid of people. It is Maya's desire to create a utopia of her very own and reflective of the myth of the island as a conquerable space. In a reworking of the colonial desert island narrative, Maya wishes to be the discoverer of a new land and to live in this empty land according to her own rules:

Je voudrais sortir de là, m'échapper, fuir ces murs, ce village, ce pays où les horizons se resserrent, cette mer-prison, ces chemins tortueux, ce manque d'air, cette absence d'espace. Je voudrais pouvoir marcher longtemps dans un endroit où l'horizon ne serait fait ni de mer, ni de montagne, et encore moins d'homme. Je voudrais à moi seule repeupler toute une terre. Y arriver la première, sentir qu'ici ne porte aucune trace avant moi, qu'ici il ne faut pas se marier selon les règles, qu'ici on peut aimer qui on veut (p.85).

The narrator mentions horizon and space in the context of a larger, wider landscape. In this passage the sea is evoked as a prison, a sort of suffocating presence that imprisons inhabitants of the island. It heightens the feelings of enclosure and isolation she wishes to escape.

¹⁸ Appanah's *Blue Bay Palace*, ostensibly a tragic love story about a couple from different castes, is a commentary on class differences and the daily struggle for survival and happiness in an oppressive island space, an unequal postcolonial society and a globalised world in which a very small percentage of western wealth trickles down to the indigenous peoples who work in luxurious tourist resorts.

¹⁹ Born on 24 May 1973 in Mauritius, Nathacha Appanah moved to France in 1968, first to Grenoble then settling in Lyon to work in the publishing industry. She is the author of *Les Rochers de Poudre d'Or* (2006), *Blue Bay Palace* (2004), *La Noce d'Anna* (2006), *Le Dernier frère* (2007), *Tropique de la violence* (2016), *En attendant demain* (2016) and *Petits éloges des fantômes* (2016).

In Devi's *Pagli*, the inhabitants begin to leave the village of Terre Rouge after a devastating storm. The narrator comments that, while they may want to flee, they have few possibilities for refuge elsewhere. The island has fixed limits; they can only reach the coast and go no further. The sea imprisons the villagers:

J'ai vu des gens qui portaient, des valises sur la tête. (Où allaient-ils ? Il n'y avait pas d'issue. Ils arriveraient toujours au bout de l'île. La mer est leur prison) (p.138).

The sea is the visible boundary and the single frontier conceivable to the islander. In *Pagli*, the sea amplifies their sense of exile and imprisonment.

There is also a tangible sense of spatial limitation in Appanah's *Le Dernier frère*²⁰, in which young protagonist, Raj, perceives the island of Mauritius as a larger landmass than it would seem to an adult or indeed to the modern child. Transport is basic, and Raj has limited opportunities to visit other parts of the island. The journey from Mapou in the north of the island towards Beau-Bassin in the centre is written as an epic adventure. When Raj and David are lost in the forest and believe themselves to be far from Beau-Bassin, Raj eventually learns that they had merely been circling the perimeter of the prison. There is little, if any, reference to the sea. Rather, the island is drawn in terms of villages, the forest or sugar cane fields. Parallels can also be drawn between the internment camp and the island itself.

The forest surrounding their new home in Beau Bassin reinforces contrasting feelings of isolation and comfort for Raj's family. The family home is defined in terms of the forest, which protects, yet isolates: "La forêt nous entourait, parfois elle me faisait

²⁰ In Appanah's novel *Le Dernier frère* (2007), the narrator, Raj, navigates his childhood memories, in particular those of the deaths of his brothers and his subsequent friendship with David, a Jewish boy interned in the Beau Bassin prison camp during the Second World War.

l'effet d'une ceinture qui serrait jusqu'à étouffer ma famille, parfois elle me protégeait comme un bouclier" (p.93). The personification of the forest in terms of its capacity to suffocate his family is particularly vivid. The duality inherent in the insular situation is also reflected in the forest: the trees both threaten and protect. The forest is incarnated as a character in the novel and has a significant bearing on the lives of Raj, his family and his new friend, David. "[...] nous plongeons à nouveau dans la forêt et, dans un froissement de feuilles, elle referme son épaisseur derrière nous." (p.169). This distinct landscape frames their experience. While the forest protects them, it is also an eerie presence. We learn of the difficulties that they had faced in making their way back through the forest. Scarred by the cyclone, the island's interior is a stifling enclosed environment and the uprooted trees create a ghoulish image for the young protagonist:

Les arbres se serraient les uns contre les autres, la terre se dérobaient sous nos pieds, les troncs déracinés nous barraient la route, nous entrions dans des carrés humides pourrissants, sans lumière, nous nous laissions attirer par des faux sentiers et nous nous retrouvions dans des culs-de-sac, menacés par des arbres tordus où nous devinions, entre les branches et les feuilles emmêlées, des visages de monstres et de diables (pp.150-151).

When Raj manages to escape with David, they make their way to the dilapidated school to locate a map of Mauritius, but cannot find it. Raj has to rely on his memory of the map and its simplistic representation of the island. He notes how their experience of the real terrain of the island differs significantly from the simple outline sketch of the school map:

La hauteur vertigineuse des montagnes, le bouillonnement cruel des rivières, l'épaisseur des forêts-pièges et le labyrinthe des champs de canne, la profondeur des lacs et la sinuosité des routes, tout cela n'était pas indiqué sur la carte. Mon pays était une étendue sans relief, accessible et colorée pour plaire aux enfants (pp.147-148).

The narrator's hyperbolic descriptions of the island's topography contrast with the simplistic colour-coded design of the educational material used by schoolchildren. The map, which had rendered the island's topography less frightening for the schoolchildren, cannot adequately represent the reality of the island's geographical

features. The young protagonist sees danger and threat in the island's topography. The sugar cane fields are compared to a maze and the forest to a trap, for example.

2.5 Islands within islands

The compartmentalisation of Mauritian society can be interpreted as a physical realisation of the concept of "islands within islands", emphasised by the awareness of boundaries and isolation referred to in the earlier section. Ethnic communities constitute small insular groups within the greater island of Mauritius, with Indo-Mauritian, Creole, Sino-Mauritian and Franco-Mauritian among its population. Class, culture, ethnicity, family, gender, race and spirituality are all part of the evolving debate and image of national identity. Mauritian society comprises several religious and ethnic groups, a result of the island's history of colonialism, slavery and migration. This has led to relative cultural incoherence, yet most Mauritians acknowledge that this hybridity is itself a defining feature of their society and of Mauritian identity. Regarding ethnic communities in Mauritius, Ravi (2007) sees these groups as islands within Mauritius' island geography, and designates them "ethnisle spaces". Ravi applies the concept of "ethnises" in a critical capacity based on the concept of the island metaphor suggesting the coexistence of both fixity and fluidity in inter-community relations, much like the coexistence of land and sea in the island. This concept of "ethnisle" spaces is an attempt to theorise the image of different ethnic communities co-existing separately from each other in an insular environment and will be useful for our analysis in this section.

To many, islands embody isolation and separation. To islanders, other islands can also represent similar notions, in particular in the case of exile from their islands of origin. Furthermore, Mauritius is home to people from other islands, now marginalised and exiled, who set up new "ethnises" within Mauritius. The Chagossians, for example,

represent islands within an island, figuratively and literally. Deported from their archipelago, they live in an unfamiliar island space, and the sea, once a refuge, is now an agent in their separation from home.

2.5.1 Inequalities and divisions in the island-prison

The struggle to assert one's place within the complex class structure of the island's society forms an integral part of the settings or plots of recent literature by Mauritian authors. The title of Appanah's *Blue Bay Palace* (the name of the fictional hotel where the protagonist is employed) suggests wealth, sunshine and holidays. The narrator, an employee of the tourism industry that is responsible for perpetuating the paradise island myth, is an observant commentator. The failure of her relationship is foreshadowed from the outset, despite the narrator's naïve optimism. The contrast between Maya's home and her lover's wealthier background is vividly drawn. The author contrasts the reality of life on the island for its marginalised inhabitants, the poor and the elderly, for example, and the more comfortable existence of wealthier Mauritians and European tourists. Appanah displays a keen awareness of the impact of wealthy visitors to the island and the contradiction inherent in the fact that the tourist economy fails to raise the standard of living for ordinary islanders, revealing a society composed of distinct entities. Mauritius is drawn in the novel as a divided society. Yet, the narrator, with some resignation, suggests that all of the inequalities, differences, contrasts and contradictions are what define Mauritius and distinguish it from other countries:

Oui, la langue d'océan qui rentre dans la terre, les enfants qui pêchent si tôt, cette mer qui apparaît et disparaît, ces maisons cachées par des haies de bambous épaisses, ces autres maisons de l'autre côté, grises, sales et fragiles. [...] Je contemple tout cela avec le même bonheur. [...] Comme si j'avais enfin compris que tout cela, les riches, les pauvres, les cons et les braves, c'était somme toute mon pays et que ma colère n'y ferait rien (p.93).

The social structure of Mauritius and the tenuous relationships between communities are fragile. There is the sense of an imminent threat of conflict and disorder. In this smaller secluded space, events appear more intensified and amplified: “Cette île est plus fragile qu’une maison de paille”, as the eponymous narrator remarks in *Pagli* (p.65).²¹ Not only, then, is the island a vulnerable space on the periphery, but relationships between the different ethnic groups within Mauritian society are fragile, which only adds to the tangible atmosphere of vulnerability and volatility of many Mauritian narratives and of representations of Mauritian society as one in which different ethnic communities co-exist but do not interact easily. Mauritians tend to identify first with their ethnic community, as Patel notes:

[...] à l’intérieur de l’espace géographique, pour respecter son espace, sa légitimité en fait, d’être là, c’est vrai que le Mauricien a tendance à voir son identité en tant que groupe (Patel Jul 2007).

The island can be read, therefore, as a site of conflict and a hotbed of potential clashes between classes and different cultures and ethnicities. In the global context, the island is a tiny piece of land. *Pagli*, for example, sees the island in terms of a patch of land surrounded by sea, and from which it is not easy to escape, and in which its inhabitants are trapped in an ongoing cycle of imprisonment. In a stifling space from which flight is not always possible, minor concerns are amplified and take on more resonance, all of which allows otherwise ordinary people to assume great power and influence. The perceived pettiness and narrow-mindedness of the inhabitants of her island seems to be a particular source of *Pagli*’s misgivings about her homeplace. The prejudices and injustices inherent in her society are employed to develop the theme of the island-as-prison in the novel:

²¹ Set in the 1990s in Terre Rouge, Mauritius, Ananda Devi’s *Pagli* (2001) Daya (known as *Pagli*, “the mad woman”), forced into an arranged marriage with her cousin who had raped her when she was younger, finds comfort in her friendship with Mitsy, and her tender relationship with a Creole man, Zil, and freedom in rebelling against her oppressive patriarchal society.

Je vais plus loin, plus loin. Le monde est grand et à la fois étroit et réduit à lui-même. L'île est minuscule. Tache de verdure frangée d'écume au milieu de l'eau, et ni les corps ni les esprits ne peuvent s'évader hors d'eux-mêmes pour échapper à cet emprisonnement à perpétuité. Alors, ils se concentrent sur l'étroitesse de leurs ambitions, et ils donnent la chance aux mofines d'établir leur règne de terreur. Et je ne veux plus d'eux (p.69.)

Geographical limits and social constraints lead to a sense of imprisonment and isolation, but Pagli is willing to break through the social and economic barriers of her stifling small island. Her desire to flee Mauritius is evident in the words addressed to her lover Zil:

Tu es ce que je suis et bien plus encore, le miracle issu de l'île dans sa vérité et non dans sa hantise de l'autre. Je suis passé au-dessous des tours, des volcans, des montagnes. Partir, ainsi, quitter les interdits et les barrières, apprendre à être autrement, avec la possibilité d'un sourire, avec l'évidence d'une loyauté. Si je pouvais t'emporter ainsi sous mon aile, je le sais: je ne reviendrais pas (pp.69-70).

Pagli's imprisonment is exacerbated by the island's topography and by the compartmentalisation of Mauritian society which is driven by the fear of the Other. Devi's narrator echoes Patel's comments on the difficulty of negotiating one's place within a confined and fragmented small island society.

There is also a tangible sense of confinement in parts of de Souza's *Le Sang de l'Anglais*.²² The boundaries inherent in the island space heighten the fear felt by Franco-Mauritians and Anglo-Mauritians as Mauritius moves towards independence. The island becomes symbolically linked to the compartmentalisation of Mauritian society: "Seuls!!! Abandonnés, et cette fois pour de bon. Être restreints à Maurice! La grande question! Entre quatre murs d'océan, aussi beaux soient-ils! Surtout en compagnie de gens si différents" (p.124). The choice of the expression "murs d'océan" is significant,

²² De Souza's *Le Sang de l'Anglais* (1991) is set during the period of Mauritius's accession to independence in 1968. The protagonist, Hawkins, is half English and half Mauritian. This mixed background (or *bâtardise*, as Joubert feels it is suggested by the novel) makes it difficult for Hawkins to feel he truly belongs Mauritian society. He chooses to leave for London, where he becomes severely mentally ill. The narrative voice is St Bart, a childhood friend of Hawkins who pieces together his friend's life story.

as it suggests that the island is shaped and protected by four walls of water. The island has fixed limits and boundaries, which protect the inhabitants, yet these very boundaries isolate them from other landmasses and recreate the island as a self-sufficient entity. The coastline becomes synonymous with prison walls. The island space therefore embodies and amplifies the vulnerability of minorities, in this case of the previously influential Franco-Mauritians as the island moves from colony to post-colony and their place within the new Mauritius appears uncertain.

The narrator comments on the composition of Mauritian society. The island's inhabitants in the past tend to remain within their own communities, with their roles in society defined by their ethnicity. The narrator's comments reveal his belief in communitarianism and rejection of interculturalism:

Ce cloisonnement qui auparavant, gardait chacun chez soi, avait fonctionné, à mon avis, très bien. Et je trouvais assez normal que nous fussions aux commandes, les hindous aux champs, les Mulâtres derrière leurs bureaux, les autres dans le commerce, ainsi de suite. Je haïssais ceux qui, prêchant l'éducation pour tous, avaient créé des besoins de promotion sociale parfaitement artificiels et injustifiés (p.124).

He argues for maintaining the *status quo* with each ethnic group fulfilling a pre-destined role within a multicultural society as this "cloisonnement" has ensured stability.

In Patel's debut novel, *Le Portrait Chamarel* (2002), a young woman, Samia, discovers that she has a family that she never knew. Having been sent for on the dying wishes of her biological grandfather, she is very quickly introduced to members of her "family" whose customs are unfamiliar to her. Samia has lived all of her life in a convent but mysterious circumstances lead her to discover the truth about her genealogy. The convent is symbolised as a protective environment and one to which Samia returns willingly, having completed her studies:

[...] Samia était devenue une enfante couvent. Un parcours scolaire brillant malgré tout, quelques études sociales. Puis elle était revenue dans son cocon pour aider à gérer le couvent. Une volontaire autarcie, un exil souhaité. Un îlot dans l'île. Sourde aux appels de la supérieure pour qu'elle tente d'aller plus loin, plus haut. Je suis chez moi ici, lui opposait-elle toujours. Suprême argument, jamais contesté, jamais démenti. Pourquoi rompre les amarres d'un équilibre si durement assuré. Et puis... (p.14).

The isolated haven of the convent is described as a smaller island within the larger island of Mauritius. Such simplistic imagery implies a state of double exile, but it is an isolation that has been actively sought out by Samia. As an “îlot dans l'île”, the convent is explicitly drawn as a small island within a larger one. The convent is represented more generally as a place of refuge from the rest of Mauritian society. Furthermore, the convent, like the island, is a place of fixed limits and boundaries, synonymous with isolation and compartmentalisation. Samia's peaceful life in the convent-isle will soon be overwhelmed by events that will lead her beyond the convent walls to spend time with an Indo-Mauritian family with whom she feels ill-at-ease.

The novel evokes voluntary exile within the small island space. Kursheed acknowledges, for example, the difficulty in finding Samia, remarking tellingly that:

Les recherches ont pris du temps. Je ne m'étais jamais rendu compte à quel point cette île pourtant si petite où l'on croit connaître tout le monde a le pouvoir de rendre invisibles ceux que certains veulent cacher, escamoter (pp.19-20).

His remarks to Samia are a commentary on Mauritian society and its marginalisation of certain groups. The island is explicitly recognised as a contributing factor in Samia's isolation. The island's very size ought to be conducive to sociability and human interaction. Kursheed acknowledges, however, that in such a small island it is nonetheless possible to keep undesirable secrets hidden if one so wishes. Furthermore, Kursheed's explicit reference to Mauritius as “cette île” reinforces the term as a marker of significance.

The novel, therefore, reveals the isolation of different communities in Mauritius. In this compartmentalised society, groups are clearly defined, and those who do not belong definitively to one particular ethnic group (children of mixed relationships, for example) may be hidden, or portrayed as Other. The very marginal location of the house and the disapproval of the majority of her step-family further isolates Samia in *Le Portrait Chamarel*, for example. She has moved from the convent-island to the cliff-top island, a peripheral geographical location. In interview, Patel notes the sense of imprisonment that one feels in a small island space. Patel's novel stresses one's struggle to express individuality and multi-faceted identity in an enclosed society:

C'est ça un problème dans toutes les petites sociétés, les petites îles, de trouver sa place devant les autres, en dépit des autres ou avec les autres. [...] Et moi j'ai écrit cette histoire un peu par frustration, pour voir ce qui peut se faire [...] On a tendance à s'enfermer. Et c'est ça que j'ai fait pour mon premier roman (Patel Jul 2007).

Pyamootoo's *Bénarès* (1999) is intimate in its setting, in its sparing use of character and in the generous allusions to the cultural and geographical specificity of Mauritius.²³ It highlights the sense of physical limits with an emphasis on marginalisation. In this context, it is appropriate that the village of Bénarès is on the periphery of Mauritius in its geographical location, to the far South of the island and a considerable distance from the capital, financial centre and major sea port of Port Louis. The novel recounts the journey of the male protagonists and their female companions from Port Louis back to Bénarès. Economically, Bénarès has been devastated by the decline of the sugar factory and is drawn in comparative terms with the rest of the island, as a place left to decay. The village is an island within an island, an unremarkable place with no real link to the

²³ Following his studies in literature at the University of Strasbourg, Barlen Pyamootoo taught in France then in Mauritius before becoming a writer and publisher full time. He is the author of the novels *Bénarès* (1999), *La tour de Babylone* (2002) and *Salogi's* (2008). He has also directed a film *Bénarès* (2005) based on his début novel.

rest of Mauritius. The car journey from Port Louis to Bénarès is marked by long philosophical conversations about the economy, life, travel and leisure pursuits, in the limited confines of the car, which also becomes a metaphor for insularity. The island, an immediate point of reference for the inhabitants of the area, is a constituent element of their identity and vocabulary. When the village is left to fend for itself in the wake of the decline in the sugar industry, the narrative emphasises the inhabitants' sense of separation and abandonment: "On guettait l'arrivée de quelqu'un du gouvernement qui nous aiderait à trouver du travail ou qui ramènerait les propriétaires à la raison. On a mis du temps à comprendre que personne ne viendrait. Bénarès s'est alors senti délaissé, abandonné de tous" (p.46). The village is separated from the rest of the island economically as well as geographically. The sea is regarded as an agent of this separation, facilitating the creation of a new island space within Mauritius: "On avait l'impression d'avoir quitté le pays, que la mer tout d'un coup nous en avait détachés et que Bénarès était devenu une île tout seul, hors du monde [...]" (p.47). The island is thereby equated with abandonment and loneliness and is conceived of in terms of separation from a mainland.

Contemporary Mauritian literature highlights topical issues such as poverty, prejudice, and the conflict between, on the one hand, the State's eagerness to promote multiculturalism, and on the other, the citizen's identification with ethnicity over nationality.²⁴ It depicts the very real differences that exist between cultures and classes in Mauritian society. De Souza notes that, in their assertion of identity, Mauritians tend

²⁴ In relation to a specific Mauritian identity most commentators acknowledge that the public sphere emphasises multiculturalism while emphasising Mauritian national identity, whereas cultural diversity is embraced more in private. See Eriksen (1998) and Ravi (2007).

to emphasise difference rather than looking for common markers of identity. Fiction helps to articulate the islandness that is absent from official discourse:

Je crois qu'il y a des différences aussi mais qu'on a tendance à accentuer les différences et à ne pas trouver les choses qui font que les îliens que nous sommes se ressemblent [...] Mais on a un esprit insulaire et qui est peut-être beaucoup plus définissable par les romans que par les études plus factuelles, que la non-fiction. Je crois que mon roman c'est là le milieu (de Souza Jul 07).

While the novels discussed here address marginalised groups within Mauritius as types of islands within an island, the Creole community is notably absent.²⁵ The lack of representation of this major ethnic group is a serious lacuna in contemporary Mauritian writing in French and is addressed further in Chapter Six.

2.5.2 Marginalised island communities in Mauritian society

The small islands in the Indian Ocean region are located at great distances from each other; contemporary Mauritian literature highlights the sense of exile that this remoteness engenders on many levels. One such representation of exile is the portrayal of islands within islands in the wider context of Mauritius's relationship with neighbouring islands in the Indian Ocean region and the smaller islands under its jurisdiction. As such, we see dislocated communities living on, or near, the island of Mauritius, such as the deported Chagossians in Patel's *Le Silence des Chagos* or the voluntary exile of the inhabitants of Rodrigues in Devi's *Soupir*. Due attention will be given later to Mauritius as a mainland to smaller peripheral island communities. However, here we highlight the marginalisation of the Chagossian community and an

²⁵ Note that there are different meanings to the term 'Creole'. In the context of Mauritius, Creole is a synonym for 'population générale', a term used in the census, and a denomination that includes Franco-Mauritians, Afro-Mauritians and mixed-race Mauritians. The term 'Creole', however, is used more often to denote a member of the black or mixed race communities in Mauritius, whereas its original meaning meant a person born on the island, irrespective of ethnicity or heritage. In the case of the novels in this study, Creole can be taken to mean Afro-Mauritian or mixed race.

exiled community on Rodrigues as representative of very literal imaginings of islands within islands in recent Mauritian novels.

Patel's novel portrays the Chagossians, an island community uprooted and confined within a new island space, as a marginalised community within Mauritian society. The Chagossians are descended from slaves and indentured Indian workers who worked on coconut and copra plantations on the Chagos archipelago where their way of life had not changed for generations before their deportation to Mauritius. Their presence on the archipelago is thought to date back at least two centuries. They have a profound attachment to their islands in spite of attempts by the British government to negate this claim by suggesting that they are merely newcomers to the region or seasonal workers sent from Mauritius to work on the plantations, without any historical ties or legitimate claims of ownership. Feasibility studies were carried out as part of the preparations for leasing the islands to the United States government. It was made clear, as can be seen in discourse from the time, some of which is helpfully reproduced in the novel, that the feasibility studies were conducted with the intention of concluding that the Chagossians had no rightful claim to the islands.

The surrounding sea offers them little or no respite from the hardship of their new lives on the periphery of Mauritian society. The Chagossians experience exile from their home island in an unfamiliar island; they are a marginalised and deprived community within Mauritius and a taboo subject for most ordinary Mauritians and the authorities.

As the young boy and his mother, Charlesia, are at the port, she looks out to sea:

Il tire sur la jupe de sa mère. Elle ne le regarde pas. Elle a les yeux perdus, là-bas, vers la fente à peine perceptible où le ciel bleu se glisse dans la mer bleue (pp.10-11).

The use of the expression “là-bas” underlines the distance from the Chagos islands and highlights the contrast between Mauritius and the island they left behind.²⁶ They have a profound connection with their island, both its land and sea, and their exile from the Chagos islands is a source of pain. This pain is manifested in both physical and emotional hurt; departure from their home-place has left a physical void. The physical sensation also compounds the sense of dislocation suggested by “cette fracture”:

Et il ne sait pas d’où vient cette fracture à l’intérieur de son corps, elle court du ventre à l’estomac et s’emplit d’un écho venu de trop loin. Des entrailles de l’océan Indien (p.11).

Their new living arrangements in these slums, marginal spaces within the city, highlight the degree to which the Chagossians are now exiled. A striking contrast is drawn between the carnival atmosphere surrounding the Independence celebrations in Mauritius in 1968 and the misery of Charlesia’s living conditions in the *bidonville*. The narrative offers vivid descriptions of the dank house in which she now lives:

Une fois l’averse passée, ils ont évacué l’eau à grands coups de balai coco, mais l’intérieur est resté humide, avec une odeur de chien mouillé qui va persister pendant plusieurs jours et faire soupirer les enfants jusqu’à leur sommeil (p.17).

Charlesia frequently recalls images and sensations from her life on Diego Garcia. The contrast is drawn between “ici” and “là-bas”. For example, the shack in which the family now lives is stiflingly hot, and any food prepared goes bad after a day: “[...] un dégueulis jeunâtre que même les chiens refuseraient” (p.18). On the other hand, there was never any shortage of food on Diego Garcia, to the extent that one would never think of eating the same thing two days running. Their food supply was plentiful: “Et l’argent n’était pas nécessaire pour se nourrir” (*ibid*).

²⁶ The Chagos Islands are situated approximately 2,150 kilometres North-East of Mauritius.

The living conditions in Mauritius are extremely difficult for the *Chagossiens* who find themselves ghettoised and imprisoned in a noisy, hot, suffocating place on the margins of Mauritian society:

Il y a trop de bruit ici. L'air est trop pesant dans cette cité. Toute cette masse de tôle qui emprisonne et solidifie la chaleur dans ses cannelures, cette musique aigrette qui se déverse sans relâche des radios insomniaques, ces mobylettes traficotées qui pétaradent et s'étouffent comme des poules asthmatiques en crachotant une fumée qui crispe les poumons [...] (pp.19-20).

The Mauritian climate is oppressive and the imposing corrugated iron shacks in the slums create a hostile environment in which the Chagossians feel imprisoned in an interminable exile. Bragard (2008) notes their sense of isolation:

Diego Garcia has become a fortress in the middle of the Indian Ocean, while the Chagossian population, relocated to shanty towns in Mauritius constitute a new periphery within the periphery (2008: 135).

Charlesia is completely disoriented; “[...] sa boussole est inopérante ici” (p.20). While Mauritius is also surrounded by sea, it does not offer her the same refuge as it did in Diego Garcia. The sea offers the possibility of escape and a return to their homeland. It could connect them with their island, yet only serves to underline their separation from home. Added to their unease is the more frenetic pace of life in Mauritius and the noisy surroundings. The narrative style reflects Charlesia's increasing sense of malaise: the brief sentences and lists of nouns and adverbs highlight the cacophonous surroundings of an unfamiliar urban space and add a sense of immediacy to her need to escape. Even the small event of crossing a road is sufficient to cause panic:

Il faut traverser [...] tout va trop vite, les canons explosent entre les parois de sa tête. Elle ferme les yeux, avance. Un grand crissement, une odeur râpeuse de caoutchouc et de bitume qui lui enfume les narines, un klaxon, une bordée de jurons. Elle rouvre les yeux (p.21).

Mauritius is drawn as the teeming mainland, an inhospitable island space with an unwelcoming people. Of course, Mauritius in this context means Port Louis, an urban space, the busy sea port destination for traders, sailors, immigrants and tourists and far

removed from what any island has come to represent in the popular imagination. The Chagossians have to look far beyond the unpleasant *bidonvilles* of the urban centre of Port Louis towards the sandy beaches elsewhere on Mauritius's coastline to feel any sense of homecoming or refuge.

The group of villagers in Devi's *Soupir* abandon the coastline in the hope of being sustained by the earth in the interior of the island in the wake of the destruction wrought by the Hollanda cyclone: "Il nous fallait nous tourner vers la terre, et espérer qu'elle ouvrirait son ventre pour nous comme la mer ne l'avait jamais fait" (p.87). It is as if the sea, *la mer*, or indeed *leur mère*, has rejected them. The powerful force of nature coupled with its vulnerable position to the East of the African continent, makes Rodrigues a difficult place to live. *Soupir* is their last resort: "Ce n'était pas la marche de l'espoir, mais plutôt celle de l'abandon. S'exiler dans cette île qui était elle-même un exil de tout" (p.139). The reflexive verb expresses the voluntary nature of their relocation. Their exile within Rodrigues is amplified by the sense of the island itself being isolated from others in the region. *Soupir* becomes an imagined space in addition to an actual physical place of exile. The islanders are now doubly exiled: Rodrigues is located far from its mainland of Mauritius, and *Soupir*, in turn, is far removed from the island's capital Port Mathurin. The narrator expresses the group's relief at living far from the madness and depravity of the bigger island: "Maurice est devenu le lieu des iniquités" (p.15). They see themselves as Other, and will be othered through the eyes of Mauritians, for whom Rodrigues is a smaller insular outpost. In light of events narrated by Patrice l'éclairé, the marginalised group will be perceived as deviant by the reader. The concept of an island within an island as an embodiment of marginality and difference is neatly summed up in the novel with the remark: "Nous allons être une île

dans une île. Des naufragés qui se naufragent d’eux-mêmes, volontairement” (p.46). The choice of the word “naufragés” is an interesting one with its echoes of the “Robinsonnade”. Their exile may be voluntary, (“se naufragent”) but the very remoteness of their new location within an already isolated island heightens their sense of personal dislocation. Devi comments on the sense of imprisonment conveyed by her novel *Soupir* in which the action takes place on the island of Rodrigues. In an interview, she explains that this sense of enclosure is directly related to the fact of being on an island, suggesting that islanders need to feel that they belong to a larger landmass or continent in order to feel safe and secure. Their isolation is felt on many levels:

Cela est partie d’une pensée que politiquement ou géographiquement, qu’on est seule. Et on a besoin d’appartenir quand-même à un continent. Et pour moi cette réflexion-là vient de ce thème de l’enfermement. Le thème de l’enfermement... dans *Soupir*...ils sont enfermés encore plus ...dans leur famille, non seulement dans leur village, mais dans l’enfermement non seulement dans une île, mais à l’intérieur de chaque personnage dans un espace très étroit (Devi Jun 2007).

Visible and invisible boundaries dominate contemporary Mauritian fiction in French. The sea and coastline are visible markers of limits and reminders of separation and exile. Further still, the confined space of the small island amplifies the ethnic tensions and social taboos in the conservative post-colony.

2.6 The city: Insularity in the enclosed urban space

Islands, which, for the non-islander in particular, inspire images of the natural world, are nonetheless home to various urban centres. The city, a man-made space dominated by human activity and a site of commercial and cultural exchange, is the antithesis of the natural world. While the city is the meeting ground, or the site of interaction between peoples, the postcolonial city, in particular, can become a site of alienation and dislocation and constitutes a negative décor in many postcolonial novels. In the case of Mauritius, dislocation is evident in many contemporary novels such as de Souza’s *Les*

jours Kaya, Devi's *Rue la Poudrière* and *Ève des décombres*, Appanah's *Blue Bay Palace*, Patel's *Le Silence des Chagos* and Pyamootoo's *Bénarès*.

Destructive relationships are key features of *Rue la Poudrière*²⁷ and other Devi novels. Other recurrent themes are violence, madness, marginalisation, deviance and transgression, and deprivation. Devi's protagonists identify with and see themselves as physically part of their environment. Her work reveals the dark side of Mauritian society and focuses on the destructive tendencies of human beings, in particular the precariousness of all human relationships. Both *Rue La Poudrière* and *Ève de ses décombres* are set in Port Louis, which is represented as a site of deprivation and alienation.

As Lionnet (1995) notes, Devi frequently explores the perspectives of deviant characters (in *Rue la Poudrière* or *Soupir*, for example), in particular female characters.²⁸ Devi's characters are complex and ill-at-ease in their situation within an unappealing urban postcolonial society as Lionnet notes on Devi's use of the character of Paule in *Rue La Poudrière*:

[...] Devi scrutinizes the tragic aspects of the female condition in a style that blends social realism with the surreal and the eerie. She writes of the most marginalised postcolonial subjects, the urban female underclass, obsessively exploring the social construction of femininity and its dark recesses (1995: 51).

²⁷ Paule in *Rue la Poudrière* (1989) is rejected because she is a girl, and never having known any affection or respect from her parents, she is sold to a local pimp by her alcoholic indebted father for the price of a drink. Her new life as a prostitute affords her a sort of liberation, a means of escaping her home, and of belonging to another community of sorts. Her narrative voice marvels at the freedom and affection she can now allow herself to feel. Devi's protagonist defies death and regains control of her life. Her salvation is to be found in her union with her environment and her friend Fatmah, and breaking with the traditions of family, culture and ultimately patriarchy.

²⁸ Devi "destabilizes the traditional Western categories of female subjectivity, such as the whore/Madonna dichotomy, by showing the constructed nature of identity" (Lionnet, 1995: 48).

She debunks the tourist brochure myth of Mauritius as an exotic idyll, concentrating on the reality of life in an urban setting. In *Rue La Poudrière*, Port Louis plays an essential role in the novel, that of a negative presence trapping its unfortunate and deprived citizens in its teeming streets, and limiting their chances of ever finding happiness or redemption. Thus: “Mais Port-Louis, le Port-Louis que tu vis chaque jour est si peu propice au métier de père” (p.93), and “Et voilà, le destin de Paule décidé, la courbe de sa vie s’emmêle, Port-Louis deviendra son cercueil” (p.94). Images of urban life are ubiquitous in the novel and the protagonist, Paule, is acutely aware of the hopelessness and poverty of the city, which houses and facilitates the continued marginalisation of people whose deprivation is predicated on the colonial and postcolonial situation. Far from romanticising the postcolonial city and the opportunities it ought to offer its citizens, Devi is critical of how it isolates and marginalises those who are less fortunate and condemns them to being forgotten by history. Paule remarks:

J’habite le faubourg, d’un faubourg, dans la marginalité des plus marginales, à l’extrémité même, aux commissures mêmes de ce que nous appelons ‘la civilisation’. J’habite sur les lèvres supérieures du vieux Port-Louis, la ligne mauve et noire qui démarque la fin de son temps et la limite de son empire. Ce nœud de vieillesse qui tire à sa fin, et va bientôt s’écrouler en un petit tas de poussières qui, tamisées, ne préserveront que quelques reliquats de son ancienneté [...] c’est assez pour jouer ce jeu de cette effrayante humanité qui occupe tant de place au cours de sa vie, et si peu après la vie. Ici, on passe, et on laisse ici et là, une trace, une fuite, une fourmière, et puis, on oublie, et on est oublié (p.8).

Her experience of the city is “la marginalité des plus marginales”, on the fringes of “civilisation”. She notes the linearity of the skyline and how it denotes the beginnings and the limits of the city. Liminality of location is related to the fragility and precariousness of existence. Paule mentions that existence is fleeting in such a marginal space and underlines how easily the underprivileged are forgotten. The final paragraph of *Rue la Poudrière* alludes to progress, and how economic progress in fact does little to support the development of the individual: “Dehors, le travail progresse [...] La lente destruction des choses, des valeurs, de l’individu amenuisé jusqu’au point de

l'inexistence" (p.197). There is considerable tension between the reality of living on the margins of a developing city and the tourist myth of the island paradise.

Devi's portrayal of the postcolonial city centres on the lives of underprivileged women, trapped in a cycle of poverty and violence, who have even less chance than other Mauritians of prospering in such an oppressive social and geographical space. *Ève de ses décombres* can also be regarded in this light; a novel published seventeen years after *Rue la Poudrière*, also set in an urban environment, a postcolonial city in which, for many of its inhabitants, conditions have not improved in the interim. Devi has commented on the spatial elements in *Ève de ses décombres* and *Rue la Poudrière*, and particularly on the real urban environments as portrayed in those novels. She alludes to the obstacles encountered in finding a French publisher because the setting of these novels contradicted Western readers' expectations of the island of Mauritius:

Ève et Rue La Poudriere, c'est un cadre où il n'y a pas de verdure, pas de plage...et ça va contre ce qu'on imagine de Maurice [...] ça ne correspondait pas à ce qu'ils imaginaient [...] Mais l'ancrage est important (Devi Jun 2007).

Thus Devi very deliberately debunks the clichéd image of Mauritius, as Appanah does later in *Blue Bay Palace*. The urban centres of postcolonial island societies such as Port Louis are regarded as an unattractive subject for a Western reading public, who are reluctant to engage with unpalatable subject matter that does not correspond with a stereotypical image of islands. Poverty and violence and other social problems synonymous with cities around the world are considered by the reading public and editors as incompatible with island life. Mauritian writers have therefore taken to representing the city in their novels as a site of both human interaction and marginalisation. The city is written as a space in which deprivation and discrimination is rife, and in spite of the apparent progress and wealth that a capital city displays,

further imprisons already marginalised members of Mauritian society. Such representations challenge assumptions of Mauritius, by highlighting the consequences of colonialism and the neo-colonialist bias of the tourist industry.

However alienating life in the urban centres of Mauritius may be, as presented to the reader in the two aforementioned Devi novels, the author also shows similar scenes of oppression and imprisonment in coastal villages (*Pagli*) and outlying islands (*Soupir*). Devi's work focuses on the destruction wreaked on female characters through the double bind of a patriarchal society and postcolonial society. This oppression appears to be universally perpetrated against women, irrespective of their living place within Mauritius.²⁹ However in *Rue La Poudrière* and *Ève de ses décombres*, the inequalities at play within the postcolonial city are the reasons for the decline of the chief protagonists, Paule and Eve. In *Ève de ses décombres* (2006) familiar themes to readers of Devi's corpus re-emerge with scenes of alienation, marginalisation, violence in the urban setting and in the context of inner-city deprivation, in the poor area of Troumaron. The geographical location of the city of Port Louis reflects the disappointments and hardship of their lives. The young character, Sad, remarks early in the narrative:

La ville nous tourne le dos. Son bourdonnement de lave sourde s'arrête à nos frontières. La montagne nous obstrue la vision d'autre chose. Entre la ville et la pierre, nos immeubles, nos gravats, nos ordures (p.14).

The physical environment and the realisation of being located between the more clearly defined places of the city and the mountain exacerbate the characters' sense of living

²⁹ In interview, Devi states that her characters are examples of how women are frequently the victim in civil conflict, domestic disputes and are kept on the margins of particular societies, such as in Mauritius. The representations of women in her novels are symbols of a greater malaise, that of women's precarious position in society. Devi is interested in how they are regarded by political, judicial, and patriarchal family systems the world over. Mauritius is therefore representative of a more universal issue. In fact, as a microcosm of African, Asian and European cultures and customs, the Mauritian city acts as an effective stage on which to represent the universal issue of women's rights through fiction.

on the margins of the capital. They feel abandoned by the city, but the presence of the mountain impedes them from seeing what the rest of the island has to offer. They are trapped in a type of limbo, a space on the border, with no hope of escape. Yet this trapped space on the periphery of the city is a definable entity, characterised by its place within the city and by the fact that it remains unchanged since the beginning, while Port Louis itself is transformed by economic progress. While highlighting that they live in a marginalised position in the deprived area of Troumaron, Sad is proud of the fact that it nonetheless lies at the heart of the city, as a haven for those who belong nowhere else:

Notre cité est notre royaume. Notre cité dans la cité, notre ville dans la ville. Port-Louis a changé de figure, il lui est poussé des dents longues et des immeubles plus hauts que ses montagnes. Mais notre quartier, lui, n'a pas changé. C'est le dernier retranchement. Ici, on se construit une identité par défaut : celle des non-appartenants. On nous appelle bann Troumaron – les Troumaron -, comme s'il s'agissait d'une nouvelle communauté dans cette île qui en a déjà tellement. Peut-être effectivement le sommes-nous (p.17).

Sad's narrative voice expresses his dignified pride (“notre cité”, “notre ville”, notre royaume”) in belonging to this undesirable urban area, a distinct sub-community within the wider melting pot of Mauritian society. The district of Troumaron is an insular space within the wider urban setting of Port Louis, yet it isolates its population from the city. In this crumbling urban environment, the younger generation has been left to its own devices, without the protection of adults. Corcoran notes that the male teacher's exploitation of Ève and the subsequent murder of Savita to cover up his crime highlights the idea that society has not taken responsibility for its disadvantaged youths. Savita's body is found in a rubbish tip. A fragmented character, and aware of her vulnerability as she approaches death, she is another victim of the “alienating environment of a postcolonial slum”, exploited by those supposed to protect her, and discarded like trash. According to Corcoran, the title of the novel is highly significant:

These are the ‘décombres’ [rubble] of the novel's title from which Sad promises to extricate Ève: both the physical rubble of the urban ghetto in a developing country and the metaphysical rubble of the postcolonial situation (Corcoran, 2007: 117).

Corcoran's comments highlight the lingering effects of colonialism in developing countries, in particular in urban settings.

De Souza's third novel, *Les Jours Kaya* (2000), also has an urban Mauritian setting. The riots that followed the death in custody of the popular seggae singer, Kaya, in February 1999, form the backdrop to the novel. The plot revolves around the coming-of-age adventures of a young girl, Santee, as she spends the night searching for her brother while riots envelop the town of Rose Hill³⁰, a small town not far from Port Louis, in the aftermath of the arrest and death of Kaya. The reality of life in the urban centres of Mauritius is explored throughout the children's adventures and encounters as they make their way through the night. Scenes of nightclubs, bars, streets, cars and prostitution form the setting against which Santee advances in her search for her brother.

Racial tensions are also alluded to, such as the incidents in which Creoles are the subject of discriminatory remarks. The poverty and disenfranchisement of the Creole population is also highlighted in the novel at different stages. The unfolding drama is not merely confined to the city; the action also takes place in rural areas when characters travel through parts of the countryside, and there are frequent and specific references made to places, towns and geographical features. There is little reference, if any, to the sea, even though the insular aspect of Mauritian society is significant in the novel. Villages, the land, rivers, gorges and inland towns are the backdrop for the most

³⁰ Rose Hill is the English form and Rose-Hill the French form, as it appears in de Souza's novel. This follows the convention for Port Louis/Port-Louis as mentioned earlier.

important scenes of the novel. Rather than looking to the sea for comfort or for escape, however, de Souza's characters seek refuge in the island's interior.

The narrative is concise and proceeds at a relentless pace. Events are viewed through the eyes of sixteen-year-old Santee, who witnesses the urban centre by night during a time of social upheaval. Asked by her mother to find her brother in Rose Hill the young Santee undertakes the journey alone. Santee is unfamiliar and initially ill-at-ease with this urban Creole environment. The lively tempo of the narrative and the sense of confusion it engenders create a dream-like effect. There is a sense of perpetual movement in the novel with sentence after sentence reinforcing the urgency of Santee's quest to find her brother in the midst of the turbulent night of rioting: "Il fallait seulement essayer de retrouver Ram, quelque part une des ruelles mènerait à lui, mais laquelle?" (p.17). Santee is not accustomed to this environment and contrasts are drawn between the scenes of unrest in urban centres such as Rose Hill, and family life in her home village.

The narrative is tense and vague at times due to the superimposition of narrative voices. This double vision adds to the atmosphere of confusion and the sense of Mauritian society being on the brink of implosion. An oppressive atmosphere runs through the fast-paced narrative, underlining the precariousness of the situation for the reader who senses that anything could happen at any moment, such is the instability, uncertainty and tension suggested by de Souza's writing. This explosive element is central to the narrative and is reinforced, Joubert suggests, by the final scene in which onlookers are not sure whether the two children will be burned alive in a fire at a large shopping centre (Joubert, 2001).

De Souza creates an intimate and personal depiction of adolescence from the perspective of a young girl against the backdrop of political and historical developments in Mauritian society. There is an overwhelming sense of the town or city as an enclosed space within which people of different races live side by side and tensions are heightened. The violent manner of Kaya's death is not without significance although Kaya is a marginal presence in the text. The reader is aware that the violent death of Kaya has marked the beginning of this social unrest and senses that death may occur in the novel. The enclosed urban space merely exacerbates existing ethnic tensions.

To a young girl from a smaller village the larger town is unknown terrain; the darkness and noise of the urban landscape highlight her sense of dislocation:

Santee s'en alla, la fille avait dit de compter cinq rues. Il ne fallait pas se tromper cette fois, elle n'avait pas d'excuse, chaque croisée était éclairée au néon. Mais quand, à la deuxième, elle se retourna pour vérifier, elle s'aperçut qu'elle avait la nuit aux trousses, une nuit silencieuse, une marée noire qui effaçait tous les carrefours (p.20).

Santee has to concentrate intensely to navigate the darkened streets in an unfamiliar environment. She makes her way through the town in a dreamlike state. The urban cityscape and the sociological aspects of city life are unfamiliar to Santee and she learns that she will have to behave according to different modes of social behaviour in order to remain unnoticed in this predominantly Creole urban space: "Ici, au milieu de la cité créole, Santee ne pouvait crier, des anxieuses intonations hindoues, le nom de Ramesh" (p.18). The city is defined in terms of ethnicity. A young Hindu girl is not a common sight in this urban area; Santee cannot risk drawing attention to her otherness:

[...] on ne marche pas n'importe comment dans Rose-Hill, tout le monde sait ça, ceux venus de la campagne l'apprennent assez vite. On se chausse comme il faut, on se met des fringues qu'il faut. On peut les trouver à la Galerie ou aux Arcades. À la rigueur, au Souk d'Arab Town si on est un peu crabe (pp.57-58).

The city is burning, the police sirens are ringing loudly and Santee observes the dramatic scenes unfolding from the backseat of the taxi as she munches on peanuts and peers out of the taxi window, as if watching a film in real time:

Des vitres péttaient sous la chaleur et les éclats pleuvaient comme des confettis sur la tête des pompiers. Dans le taxi de Robert de Noir, garé sur le trottoir, Santee savourait le goût salé des cacahuètes sur ses lèvres (p.45).

“Ram’s world” in the urban setting of Rose Hill is the opposite of all that is familiar to his sister. Santee’s self-awareness and development are placed within the context of the revelations she discovers about her brother. The intensely charged atmosphere in Rose Hill frames the development of the young female protagonist; her awakening and maturity are achieved through exposure to an urban, adult world during a particularly chaotic time in Mauritius. The fast-paced action in the city closes in on Santee as she moves through time and space, and eventually leaves Rose Hill to return home to her village in rural Mauritius. Her senses are overwhelmed by the urban nightscape. De Souza’s novel is reminiscent of the *bildungsroman*; what may have been simply an enclosed, prison-like environment becomes a site of learning for the young central protagonist and exposes her to the reality of how other Mauritians live and an awareness of her place within the wider world.

Cities and villages are also written as sites of inactivity and hopelessness, such as in Barlen Pyamootoo’s *Bénarès*, which describes the adventure of some young men who make their way back from Port Louis to the small coastal village of Bénarès with two prostitutes. The villages and towns they pass through reveal the inhabitants’ malaise.

The men they observe appear to move along with little sense of purpose:

La rue ressemblait à une salle d’attente. Des hommes, jeunes pour la plupart, y déambulaient, mais à la manière de ceux qui tourment en rond, dans un mouvement qui avance à peine, qui captive même (p.57).

This image, of men moving aimlessly in circles, suggests further confinement and insularity. The simile used, comparing the street to a waiting room, evokes the state of torpor that dominates the village. The urban nightscape of the small villages contrasts with the peaceful landscape they have travelled through thus far. This landscape is interrupted only by the presence of unexciting villages. One particularly unsightly small town leaves the narrator cold:

[...] nous traversons un village que j'avais du mal à regarder, Il n'y avait que des commerces le long de ses rues, qui se dressaient les uns à côté des autres, sans le moindre espace entre eux. Chaque commerce avait ses affiches et ses panneaux-réclame, et chaque enseigne était ornée de figures bariolées, du genre tape à l'œil. Jimi trouvait drôle qu'en même temps tout y paraissait morne, sinistre. Il disait que c'était à cause de l'apparence des choses, de tout ce côté factice et trompeur (p.61).

This urban area, with its abundance of gaudy visual stimulation, is seen as an ugly, busy and cramped space - the very antithesis of rural Mauritius. According to Jimi, the village attempts to portray itself as an exciting place by making use of garish signs but the town's eeriness is only exacerbated by the falseness of the signs that seek to mask its mundane reality.

Depopulation has a visible effect on the local landscape, as inhabitants of small villages such as Bénarès move to larger urban centres in search of employment. The villages on the road to Bénarès appear haunted: "Les maisons paraissaient inhabitées, abandonnées depuis des années. Mais ces contours sur les murs, ces écrans aux portes ? Des revenants, je me suis dit, la nuit est peuplée de revenants" (p.85). Village and city are juxtaposed through the dialogue between the men from Bénarès and the women from the city, who are surprised that Bénarès has no restaurants or shops:

« Il y a une boutique » a dit Jimi, « un dispensaire, un bureau de poste, une école aussi, mais pour les tout petits seulement »
« C'est tout ? » a demandé Mina.
« Et des maisons bien sûr » a ajouté Jimi avec un sourire, « et des champs et la mer tout au bout » (p.41).

The city is described through the eyes of the men from the village who appear unfamiliar with this urban environment. They make reference to the sounds, sights and sensations it evokes, such as running engines, barking dogs, or shadows (p.31). However, the narrative recalls the slow-moving apathy of Bénarès in its description of the empty streets of Port Louis in the evening, early in the novel:

Nous avons traversé Port-Louis. On aurait dit une ville en guerre, pas une femme n'était visible dans ses rues. Juste des chiens et quelques hommes qui semblaient attendre un même couvre-feu, le signal pour se séparer, se disperser (p.18).

In both *Bénarès* and *Les jours Kaya* the action takes place within a confined geographical space. In *Bénarès*, the city of Port Louis and other smaller urban centres provide an important backdrop against which the action takes place, the claustrophobic atmosphere reinforced further by the confined space of the interior of the car that transports the central protagonists and secondary characters through the night. In *Les jours Kaya*, the urban centre of Rose-Hill is contrasted with the smaller outlying village of Bienvenue. Tension mounts as the young protagonist journeys through the night in a wholly foreign environment; the strange sounds and smells increase the level of tension and sense of excitement and foreboding. Important events that highlight significant social issues such as poverty and ethnic differences are concentrated within these confined and more densely populated urban spaces than in the wider rural spaces of the sugar cane fields or the beach, more typically representative of the island in fiction.

In Patel's *Le Silence des Chagos*, the city is explicitly represented in contrast to the quiet islands from which the Chagossians were deported. Port Louis's slums are vividly evoked in the narrative through unforgiving visual, aural and olfactory imagery of an urban dystopia. Charlesia's shack in the shanty town, where she has been housed after

being refused the right of return to her home in the Chagos Islands, is an enclosed space to which she is wholly unaccustomed. To further exacerbate her unease, the narrative draws a stark contrast between the life Charlesia and others had on Diego Garcia before they were deported from their islands and their present predicament: “Impossible d’échapper du bruit. Ici, de toute façon, on ne pouvait jamais être tranquille. Quelle idée de construire une cité adossée à la montagne!” (p.16). The city echoes with noise, amplified by its geographical location, an enclosed space surrounded by mountains. Charlesia bemoans the lack of silence in her new neighbourhood:

Qui pourrait y échapper dans cet enclos où tous les sons ricochent dans un écho inversé, qui résonne en s’amplifiant. Elle a l’impression d’avoir la tête dans un tambour sur lequel ils cognent, cognent, cognent, sans relâche, la peau tendue absorbe les coups et démultiplie, les explose en ondes courtes qui forcent les membranes de ses tympanes pour se fracasser contre les parois de son crâne (p.19).

Patel’s narrative underlines the sense of imprisonment felt by the Chagossians in the stifling and cramped urban space. Charlesia is overwhelmed by the noise of the urban environment. The sounds of the city and the shantytown have a profound physical effect on her; her entire body absorbs the environmental noise to which she is now subjected on a daily basis. The very structure of the paragraph, the onomatopoeic vocabulary and the rhythm of the phrases convey the intense feeling of imprisonment experienced by Charlesia. From earlier descriptions of life in Diego Garcia the reader sympathises with Charlesia’s plight and that of the other Chagossians. The contrast between the urban prison of Port Louis and the more pastoral way of life on the Chagos archipelago is both implicit and explicit at various stages in the novel. Their lack of familiarity with the urban environment serves to express the alienation and dislocation of the Chagossian population in Port Louis. Already traumatised by the forced evacuation from their homeland, their relocation to the city’s slums, a frightening space, housing

deprived communities, marginalises them from their rural home-place and from the centre of power in the capital, Port Louis.

In the aforementioned novels, the town is written as a site of human interaction that serves to facilitate meetings between a range of characters from across a wide spectrum of Mauritian society.³¹ What emerges from the many contemporary Mauritian novels that evoke the city are representations of the urban space as deprived and hopeless. The depiction of postcolonial Port Louis, in particular, is consistently negative. This literature presents the reader with lesser-known images of the island: the urban space and the universality of the problems found therein. Such representations, which emphasise confinement and tension, challenge the reader's assumptions of islanders and island spaces.

2.7 Centre and periphery

Reverzy (2001) notes that the Indian Ocean islands or archipelagos (Madagascar, Mauritius, Réunion, Rodrigues, Comoros), due to their plurality, appear to repress the links between themselves, each one appearing to be an entity in itself complete with distinct defining elements (he identifies Madagascar as “a primitive afro-asian island continent”, Mauritius as a “Rousseau and Baudelaire inspired Eden”, Réunion as “an old colonial style, creole, volcanic island”). Mauritius therefore remains a marginal small island synonymous with tourism and pleasure, but struggles to carve out a sense of identity internationally.

³¹ except for the more privileged Franco-Mauritian community.

As Reverzy (2001) further observes, basic errors have been made in relation to their geographical location in discourse concerning the Creole islands of the Indian Ocean. The islands are often mistakenly located in the Caribbean and islands of the Pacific Ocean (Oceania) in the Indian Ocean. Knowledge of these islands outside of the region itself therefore appears to be limited. Mauritius is frequently confused with Martinique, which is situated in the Caribbean region, or Mauritania, a country on the African continent, for example. It is possible that all small islands are considered similar entities, and consequently no care is taken to distinguish between these regions. It is also possible that because these island groups are former French colonies sharing similar characteristics and histories, and are invariably regarded as Creole islands, that little or no care is taken to distinguish one from the other.

Ravi (2007: 2) notes that Mauritius has maintained close cultural and economic ties with the many areas of the world that have played important roles in that country's cultural and economic history, such as France and Britain, and that more recently there is an awareness of other countries and regions of the Indian Ocean area, as well as more and more influentially, Australia. Small islands such as Mauritius need to maintain commercial and cultural relationships with continents. Mauritius maintains close ties with Britain and France and newer thriving economies such as Australia and Canada, and Mauritians have emigrated to these countries in great numbers, particularly since independence. As a considerable percentage of the Mauritian population is of Indian descent, the island also maintains cultural links with the Indian subcontinent. Mauritius therefore looks outwardly towards the faraway countries and continents from which its people originally came, countries that once ruled the island and to countries which many Mauritian expatriates have now made their home.

Smaller islands are usually dependencies, colonies or former colonies for example, and linked, in to varying degrees, to the *métropole*, as Racault (1995) has observed. Their history of colonialism and exploration is essentially an imported history. By asserting difference the islander opposes continental culture but also identifies him or herself in relation to it in an affirmation of a specific cultural identity.

Instabilité, précarité, décentrement, dépendance, tels sont les cadres objectifs de l'insularité vécue. Ils alimentent par réaction un imaginaire inverse qui tend à faire de l'île tout au contraire, un centre et une origine (Racault, 1995: 10).

Alongside the more typical aspects of the lived island experience such as instability and precariousness, Racault mentions remoteness and reliance in terms of distance from and dependence on the *métropole*. The remoteness or de-centering reflects the island's position in relation to the continent or metropolitan centre. Racault (1995: 9-10) believes that Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's observation in *Paul et Virginie* that: "Ils croyaient que le monde finissait où finissait leur île" reveals a thought process so insular that the protagonists are not even conscious of the existence of the island itself. Acknowledgement of the island's existence presupposes that it stands alone from the continents, and that it is not the entire world. In such childish visions of the island, acknowledgement of the existence of continents is inconceivable. Furthermore, Racault asserts that the island is therefore only recognised by the adult relativist world view, which is formed by experiences of division and duality, and so the paradise island is actually a lost paradise, much like lost innocence. Therefore, acknowledging the specificity of the island entails accepting that it differs from continents (Racault, 1995). Today, in Mauritian literature, an awareness of Mauritius's situation on the periphery of the continents is more tangible.

Corcoran (2007) argues that postcolonial criticism's world view emphasises the differences between metropolitan centres and a colonial or postcolonial periphery. The centre-periphery metaphor is essentially representative of the relationship of power. The notion of centre can be regarded as an advantaged perspective, as it is perceptible from the rest of the world, yet finds it difficult sometimes to keep all of the peripheral areas within its view as some of these territories are to be found at great distances from the metropolitan centre. Corcoran points out that islands of the Indian Ocean tend to regard themselves as doubly peripheral (a periphery on the periphery) as they are so geographically removed from the centre and are also located at a great distance from each other (2007: 109). Certainly, colonisation had a decentring effect on the island of Mauritius as a geographical space. The colonised, and later postcolonial, island is a peripheral landmass. Rosello (in Césaire: 1995) notes that islands such as Réunion and Guadeloupe are still drawn as an inset to accompany maps of the "métropole". While they are officially departments of France, this is further proof that islands are considered to be on the periphery of continents and on the periphery of Empire. However, increasingly, Mauritian authors are giving voice to the marginalised within their society and to the place of their country in relation to the continents.

Garuba (2001) notes that island narratives are also written from the point of view of the island itself, and not always from the perspective of the colonist, explorer or adventurer. We can observe this perspective in contemporary island narratives, which place the island at the centre, and not the periphery, thereby challenging the Eurocentric tradition of island narratives. They deal largely with everyday life on the island and sometimes evoke a return to the island after travel to places outside. Garuba adds that any study of island narratives ought to acknowledge that a multiplicity of island experiences exists,

and that no advantage can be gained from ignoring all possible individual and collective subjectivities. Aligning itself with Garuba's view, this thesis, and this chapter in particular, examines the island as both centre and periphery in island narratives.

2.7.1 Mauritius on the periphery of the *métropole*

The two-way nature of the centre-periphery dynamic is evoked in Appanah's *La Noce d'Anna*.³² Sonia's problematic relationship with metropolitan France is mirrored in the contrasting points of view she and her daughter hold on culture and tradition. Her daughter, Anna, having grown up in France, identifies as French and values French traditions, as evident in her wedding plans which, much to the disappointment of her mother, will not reflect any aspect of Indo Mauritian tradition. The reader learns that Sonia was keen to leave Mauritius, and was unwilling to return once she had her daughter, as having a child out of wedlock would have scandalised her family. Sonia has a migrant perspective, having left her country of origin to live abroad, while Anna, born in the host country, has only ever known French society, which is represented in this novel in its bourgeois context. The daughter of a white Englishman and an Indo-Mauritian mother, Anna is French with a multicultural background. Yet, she places value solely on the French aspect of her identity. Sonia, however, is depicted as a citizen of the world, with a multifaceted identity of which Mauritian nationality and the Indo-Mauritian community are two of its constituent elements. For Anna, Mauritius is seen as representative of her mother's childhood, and a sometimes embarrassing element of her identity. Sonia holds the French middle classes responsible for transforming her daughter to such an extent that she no longer resembles her mother, nor do they share

³² In *La Noce d'Anna* (2006), as her only daughter, Anna, prepares for her wedding the narrator, Sonia, of Mauritian origin but living in France, casts a critical eye over her past, and in particular her relationship with Anna, who is her polar opposite.

the same views on French culture or identity. In her roles as exile and immigrant, Sonia finds herself at odds with the society in which she now lives and in which she has chosen to raise her daughter. She in turn becomes a stranger to her own daughter, who represents France's rejection of communalism, with her adherence to the Republic's values and identity. Sonia has a problematic relationship with France. She does not regard her place within French society as secure and she lacks her daughter's confidence and optimism. From her mother's perspective, Anna has completely adopted the behaviour and customs of the French bourgeoisie. Her mother, meanwhile, rejects the values of this social class which her daughter is about to join. What further separates mother and daughter in the eyes of others is their lack of family resemblance. Sonia narrates a particularly jarring incident from Anna's childhood which underlines racial prejudices and her fear of its consequences. Anna gets lost in the supermarket, and when Sonia comes to claim her the supermarket manager refuses to believe that the little girl is her daughter. In the eyes of others, she could not possibly be the mother of a blonde, white, and by extension, essentially French, girl (pp.98-103). This incident, and her vitriolic reaction to it, underlines Sonia's place as an outsider, othered by the *métropole*.

Mauritius is regarded as a faraway offshoot of Britain and France, and unfamiliar to most people she meets. It is seen as an "exotic" holiday destination that exists only in the imagination for the majority of Europeans who will never have the opportunity to visit it. In this sense, Mauritius is peripheral to the *métropole*. The sense of Otherness is tangible throughout Appanah's narrative. Sonia frequently draws contrasts between life in France and life in Mauritius and underlines her need to retain links with her Mauritian identity. At the same time her character highlights the fluidity of notions of

centre and periphery. Her attitude to her homeland is ambivalent. She chose to leave the island to experience life elsewhere and found it difficult to return. Her descriptions of Mauritius evoke both an insular and unequal society, but as an exile and a writer, it inspires her creative output and gives her a sense of cultural identity. The island, often regarded by outsiders in terms of its marginality, becomes the centre and France, the periphery. Sonia prefers to see certain elements of life in Mauritius as more favorable to those in France. For example:

Je dis à Anna que les fleurs de mon pays sont les plus belles de la terre. Qu'elles ne sont en rien cultivées, plantées, elles jaillissent où bon leur semble. Elles sentent comme l'aube, le soleil, la nuit –y a-t-il un parfum qui a réussi à emprisonner cela ? Elles font des reliefs au ciel bleu, elles sont énormes, comme les hibiscus, fragiles comme des frangipaniers, effrayants comme les langues de flamboyants, changeantes comme les goyaviers royaux aux petits matins, enchaînées à jamais comme les fleurs du safran. J'ajoute que le jardin de Versailles, c'est de la gnognote à côté et ça fait éclater de rire Anne et Yves (p.75).

Her description of Mauritian flowers shows how the supposedly beautiful offerings in Paris are actually rather mediocre by comparison. By contrasting France and Mauritius in such a way, Mauritius is now seen as the superior location for a moment, and Paris, the former centre of Empire and a city renowned for its beauty and culture is simply relegated to the margins. It reflects a refreshing way of regarding the relationship between a once-important colonial power and its former colony in which the dominant culture of France is acknowledged, but it is now considered in the light of the beauty of a smaller, seemingly insignificant island in the Indian Ocean, and is found wanting. Appanah's narrative reinforces Garuba's assertion that some island narratives are written from the perspective of the island and place the island at the centre of the narrative in such a way as to challenge Eurocentric stereotypes. While Sonia lapses into nostalgia and sometimes adopts an outsider's perspective when recalling her island childhood, she nonetheless re-appropriates this imagery and sets it against a dominant colonialist narrative that would normally place the "métropole" at the centre of

civilisation and the island as offshoot of Empire. Her sense of dislocation at living in France but being from the periphery is evident throughout the novel. One solution to her malaise is to distort the centre-periphery dichotomy, the other is to accept her daughter's place in the *métropole*.

Barlen Payamootoo offers a similar distortion of the familiar postcolonial centre-periphery dynamic in *Bénarès*, in which he explores the significance of the village's name, bringing local history into a global context by evoking the city of the same name in India. Bénarès in India is a place of pilgrimage for Hindus and depicted as a teeming dirty city. Zelda is mesmerised by the possibility of a faraway city carrying the same name, and draws information from the narrator. This curiosity is reciprocated; the narrator tells of people in Bénarès in India being troubled but amazed to hear of a village in a different country bearing the same name. This awareness of another Bénarès gives them a sense of belonging to the wider world beyond their homeplace. In a curious turn of centre-periphery binary opposition, Mauritius is posited as a centre and India, usually depicted as the spiritual and historical motherland, is on the periphery. The girls are curious as to how the people of Bénarès in India reacted to learning about the existence of another town in a faraway country with the same name.³³ Their world view places Bénarès in Mauritius as the original Bénarès. The narrator displays awareness of this centre-periphery relationship when he wonders “[...] si je ne suis pas allé à Bénarès rien que pour eux pour qu’un jour ils fassent le voyage eux aussi” (p.76), thereby legitimising Mauritius's position in the post-colonial relationship with India. That Indians would make a pilgrimage to Mauritius means that the latter cannot be viewed

³³ The town is now known as Varanasi. Mehta uses two different spellings to show the difference between the village in Mauritius, Bénarès, and in India, Banaras.

as an offshoot of India but as an important destination in its own right, and worthy of pilgrimage. Indeed, as Mehta also notes:

The inhabitants of Banaras, India, would recognize Bénarès, Mauritius, not as an illegitimate child of colonialism and *coolie* migration, but as a legitimate place that they would one day like to visit (2010: 52).

An inward movement from India would recognise the historical ties between the two now-independent countries and give weight to Indo-Mauritians' memory of indentured labour and their role in Mauritius's economic and political development.

2.7.2 Mauritius as mainland to peripheral islands

Notions of centre and periphery in Mauritian island narratives are fluid. The centre may constitute a large urban centre in contrast to outlying or peripheral villages, such as in Pyamootoo's *Bénarès*, in which the epic portrayal of the journey by night from the capital Port Louis in the northeast to the eponymous small village in the southern part of the island, shows how the small island space of Mauritius can seem relatively vast depending on one's perception and access. Centre and periphery are also explored by Devi, who highlights the many levels of enclosure that constitute island identity, and in particular the marginal situation in which many islanders live. Devi's novel *Soupir* reflects a particularly marginalised group: women in a vulnerable position within their community part of the wider group seeking refuge in a peripheral part of the island on an island already located a great distance from the main(is)land. A central character remarks: "Nous faisons partie de Maurice mais elle est bien loin, bien différente. Rien ne nous unit. Nous sommes la dernière île habitée à l'est de l'Afrique" (p.25), thereby acknowledging the complex relationship between the two islands. While Rodrigues officially belongs to Mauritius, it is at a considerable distance from the larger island. The characters' Otherness is constructed in relation to their marginality, as a community

separated from the urban centre of Port Mathurin, the capital of Rodrigues, on an island located far away from the mainland of Mauritius. The speaker is also aware of the differences between Mauritius and Rodrigues, with Rodrigues then described in terms of its location in relation to Africa. Both Mauritius and Africa are points of reference, with the island of Rodrigues defined in terms of what it is not. We learn that many young people emigrate to Mauritius for employment. Mauritius, as the centre, is a marker of success, and failure entails a return to the smaller, poorer island-prison of Rodrigues. “Lorsqu’ils partent pour Maurice, ceux qui réussissent ne reviennent pas. Les autres reviennent, mais c’est avec une sorte de haine pour l’île-prison dont ils n’ont pas pu s’évader” (p.118).

The centre-periphery relationship between the large and small islands, with its own history of migration and exile, recalls the problematic postcolonial relationship between Mauritius and France. Shifting perspectives allow Mauritius, the centrepiece for outlying islands to assume the role of a decentred *métropole*, a place of opportunity and social advancement. In this centre, the Rodriguais are othered; they embody the exoticised Other, a simple and quiet people who originate from a challenging island landscape.

A Maurice aussi, on s’intéressait au sort des habitants de ce rocher perdu comme jamais avant. Mais pour nous, cela ne voulait rien dire. Nous étions les gens de la solitude, des paysages cruels, des collines silencieuses, des côtes abruptes, des vents chauds (p.140).

We see another evocation of Rodrigues in Berthelot’s *Le Désamour*³⁴. When Manu travels to Rodrigues she is struck by the welcome and simplicity of the people she meets:

³⁴ In Berthelot’s *Le Désamour* (2004), following surprise letter from an old boyfriend from her student days in Paris, Emmanuelle recalls their relationship and ruminates on the path her life has taken since.

Les habitants de l'île-dépendance l'accueillirent simplement et avec sympathie. Hommes et femmes lui parlèrent de leurs problèmes ou de leurs misères sans honte mais sans ostentation. Comme elle se sentait bien parmi eux ! Ces grandes mains qui étreignaient la sienne, ces sourires aux dents blanches, ces regards sans détour, ces rires qui fusaient, contagieux, lui faisaient une ambiance agréable, propice aux échanges et à l'amitié spontanées (p.213).

Rodrigues is an outlying island to which Manu has come to undertake research, but also to flee her personal problems at home. She is attracted by the lifestyle of the Rodriguais : “Elle touchait là à un art d'exister incomparable, vivifiant dans un sens, puisqu'il comportait aussi un royal mépris de l'heure qui passe, du temps qui presse” (*ibid.*). The island is described as timeless and where life moves at its own pace. Manu's view of Rodrigues appears to be informed by exoticism. Her wholly optimistic description of the island and its inhabitants is resonant of early euro-centric island narratives and the myth of the noble savage. Yet, the reader wonders whether the character's viewpoint is naïve and influenced by exoticism, possibly informed also by the simple fact that Rodrigues is regarded as an outpost of Mauritius. She also refers to how attractive the dark-skinned population is, remarking as noted in the citation above: “ces sourires aux dents blanches”. Her perspective is reminiscent of a Eurocentric world-view that sees the islands as marginal, somewhat backward, yet attractive to the visitor. As an islander from a tourist destination such as Mauritius, and having remarked on how the British regarded her island, it is curious to see Manu adopting a similar exotic gaze in regard to a small neighbouring island dependency of Mauritius. Informed by the cultural significance of islands as objects of desire and mythological places, Manu is not immune to the allure of the island.

The centre-periphery dichotomy is visible here in a similar reworking observed in Devi's *Soupir*. Island dependencies are shown to have their place within the hierarchy of island groups. For Devi, writing from the marginalised islander perspective,

Rodrigues represents an island-prison and a life of hardship and limited opportunity for its inhabitants. Berthelot's text, in comparison, highlights a neo-colonialist and reductionist world view in which the outlying island is a place of beauty and simplicity. Their contrasting narrative voices highlight differing perspectives on notions of centre and periphery for islanders.

2.8 Conclusion

In this chapter we examined how the island's distinct topography and marginality influence the writing process, are shown to determine protagonists' behaviour and drive the narrative in contemporary Mauritian novels in French. The confined space and remoteness of the small island can also heighten existing tensions and inequalities; its uniqueness reflects the idiosyncracies of Mauritian society and echoes the divisions and tensions at its heart. When examining islands in the context of geography, both urban and rural, it has also been useful to assess the island's relationship with continents and with other small islands. The concepts of centre and periphery are also effective in discussing how the island is both a marginal space and centre. The island is evoked in relation to other spaces, as a postcolonial space on the periphery or as a centre to outlying island spaces. We have also observed some reworkings of the postcolonial centre-periphery dichotomy in which Mauritius becomes a focus for those living in the *métropole* or ancestral lands. We conclude that the island is predominant and omnipresent in the Mauritian novel as a literal space conceived of in terms of its spatial limitations as well as its distinct physical attributes. The island is the subject of diverse representations of place and space, never formulaic, and which challenge the reader's notions of place and identity.

The following chapter explores other significant, yet more figurative, aspects of the island in Mauritian literature, in island metaphors and tropes. We see that the island constitutes a symbol and manifestation of alterity, and an important motif to explore the idiosyncratic aspects Mauritian society as well as more universally, the human condition.

**CHAPTER THREE - RE-IMAGINING THE ISLAND: APPROPRIATING
AND SUBVERTING THE ISLAND TROPE**

3.1 Introduction

The present chapter analyses the importance of the island trope in the context of contemporary Mauritian novels in French, and the many ways in which the image of the island is manifest in these texts. While the island trope holds a prominent place in literature, and in particular in Western discourse, we will see how these novels re-interpret, or subvert the island metaphor. In Mauritian writing the island is omnipresent as theme, as décor and as protagonist in its own right.

The significance of the many representations of the island in these Mauritian novels is noteworthy. The island, in terms of islandness and insularity, will be considered as a theme in Mauritian narratives with a view to assessing how the island defines the text and how the text defines the island. The island has a wealth of recognisable imagery in literature: a feminine image, an idyllic space, a hostile space, a site of memory, a place of transformation, or a prison. Contemporary Mauritian authors, such as Appanah, Berthelot, Devi, de Souza, and Patel, draw on such imagery to reflect on issues of marginalisation, and on how a sense of Otherness can appear even more pronounced within island societies than between island and continent. This chapter will address the island in some of its most frequent fictional metaphorical imaginings. The island is conceived of as a simmering landmass that represents a fragile state of mind as well as a volatile society on the brink of conflict and disorder. It will also consider the island as an image of woman, marginalised by caste, gender and ethnicity. Lastly, we will explore insularity and how the island embodies marginality and alterity.

3.2 Island metaphors and tropes

Islands are powerful symbols in popular imagination and literature. In the latter, islands function as a captivating image and often as a metaphor, largely associated with

romance, freedom and escapism. Péron outlines the reasons for the island's continued significance:

[...] the island is one of the great locations emblematic of spirituality in Western Literature, together with the desert, the hermitage and the cave. Island experience situates an individual geographically midway between the immensity of the sea and the boundlessness of the sky, and is thus propitious to that individual's discovery of the infinity within him – or herself. (2004: 331)

The island is considered a conquerable or transformative space or a site of self discovery.

The recurring use of the island as a symbol has been identified in small canon of island-based literature in such works as *The Tempest*, *Gulliver's Travels*, *Paul et Virginie*, *Robinson Crusoe*, *Treasure Island*, or *Lord of the Flies*. Common to these island narratives is the representation of island as a destination, accidental or otherwise.

While we observe some diversity in representations of the island in such narratives, the absence of the islander's voice is notable. The most consistent island trope is that of an Other space. In its embodiment of Otherness the island becomes the ultimate representation of alterity. The notion of exile, in Mauritius for example, is enhanced by an awareness of islandness, and the geography of the island space. While binary opposition models (heaven or hell, prison or refuge, communality or individuality) dominate narratives on the island, it could also be argued that the very process of negotiating the apparent contrasts in what the island represents is, in fact, the defining characteristic of the island experience and literary imaginings of the island. Navigating the contradictory aspects of islandness is therefore central to island identity.

Theoretical approaches to the island in literature focus on the concepts of islandness and insularity, and the island metaphor. Baldacchino (2006: 5) identifies some discourses on the island that contribute to islands' subordination through the simplification of various paradoxes. He asserts that contemporary fascination with islands is due to a tendency to regard the island space as a blank canvas or as a potential laboratory for various types of human projects. Literature propagates this notion, with many fictional characters transformed for the better or for the worse by their travel to, or extended stay on, an island. Baldacchino mentions *Lord of the Flies* (1954), *The Island of Dr. Moureau* (1894) and *Elle* (2003) as examples. Certainly, the knowability of islands is key to how the island is perceived by outsiders. Its small shape, almost all visible to the naked eye from the air, is a tantalising prospect for the visitor, with the island frequently embodying a utopian vision of humanity and nature.

Attempts to historicise or theorise the Other in the island trope have conventionally been presented in the form of such oppositions as Crusoe/Friday in *Robinson Crusoe*, and *Foe* and in the case of Mauritian literature, in *Paul et Virginie*. Islands are specific and fruitful areas of interest because of the wealth of complex interpretations and representations. The amalgam of contrasting features is arguably their most distinguishing characteristic. Garuba (2001) acknowledges that such images have been helpful in understanding how the colonial meetings between island and Europe are processed and described, but suggests that a new type of interrogation on the island is needed.

The island is increasingly identified as one of the core metaphors in Western literary discourse. Since Crusoe, the paradise-hell dichotomy is arguably the most visible

metaphor in the literary evocation of the island. Hay (2006: 27) notes that islands have been interpreted and represented as symbols of loss (loss of innocence for example), as places characterised by remoteness and isolation, (leading to the further metaphor relating to a particular isolated state of mind), and as a paradise or a prison. Baldacchino (2006: 6) also acknowledges that islands lend themselves to assumptions of resilience, and identifies islanders' experiences as representative of malleability and toughness. Associated with this notion is the assumption that the remoteness of island life equates with isolation or peripherality (as seen in the previous chapter and in Devi's *Soupir*, for example). This alternative island metaphor, the supposed resilience and resourcefulness of the island population, as a response to challenges posed by their landscape and history, is also acknowledged by Hay (2006: 20). Commentators are in agreement, however, that existing island metaphors have been constructed and interpreted from a largely Western subjectivity. In addition, the island tends to be regarded as a site of extreme contrasts: insularity and openness, a place of exile or a nurturing cocoon, an exotic tourist destination, and yet a problematic home-place, as both paradise and hell. Yet, Péron (2004) suggests that there is a need for constructive dialogue about how islands are perceived. Discourse on islands has been founded on a combination of myth and reality that has never quite gone out of fashion:

[...] the island may have paramount significance. Its distinctiveness will reside in the ambiguity between insular status and "islandness", between development in the strict sense of the term and the culture of island diversity. The philosophical polarisation of island from the rest of the world may have been a myth constructed in the time of Greek antiquity; yet, the bimodality remains starkly evident (2004: 338-339).

Racault (2007) has identified similar features of an island imaginary in historical and contemporary literary and documentary works from both Europe and the Indian Ocean region. Symbolic values are attributed to the island, again employed in a binary oppositional context. Racault identifies five principal island symbols that follow a

chronological order through the history of islands, particularly in a colonial and postcolonial context. First, the island may represent a new Garden of Eden where Mother Nature forms the backdrop to a life of leisure. Second, this island paradise can be regarded an island-hell when slavery and violence, associated with the colonial experience, are framed by the geography of the island. The island can also be hellish for an expatriate for whom the island host country is actually a site of exile. Third, the island represents separation and as such is the ultimate representation of alterity. The island is seen as Other in relation to Europe, which is regarded as Self, or as the norm. This leads to such binary oppositions as the island versus the continent, the colony versus the *métropole*, and a general dialectic of sameness and difference. Fourth, a political reading of the island also becomes possible. The exotic uninhabited décor of the island is conducive to a sense of freedom and potential. It therefore presents an opportunity to conceive of the reconstruction of a new social order or a utopian possibility to establish a community, starting with a blank canvas. The fifth point put forward is the sense of new beginnings, of being almost beyond history (Racault, 2007:19). Furthermore, the Mascarene Islands have succeeded in capturing the imagination because they are linked to cultures that have historically been present in the region and often inscribed in a wider Indian Ocean mythology. Given their place in the history of trade and empire, the islands of the Indian Ocean have become synonymous with the spice route, associated with the Portuguese, the Dutch and the French, since Pierre Poivre in particular. Trade in slaves, precious stones and gold all add more allure to the myth of the islands in the Indian Ocean, evidence of which is to be seen in Le Clézio's *Le Chercheur d'or*.³⁵ While the appeal of the island to non-

³⁵ 2008 Nobel laureate Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio was born in Nice on April 13, 1940. He studied in Bristol, Nice, Aix-en-Provence and obtained his doctorate at the University of Perpignan. A novelist and essayist, ecologically-minded and heavily influenced by travel and his family ancestry, Le Clézio's oeuvre is prolific and varied. His Indian Ocean-based novels *Le chercheur d'or* (1985), *Voyage à*

islanders is well documented, we must consider the point of view of islanders themselves, and how the island environment influences their lifestyle and world view. How island writers appropriate and subvert the island imagery is the focus of the following sections.

Island narratives have given rise to vivid imagery of a destructive environment and its fragmentary and volcanic landscape, which is an intrinsic part of the cycle of birth, ageing and rebirth. We have seen in the previous chapter how the natural environment of the island is a tangible and dominating presence in contemporary Mauritian novels. This chapter will assess the image of the island as a living entity. We examine how it inspires more figurative representations and how the literary trope of the island embodies many aspects of Mauritian society.

3.3 The simmering island and the power of the elements

Personification of the island is a common feature of island literatures and is at the heart of what has become known as the island metaphor. The various features of the island topos are equated with the human body, as if to signify it as a living terrain. One of the most frequent uses of island imagery is the representation of the island as a rumbling volcanic landscape. Volcanoes are a symbol of both fertility and destruction. The island is created through volcanic and seismic activity, and in certain texts we see that the restless island gives birth to its inhabitants or regenerates them.

The volcanic island comes to embody life and death, and this vivid imagery of a destructive environment, a fragmentary, volcanic, landscape, places the island within a

Rodrigues (1986), *La quarantaine* (1995) explore his family's association with Mauritius and form part of our corpus. Le Clézio is also the author of *Le procès-verbal* (1963), *Terra amata* (1967), *Onitsha* (1991), *Étoile errante* (1992) and *Ritournelle de la faim*. (2008), amongst many others.

cycle of birth, ageing and rebirth. The volcanic island is personified as a simmering mass in some Mauritian narratives and is frequently highlighted through a choice of dynamic, energised verbs and adverbs, such as in Devi's *Soupir*, when Patrice reminds the reader that the island and its geographical characteristics have been created by the volcanic rumblings underneath the island's soil. The island has been created from a violent movement of humanised ferocity: "On aurait dit qu'un volcan avait craché ici sa rancune et ses cendres et tout figé par des langues de feu" (p.112). The volcano is represented as a body raging and spitting fire. The process of eruption calls to mind birth and fertility, and also fire, which signifies destruction. The forested area of *Bwa Mor* is described by the narrator as a barren place, a forest of dead stumps in dry volcanic soil. The volcanic island, usually synonymous with fertility, with rich soil and verdant landscape, is depicted here as a bleak and unproductive place. Similar imagery appears in Appanah's *Blue Bay Palace*, when the island is personified through the image of its violent birth: "C'est un pays né du crachat brûlant d'un volcan et dont le profil a été dessiné pas les tempêtes et le soleil cardinal" (p.9). As in *Soupir*, the island has been spat out by a volcanic eruption. Personification allows the island's origins to be attributed to a malevolent living being.

In Devi's *Pagli*, a first-person narrative written from the point of view of Daya (known as "Pagli", *la folle*), the island is depicted as a violent rumbling space. Pagli assumes the identity of a crazy woman as an act of defiance against the discrimination and cruelty she suffers. Her behaviour holds a mirror up to society to highlight the inhumanity of the prejudices that stem from gender and racial inequalities. The protagonist identifies with part of the island landscape and explicitly draws parallels between the volcanic environment and her own turbulent emotional state. Pagli is

simmering with intense anger caused by unhappy events in her past and present and is likely to reach breaking point at any moment, much like an erupting volcano that has lain dormant for many years. In employing the volcanic earth as a metaphor for her own mindset, Pagli reveals her tumultuous emotional state and shows the possibilities for refuge and solace offered by the island topos. The protagonist identifies with her environment and conceives of the island itself in terms of its human qualities:

Mais au fur et à mesure, mes sens cessent de percevoir les choses ordinaires pour n'entendre que des histoires d'insectes et de poussières et de sédiments, et je vais très très loin parce que cette terre volcanique me ressemble. Issue de séismes, elle est en perpétuelle attente de ses éruptions. L'une d'elles, peut-être, la ramènera à son origine de feu et de soufre, en dehors du temps (p.27).

This paragraph evokes a desire for oblivion, for the human being and the island to be transformed from matter into pure energy by the violence of a volcanic explosion, recalling Lohka's (2010) assessment of female characters becoming part of their island environment such as in Appanah's *Blue Bay Palace* or Devi's *Le Voile de Draupadi*, in which the protagonists also identify with the island space, in terms of its physical attributes and marginalised status.

The capacity for regeneration is a notion also associated with the island environment. The island energises the human body, as if in such a small space, every part of human life is amplified, or concentrated or distilled. Serenity and calm are juxtaposed with images of upheaval and fragmentation. In *Blue Bay Palace*, Maya's emotions are equated with the violent earth of the island space. It needs first to erupt before it can become a stable environment. Maya's desire for oblivion is combined with a longing to be at peace:

J'avais l'impression que le temps ralentissait et que la terre menaçait de s'ouvrir à nouveau sur un noyau de lave et que, comme il y a des milliers d'années, cette lave recouvrirait tout et dessinerait une terre plus clémente (p.42).

Cyclones pose a constant threat to islanders in the region and feature in Mauritian novels such as Devi's *Soupir*, Appanah's *le Dernier frère*, Patel's *Le Portrait Chamarel* and in Le Clézio's *Le Chercheur d'or*. Life is extremely challenging for the inhabitants of Rodrigues, the central protagonists of Devi's *Soupir* in their vulnerable geographical location on a small island to the far west of the African continent. The powerful force of nature is expressed largely in the novel through the presence of cyclones. Devi's protagonists are aware of the impact of cyclones on their already vulnerable island as well as on their fragile emotional state: "Le cyclone nous avait peut-être anesthésiés. Le cyclone ou autre chose, une laideur née de l'échec, une brutalité qui nous pourrissait le cœur" (p.88). The cyclone is given as one potential explanation for certain behaviour, equated with inherent sense of failure or violence. Devi's protagonists have a heightened sense of awareness of their physical environment. The natural elements are inescapable and determine all aspects of island life: "Mer, soleil, sécheresse et cyclone. Nos quatre rythmes. Nos quatre points cardinaux. Ce qui nous faisait vivre et nous tuait tour à tour" (p.24). Cyclones have particular resonance in this novel as a reminder of life and death, energising the island and its population, and yet threatening to destroy their very existence.³⁶ The cyclone is also an effective narrative device, particularly in *Soupir*. A catalyst for their displacement from their village on the coast to the desolate area of Soupir, the cyclone also facilitates the representation of the island space as a

³⁶ Similar symbols have been used in earlier Mauritian novels, such as André Masson's *Un temps pour mourir* (1962) in which a destructive cyclone ravages an island plateau (presumably Mauritius). The cyclone is feared as an apocalyptic event and causes a 'cyclone de l'âme' whereby not only are lives disrupted but values and morals are uprooted and called into question. Also, in *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*, Aimé Césaire describes how cyclones breathe life into the island, thereby representing rebirth:

l'énorme poumon
des cyclones qui respirent et le feu thésaurisé des volcans et les gigantesques poules sismiques qui bat maintenant la mesure d'un corps vivant en mon ferme embrasement.

Césaire, A, (1995). Trans. Rosello & Pritchard.

nurturing site of refuge. The narrator, Patrice, describes how the group came to leave for Soupir:

Le cyclone n'avait laissé qu'un parfum de sel dans l'air, mais il s'accrochait, s'épaississait, et refusait de se dissiper comme il le faisait normalement. Les algues et les rochers prenaient des formes étranges. Nous ne reconnaissons plus rien. Assis sur les pierres humides, nous avons refusé d'écouter la mer, nous lui avons tourné le dos pour ne pas sentir son appel. Il nous fallait nous tourner vers la terre, et espérer qu'elle ouvrirait son ventre pour nous comme la mer ne l'avait jamais fait (p.87).

Coastline and inland areas are placed in stark contrast, yet each is personified, highlighting the bodily connection between islander and island. The dichotomy drawn by Devi dramatises the protagonists' sense of loss at leaving the coast. As they believe that the sea can no longer sustain them and holds no promise for the future, they place all their hope inland and move to Soupir where their contrasting fortunes play out.

Patel also exploits the cyclone as a cataclystic narrative device in *Le Portrait Chamarel*. The damage caused by the cyclone exposes an old family portrait, revealing an image of Samia's grandfather. Samia, the protagonist, is then revealed to have a connection to Hussein's family. This discovery becomes the focal point of the narrative. Furthermore as a thematic element, the cyclone reinforces the vulnerability of islanders who are left at the mercy of the devastating storms that strike the island regularly:

Samia avait gardé des souvenirs affolés des précédents cyclones qui avaient visité l'île. Les trombes d'eau, le vent furieux appliqué à tout détruire sur son passage, les éléments déchaînés dans l'obscurité. Oui, elle l'avait toujours haïe cette sadique propension à venir presque toujours de nuit, quand les rafales pouvaient plonger toute l'île dans l'obscurité, quand les heures interminables s'écoulaient à écouter les craquements sinistres et le déchirement brutal des grands arbres, le vol meurtrier des feuilles de tôle arrachées, sans pouvoir distinguer, dans la nuit sombre, d'où viendrait la prochaine menace (p.110).

The narrator's lively description of the cyclone reminds the reader of the vulnerability of the island and the power of the elements. The terror engendered by the cyclone is further dramatised by the haunting description of the old woman wailing as the storm

rages. Her intense physical reaction to the cyclone is the result of years of experiencing devastating, apocalyptic storms:

Un cri, rauque, douloureux, un râle immense et caverneux, venu d'entrailles déchirées, un cri vieux d'années de retenue, un cri de rage, de haine et de défaite. Un cri sépulcral. Un cri de fin du monde (p.113).

The elements also play a key role in Appanah's *Le Dernier frère*. Again we observe the cyclone as catalyst when the major storm that leads to the death of Raj's two brothers is the cause of the family's displacement. It instils a profound sense of dislocation, as well as being a source of considerable hardship. The cyclone has both visible and unseen consequences. It scars the landscape and affects the characters' material situation, but also heightens their sense of vulnerability and mortality.

Forces of nature are omnipresent in island life. Contemporary Mauritian fiction highlights the omnipotence of nature to the extent that it becomes a character in its own right. Lyrical passages evoking geographical features call to mind the beauty of the island, on the other hand, and show the volcanic island as a life-giving force. Contemporary Mauritian writers favour increasingly realistic representations of the island, by portraying the hardship which the island environment represents in the lives of its marginalised inhabitants. The island, therefore, comes to represent the antithesis of an idyllic refuge and serves to underscore the vulnerability of humans in the face of nature.

It follows that as a limited space, with an often explosive, violent natural environment, the island is also a hotbed of social tension and violence. Violence consistently arises in Devi's novels which frequently feature protagonists as the victims, or perpetrators, of extreme violence. There is a sense of inevitability in the frequent evocation of brutality

in Devi's narratives, given the closed physical and social environment in which the plot develops.³⁷ In *Soupir*, the European tourist who has raped Pitié every year since she was eleven appears to come alive through the violence to which he subjects the young girl, as if empowered by the island environment that is in such stark contrast to his home country:

[...]là-bas dans son grand pays il n'est qu'un cadavre bleu de froid comme tous les autres, aveuglé de lumières blafardes, assourdi de bruits dès qu'il ouvre la fenêtre, le goût de la fumée sur la langue, mais ici, dit-il, il marche pieds nus et comprend la terre, il écoute la lune sur la mer et le silence qui coule sous chaque parole, et dans mes yeux ouverts de peur et de douleur, il se voit vivre, naître, porter, créer, il voit une souffrance qui lui permet de vivre [...] (p.194).

Utterly transformed by the island; he becomes closer to nature and is emboldened by it, evoking a colonial mindset in which the island is regarded as a conquerable and transformative space, frequent tropes in the perception of the island by non-islanders, as outlined earlier. Yet Devi's narrative appropriates the transformative island metaphor, turning it on its head to show the destructive effects of othering and exoticism suggested by the Eurocentric image of the island. The transformative quality of the island in this case facilitates the increasing violence perpetrated by the European visitor against a young local girl. Tensions and actions are amplified in the stifling, volcanic isolated environment of the small island space, and can be read as a perpetuation of colonial violence. The postcolonial island continues to be the playground for European dominance, as we also see in Appanah's *Blue Bay Palace*, discussed later.

3.4 The gendered island

³⁷ “[...] l'île est notre seul radeau, c'est sur l'île et sur l'océan en même temps [...] la mer nous emprisonne, donc on est dans une prison qui nous sauve et nous condamne, et je crois que c'est vraiment fondamental dans l'écriture des îles, parce que j'ai l'impression qu'il y a dans beaucoup d'auteurs [...] une écriture violente qui est née dans les îles et justement parce qu'on est à la fois emprisonné mais en même temps il y a la mer”. (Devi Jun 2007).

The island is frequently evoked in gendered terms in literature, as a feminine and, more rarely, as a masculine space.³⁸ As a small entity of land surrounded by sea, the island has also been likened to a child in the womb, protected by the sea, an amniotic fluid that nurtures and sustains it. This imagery is resonant of Thomas More's *Utopia* and is a feminine image, *par excellence*. The island has also been interpreted as a motherland that protects her inhabitants (her children), from the destructive sea and shelters them from outside threats and marauding invaders. Both vulnerable and protective, the island is a penetrable fortress and a mother-protector. It embodies a feminised space on the periphery and represents both a strong and a vulnerable female figure in literature. Vulnerable to outside interest and conquest, the island is a violated space, and its traumatic history of colonisation, slavery, immigration, and discrimination bears witness to this. The island can therefore also be a metaphor for violation or penetrability. Depicted as a conquerable space, the island resonates with female experiences (in a feminist reading), in particular the vulnerability of women in relation to men. We see, for example, the island equated with the female body as a possible site of conquest in Devi's *Soupir* and Appanah's *Blue Bay Palace*.

Representations of islands in literature are also informed by the lure of the exotic or indeed, by a distinctly male gaze in the analysis of place as feminine.³⁹ Female authors can therefore mimic "scopophilia", the male gaze that reduces women to objects of eroticism and beauty. Islands have been romanticised throughout history, albeit from a Western subjective point of view, and function as powerful symbols of romance in popular imagination and popular literature. The gendered island metaphor in literature

³⁸ Robinson is marooned in a primarily masculine desert island in Defoe's eighteenth-century novel.

³⁹ Wightman (in Matthews, 2000) summarises this notion in an article comparing Irish and Caribbean novels in their portrayals of 'Island Women'.

occurs more often as a female than a male space. Indeed, discussions of place itself are often undertaken in the context of a discussion of gender. Evidence of the male gaze can be seen in recent texts by Mauritian authors, in particular by female authors. The island is most often described in terms of its resemblance to the female silhouette; a mountainous and cavernous curving landscape that calls to mind the contours of a woman's body. It is especially important, in the context of this analysis, to study texts written by women, and about women, to ascertain how these representations are appropriated or challenged in the Mauritian context.

3.4.1 The island topos as a geographical embodiment of woman

The island is regarded as a feminine space by a female narrator in Appanah's *Blue Bay Palace* and by a male narrator in Devi's *Soupir*. Through its similarity to the female form and through the nourishment the island offers its inhabitants the landscape evokes the themes of pregnancy and childbirth. In the former novel, the narrator describes how the island landscape resembles a woman at different stages of life, from adolescence to motherhood, and then old age. She describes the curving voluptuous landscape and how the island's earth transforms from fertility to aridity: "Un bout de terre à la surface irrégulière, aux contours incertains. Ici la rondeur d'une femme enceinte, là la cambrure d'une jeune fille, plus loin l'aridité d'une vieille" (p.9).

As the narrative progresses, this wild landscape is portrayed as an attractive challenge to the first male visitors to the island who tried to tame it in order to make it habitable: "Les premiers hommes l'ont accosté sur leur route des Indes, par hasard, il y a quatre siècles" (p.9). In this portrayal of the female body, the author plays on the different

meanings of the verb “accoster”: its nautical meaning (to draw up alongside, to berth), its sense of propositioning and indeed its more negative connotation, to accost.

We see how the island metaphor is appropriated when Maya dreams of her grandmother early in the narrative. Echoing the symbolism employed in the opening of the novel, her grandmother’s face now reminds Maya of the island, thereby transforming the usual perspective of the island-as-woman metaphor in favour of a woman-as-island imagery. She likens her grandmother’s face to the island space, thereby ascribing human qualities to different aspects of the island’s geography: “Son visage m’a fait penser à mon pays: les vallées de rides, les montagnes de chair, les rivières de peau, les recoins brûlés, les bords dévastés et les yeux de soleil” (p.34). Just like the wizened face of an aged woman, the landscape has been marked by the elements, and by the passing of time. Later we see Maya exhausted, emotional and tormented after a rendez-vous with her lover and, not for the first time in the novel, her state of mind is compared to the tumultuous island environment. Her body is equated with an island devastated by a cyclone and she identifies with the island in its vulnerability and penetrability. The island is “ravaged” by a storm, which evokes Maya’s body, and her emotional state, consumed and exhausted by love-making:

J’ai l’impression d’être mon pays après le cyclone : ravagé, à plat, sens dessus dessous, la terre dans l’océan, la mer dans la terre, le vent plus fort que tout...Plus rien n’est à sa place (p.73).

Everything has been turned on its head, as if subject to a cyclone. The powerful imagery of the cyclone highlights the torment she feels at having to conceal her relationship and being unable to escape her socio-economic status.

Femaleness is explored on two levels by Devi in *Soupir*; firstly, in the portrayal of the status of women within their new secluded society in relation to the men, and secondly, in a representation of the island as a largely female space. The narrator regards the island in gendered terms:

[...] la colline était l'enflure d'une gorge de femme, la même qui se répétait à l'infini autour de nous, menue ou ample, pointue ou très ronde, orgueilleuse ou modeste, on ne voyait plus que des choses intensément, démesurément féminines qui nous mettaient dans un état proche du paroxysme, on comprenait soudain que Soupir tout entier était une femme qui nous avait pris dans son corps avec ses crevasses et ses amplitudes, son épaisseur et sa fragilité [...] (p.181).

This is a compelling, almost voyeuristic, representation of the island topography as female. The island reminds the narrator of a woman who offers emotional comfort to islanders, yet she is also represented as a sexual being. The island therefore embodies the many binary oppositional markers of female identity: sexuality/motherhood and strength/fragility.

Woman's role as mother and giver of life is invoked in *Soupir*. The island gives birth to its inhabitants and these islanders are forever held in a deep bond with the island-matriarch.⁴⁰ She is their protector, enveloping them in her womb in the age-old image of Mother Nature. The Rodriguais who moved to Soupir expect the land to protect and nourish them in its incarnation as surrogate mother who replaces the sea's mothering role. This, at least, is her potential. However, the soil on Soupir is infertile and unsuitable for refuge: "Elle était pâle et sèche. Elle ne donnerait rien. Elle était et demeurait stérile par haine et par rage. Et par volonté de ne jamais être la mère nourricière que nous attendions" (p.52). There is tangible disappointment that the island

⁴⁰ See also Berthelot's *L'Outre-Mère* (1996), in which Michael, who returns to Mauritius after a long absence, regards the island as the giver of life, a mother figure, and nurturer. It is his *raison-d'être* and the place to which he returns in order to feel safe and find meaning in his life. It is a feminine space that offers refuge and the promise of recapturing his past. "Au fait, il était décidé à s'inquiéter le moins possible de tout. N'avait-il pas retrouvé l'île mère, la source pérenne de toutes les grâces ?" (p.96).

cannot provide for them as it ought to and resignation and despondency at the inevitability of their plight. Yet, the island later reveals its maternal instincts in providing shelter to some of its inhabitants. From Soupir, the rest of the small island of Rodrigues is viewed as a potential mother-figure by those that are lucky enough to live in a more pleasant part of that island: “Au bas, l’île semblait très douce et très bleue comme si elle enveloppait ses enfants favoris, restés en arrière” (p.148). Those who are favoured are embraced by the sea and the island. The island is therefore both good and bad mother.

The deep respect the group feels for their island home environment and their appreciation of its beauty create a sense of returning to the womb:

Nous étions à l’intérieur du corps de Soupir, redevenus des êtres endormis et embryonnaires attendant la naissance, et dans le tumulte de ses battements, de son souffle, de sa souffrance, de son attente, nous comprenions que nous étions tous ses enfants, que nous serions aimés même pendant la déchirure, que la naissance était faite pour détruire la mère et offrir la gloire à l’enfant, c’était ainsi, l’ordre des choses était tel, Soupir nous enfantait au monde (p.148).

Drawn in by the island’s nurturing power in times of difficulty, they find themselves regressing to an infantile state. The island has the capacity to be a nurturing landscape for its inhabitants. The sea and the island can both be read as feminine in the text. The sea is a mother figure as it envelops the island protectively, and the island is the place of refuge and a supposed provider of nourishment.

The sea is portrayed as a symbol of liberation and new beginnings for women in some Mauritian narratives, in a reworking of the perennial myth of earth as masculine and sea as feminine, as in Devi’s *Le Voile de Draupadi*⁴¹ or Patel’s *Le Silence des Chagos*.

⁴¹ In *Le Voile de Draupadi* (1993), Anjali’s journey of self-discovery, a rejection of Indo-Mauritian society, its materialism, its patriarchy, and its limits, leads her to an awareness of geographical as well as personal space, linking her to the island and its society.

The sea is also proffered as an image of refuge, much like the island itself has been romanticised in narratives as a refuge from the sea. In Appanah's *Blue Bay Palace*, Maya, facing arrest for her earlier act of violence, reveals her desire to be at one with the ocean that surrounds the island space. The sea is shown as an extension of the island:

J'ai espéré que je m'endormirais avant, bercée par la solitude de cette plage. J'ai espéré qu'une dernière fois, qu'une toute dernière fois, je ne ferais qu'une avec la mer. Et qu'avant leurs bottes lourdes sur le sable et leurs mains calleuses sur moi, j'aurais l'illusion d'un dernier goût de mon pays (p.95).

The fluidity of the sea's movement supports the body, like a child surrounded by amniotic fluid in the womb. The adjective "bercée" emphasises the mother-daughter relationship that lies at the heart of the islander's life experience. The sea cradles and comforts her island dwelling daughters (and sons). In the same novel, we see how the sea is regarded by some as an aid to fertility when Maya mentions how her parents are sure that the sea air helped them to conceive (p.19). The sea, therefore, affects all parts of island life, sustaining the island population, providing security, and as such becomes a source of much superstition and mythology.

3.4.2 Woman as island: the island as a peripheral female space

Not only are inhabitants of small islands in a peripheral situation geographically, separated from larger neighbouring islands and continents, but women within many such island societies also occupy a space on the periphery of their communities. In fact, as a meeting place of African, Asian and European cultures and customs, we could argue that the island space of Mauritius acts as an effective stage on which to represent in literature the universal issue of women's place in society. The island topography and geographical situation echo the vulnerability and marginalisation of women in postcolonial island societies.

Contemporary women writers in Mauritius undermine the stereotypical image of women by depicting them in a new economic, cultural, social and political light. Their representations of the complexities of past and contemporary Mauritian society serve to highlight the difficulties faced by women in establishing a sense of Self. Female writers dwell on issues of personal space, oppression, self-discovery, and the desire of women to assert their identities in the face of imposed ethnic and social barriers, either in literary fiction or in historical narratives. Devi, in particular, has a prolific body of work that addresses issues relating to vulnerable women on the margins of Mauritian society, evoking such topics as prostitution, incest, facial deformities, rape, domestic violence and usually in the context of marginalised Indo-Mauritians. Lionnet notes that Devi evokes the unappealing aspects of woman's existence in a postcolonial society in a style heavily influenced both by social realism and mysticism, especially in relation to *Rue La Poudrière*: "She writes of the most marginalised postcolonial subjects, the urban female underclass, obsessively exploring the social construction of femininity and its dark recesses" (1995: 48).

The protagonist and narrator of Devi's *Pagli* has been rejected by her community and dismissed as a madwoman, and is marginalised by poverty and by gender. In *Soupir*, the narrator implies that the female characters are used to hardship and have come to rely on their own instincts and guile to survive. Admired by the men, but mistreated by them, the female characters in the novel, Marivonne, Corinne, Pitié, among others, are defined and constructed as "Other" in their opposition to men. Yet, like the island space that they inhabit, they show remarkable resilience. They take strength from each other and from the harsh island environment, and from the power they hold over the men, as objects of their desire. However, they are also the victims of violence. Noella, in *Soupir*,

is particularly relevant in this regard. Her limbless body reflects the sense of exile felt by their whole community. In the act of violence perpetrated against her towards the end of the novel, which is akin to the violation of their island space, Noella becomes Rodrigues. In *Le Voile de Draupadi*, Anjali's act of firewalking is imposed on her by her husband and in-laws as the ultimate act of self-sacrifice in the hope of curing her seriously ill son. In Appanah's *Blue Bay Palace*, Maya is from a lower social class than the man she falls in love with, and is keenly aware of the gap between rich and poor in her society and of the limited opportunities for women from her community:

Les autres ont quitté l'école brusquement, sont pêcheurs, vendeuses, serveuses, putes, femmes battues, alcooliques. Souvent le matin, quand je remontais le village et que je sentais ces regards envieux sur mon uniforme fraîchement repassé, je pensais à ça (p.27).

The reader may wonder whether the solutions to their suffering and marginal place in society are to be found in their relationship with the island spaces, in exile from the island, for example, or in seeking refuge within that same island space or in a neighbouring one, as seen in the previous chapter. These female characters are marginalised in daily life and constrained by the limited possibilities for their futures, not only as women, but also as members of a less privileged social class, which in turn is linked to their racial and ethnic identity. Devi's characters, in particular, tend to embrace these limitations and experience their suffering as a type of liberation, such as Mouna in *Moi, L'interdite*, Anjali in *Voile de Draupadi*, Paule in *Rue La Poudriere*, Pitié in *Pagli*, and the female characters in *Soupir*. According to Lohka (2008), Devi's characters seem to be born directly from their environment. In *Soupir*, for example, the island is humanised as a woman, and the interplay between character and environment culminates in violent acts. Land and character become so closely entwined in *Soupir* that the characters are actually an extension of their environment. Lohka notes that the sea is also a refuge and Mother figure for another protagonist in Devi's oeuvre, Joséphin

in *La Vie de Joséphin le Fou*. Pagli also finds refuge in her Otherness, losing herself willingly in the island and the earth (Lohka: 154). Lohka acknowledges two possible (feminist) readings: characters immerse themselves in the earth or the sea, fully embracing their internal suffering, unable to do anything other than return to the elements, leaving no evidence that they ever existed, or they look to death as a logical release, conscious of their mortality (Lohka, 2008).

The island and the sea figure in Humbert's *La Montagne des Signaux* (1994)⁴² and Devi's *Le Voile de Draupadi* (1993). The sea, in particular, is presented as heightening and reinforcing the sense of insularity experienced by the protagonists. This insularity is characterised by both escapism and a profound physical and spiritual union with nature. The island's isolation and consequent vulnerability reflect the protagonists' fragile personal circumstances. The central female protagonist, such as Anjali in *Voile de Draupadi* or Sissi in *La Montagne des Signaux*, sees her mirror image reflected in the island environment. Union with nature offers freedom and leads to a rebirth of the island in the eyes of the female protagonist, which symbolises her own rebirth. The island therefore becomes a symbol of hope. In the final few lines of Devi's *Voile de Draupadi*, Anjali finds refuge in the island space, rather than with other people. Both island and Woman are united in their experience, sharing in an almost physical union.

⁴² Marie-Thérèse Humbert was born 7 July 1940 in Mauritius. She studied in Cambridge and the Sorbonne and has lived in France since 1968. She is the author of the novels *A l'autre bout de moi* (1979), *La Montagne des Signaux* (1996), *Amy* (1999), *Le Volkaméria* (1984), *Une robe d'écume et de vent* (1989), *Un fils d'orage* (1992), *Le chant du seringat la nuit*, (1999) and *Comme un vol d'ombres* (2004). Humbert is best known for *A l'autre bout de moi* which dared to explore the complexities of identity in a plurilingual and pluriracial island at a time when such realities were still considered taboo. The novel follows mixed-race twins Anne and Nadège, who have contrasting views on identity and social mobility, as they navigate the complexity of pre-independent Mauritian society and its fixed ethnic boundaries. Anne, constructs the story of their childhood and the events that have led her to exile in France. In *La Montagne des Signaux* (1996), which is also set in 1950s Mauritius, Dolly attempts to define her family's identity in terms of her attachment to England which she left many years before.

Anjali feels that the island belongs to her, just as she belongs to the island. The island and its surrounding sea become the focal points for her eventual liberation, and consequent relief, after a prolonged period of suffering and self-denial:

Le chant de l'océan est en moi, et j'ai bien l'impression d'appartenir à mon île au point de devenir un peu elle. Nous sommes soudées en un insolite mariage. Son soleil se couche dans mon regard, sa lune grandit en moi. Je suis emplie de leurs lumières conjuguées, leurs couleurs creusées de dunes de sable à marée basse (p.174).

This sensuous passage from the closing pages of *Le Voile de Draupadi* shows to what extent the protagonist, in her symbiotic, visceral relationship with her home place, has come to identify with the island and also to seek solace in its unique environment; the island has become an integral part of her, just as she now feels part of its landscape. The island and the sea allow for a re-birth once the woman achieves union with the elements. This passage evokes a physical union, to the point that Anjali feels filled to the very core of her being, with the sun, the moon and the beach. Patel's *Le Portrait Chamarel* has a similar dénouement, where the female protagonist looks out to sea and experiences a mystical connection with the ocean: "Assis face à l'horizon, ils écoutent mer et ciel se murmurer leurs sortilèges dans l'évanescence du soir mauve" (p.132). The sea is a mysterious presence in these novels and it comforts and reassures the female protagonist in particular.

The need or desire to be beside the sea can stay with the islander throughout his or her life and is alluded to in both *La Noce d'Anna* and *Blue Bay Palace*. The body is embraced by the sea, and the sea personified to the extent that it seems to extend a physical welcome, to the female protagonist in particular, such as in *Blue Bay Palace* as Maya jumps into the waves:

Je ne rentre pas en marchant dans l'océan, j'y vais en courant, en faisant naître des arcs d'eau et je plonge comme si je sautais dans les bras de quelqu'un que je n'aurais pas vu depuis des années et qui m'aurait manqué à crever. J'aime cette apesanteur, ce sentiment que je ne pèse

plus rien, j'aime me laisser engloutir, ouvrir les yeux dans l'eau et regarder le ventre de la mer jusqu'à ce qu'il m'étourdisse. J'aime mon corps salé, après (p.18).

The scene is resonant of Camus' *Noces* (1959) in portraying a sense of intimacy with the sun and sea. Later, Maya seeks refuge on the beach and has an insatiable need to feel the sea on her skin. The sea is the island's mother, *sa mère* (my emphasis), in the following play on words:

Je cours vers la mer. J'ai une envie folle d'elle, un désir déraisonné de me jeter dans ses bras. Soudain tout me revient. J'entends la mer ! Les vagues, le crépitement de l'écume sur le sable, le vent dans les filaos. Le silence a crevé pour ne laisser passer ce que j'aime le plus de mon pays : sa mer (p.94.)

She has an intense desire (“envie”, “dans ses bras”) to feel surrounded by the sea. As we see in other Mauritian narratives, emphasis is placed on the physicality of the experience when the protagonists come into contact with the water. The female body merges with the sea to become one being.

The sea is envisaged in Mauritian literature as either a source of danger and death, or of comfort and life, yet it is mostly evoked in terms of its physical and spiritual relationship to female characters or indeed in terms of its gendered characteristics. Mauritian women writers access the sea as an entry point into a new order, an alternative to the patriarchal order prescribed by society. The sea is integral to the island experience and a point of reference for insularity, exile or indeed connectedness. While the sea can very often be representative of the island paradox, embodying both imprisonment and the possibility of escape, it is frequently represented in Mauritian texts as a refuge which offers the possibility of re-creation for marginalised female characters. The female characters' circumstances are so difficult and the possibilities for overcoming them so limited, that how they assume these hardships and endure them, while quietly

subverting the patriarchal order that causes their distress are presented as acts of defiance.⁴³

In novels by women there is a demonstrable preoccupation with the theme of female identity and vulnerability of women in the island society of Mauritius. In certain novels, the island trope is used effectively to express this peripheral situation. Devi, Appanah and Patel attempt to give a private space or identity, in fiction, to a marginalised female (postcolonial) subject. In fact, the female protagonists in their novels are frequently young women who attempt to assert their identities in their refusal to accept customs and conventions which reinforce the patriarchal order and class structures within Mauritian society. Anjali, in *Le Voile de Draupadi*, chooses her own freedom over remaining subservient to her husband and her family, while Maya in *Blue Bay Palace* resorts to murder and apparent suicide. The end of the novel sees the chief protagonist committing an act of violence and subsequently submerging herself in the ocean whilst awaiting her fate (pp.94-95). Other examples show female protagonists in a state of self-imposed exile, such as in Patel's *Le Portrait Chamarel* in which Samia, the chief protagonist, retreats to her grandfather's second home near Souillac. In all three examples above, we see that the island's isolation and consequent vulnerability reflect the protagonists' fragile personal circumstances. Yet, they find refuge in the island space, rather than in human relationships. They can identify with it, and in this instance Island and Woman are united in their experience; they are both Othered. Both island and woman can be and indeed have been defined in their otherness and in all the complexities and paradoxes they seem to embody, as Patel suggests:

⁴³ Representations of gender inequalities within the island society are not confined to the Indo-Mauritian community, but are also apparent within others, as seen in Berthelot's *L'Outre-Mère*, or *Le Désamour*, in which the author explores taboos of race, sex and *métissage* in Franco-Mauritian and mixed-race social settings.

[...] il y a une réalité d'être femme et la situation différente que vivent les femmes de l'enfermement, et on le voit encore plus dans l'espace enfermé de l'île (Patel Jul 2007).

The present societal structure offers these characters no escape. The only possible outcomes are exile, escape, imprisonment or, in fully engaging with their suffering to liberate themselves from it, suicide.

3.5 The idealised island

The knowability of islands has a bearing on how the island is perceived. Islands have captivated those from continents, reinforced by a colonial, and postcolonial, view that sees the world in terms of metropolitan centres and colonial or postcolonial peripheries, a viewpoint that Corcoran (2007: 109) interprets as a power relationship rather than solely being geographical in focus. Islands have therefore been conceptualised in literature in terms of a Centre/Margin dialectic. However, island myths, and the desire to inhabit a new undiscovered space, are not limited to those from the continents, but can also be of relevance to islanders themselves, where we see the traditional centre-periphery appropriated thereby transforming the centre-margin relationship, with the once marginal becoming central. (See Chapter Two).

Devi's character Pagli holds a different and faraway island up as an idealised island space. The island of Mauritius has become a place of confinement and hardship for the central protagonist, Pagli, who dreams about Agalega ⁴⁴, the island described to her by her lover Zil. She imagines raising a family with him on Agalega, and living a simple life, far away from the prejudice and oppression she has experienced in Mauritius. Such idealistic island imagery is part of an island myth tradition, inherited from such pastoral narratives as *Paul et Virginie*. In *Pagli*, Agalega is an Other space, a dream island in

⁴⁴ Agalega is a smaller island and an outlying territory belonging to Mauritius.

stark contrast to the confines of Mauritian society. There is an element of irony here in her idealisation of Agalega, as Pagli already lives on an island that is itself considered by many as a dream island destination, yet he wishes to escape to Agalega as it represents the dream of a better future:

Agalega, îles de brises et de corail, de rochers et d'écume. Lavées par les rythmes de l'océan. Par la grâce et la brûlure de leurs soleils. Îles de ma dernière heure, de ma dernière vie. Je garde au chaud mon rêve d'Agalega. Je ne veux pas l'abandonner. Tant que l'espoir me reste, je continuerai de le nourrir et de le grandir en moi. Et si c'est un enfant mort-né, tant pis (p. 72).

Islands are definable entities, ideal spaces for the projection of utopian or dystopian ideals. Pagli conceives of Agalega as the utopian island, where life is simple, slow and relaxed, community ties are strong, food is plentiful and music fills the air in the evenings:

Oui, nous irons à Agalega. Là-bas, les gens sont simples et ils ne posent pas de questions. Ils sont habitués à avoir du bleu au cœur. Ils ne ferment pas leurs portes le soir. Ils écoutent les oiseaux et ils ont l'impression que cette musique vient des cocotiers qui portent leur existence. Ils vont pieds nus dans le sable et vivent au jour le jour de leur pêche. Le soir ils se réunissent sur le sable pour chanter et faire de la musique. Nous serions simples comme eux, assis par terre, écoutant le son des raves et une voix plus vieille que l'océan. Un enfant nu serait endormi dans tes bras. Il gronderait dans notre ventre comme un cyclone. Cela nous ferait rire, puis frémir. Et quand tous nos sens seraient suffisamment effleurés, nous irions nous réfugier dans notre cabane soufflée par le vent (p.72).

Like Manu's perception of Rodrigues seen earlier, Pagli admires the apparent simplicity of these islands and their inhabitants. It recalls the colonial narrative and notions of "going native". Again we see the adjective "bercée" used in the context of representations of the island as a protective matriarch, or indeed when the sea is represented as a protector or as a source of comfort for islanders: "Naître au matin entre tes bras, mon île, mon Zil. Bercée de ton corps engourdi, ta jambe jetée sur moi comme une rame" (p.87). In this example, the island is echoed in the body of Pagli's lover Zil. His name, Zil, which signifies "île", or "les îles", in Creole, highlights this point. Zil's body will protect her, but will also feed her imagination, as it represents islands of possibility. His body is an island-protector within the island-prison that Mauritius has

become. The island trope is gendered as female in other Mauritian texts, as we have seen in the previous section. However, in the character *Zil* in *Pagli* we see the island as the embodiment of man, or indeed, man as the embodiment of the island.

Pagli identifies with the island space; it will always be her point of reference. While Mauritius, a place of hardship and prejudice, has become her prison, she does not dream of moving to the other destinations favoured by Mauritian emigrants (however impractical this would be given her socio-economic circumstances). Her dream is to escape to a smaller, more peripheral island. The notion of a perfectible island can be observed in how the island of Agalega is seen to offer everything that Mauritius cannot. Mauritius in the context of this novel is Terre Rouge, the small village on the Northwest of the island, which has caused *Pagli* so much misery.

The idealised representation of the island of Agalega is in stark contrast to the portrayal of a dystopian island experience evoked in another of *Devi's* novels, *Soupir*. As such, *Devi's* novel shows how island spaces can differ in terms of what they represent to those either from islands or from continents. At times, they represent similar notions of freedom, simplicity and beauty. Desire to inhabit an island space is not necessarily limited, therefore, to people from the continents, but it can also exist when one moves from island to island. In the case of *Pagli*, she is seduced by the stories *Zil* recounts of life on Agalega and imagines their life there in the near future: “Un jour, me dis-tu, nous irons manger la noix de coco à Agalega. Nous irons vivre là-bas et je serai ton pêcheur et toi ma femme qui m’attend” (p.71). Her idyllic refuge is conceived as another island space, in spite of the island-prison, a place of hardship and brutality, in which she lives. She will find her island paradise elsewhere. The idyllic refuge remains

conceptualised in terms of an alternative island space. In *Soupir*, Patrice reveals how many young Rodriguais move to Mauritius, but we see how resolutely the older generation resist this. They regard Mauritius as a decadent island even when compared to the difficulties of life on Rodrigues. In the light of such examples from Devi's work, the island metaphor also represents dysfunctionality, as Hay suggests (2006: 28).

Péron notes that as the twentieth century progressed, urban dwellers experienced a more intense lure of the island, and its mystical attraction consequently drew them towards other geographical expanses that fed the imagination, such as the ocean, the mountains, and the deserts. In an increasingly globalised world where mobility is easier than for previous generations, islands distinguish themselves as the ultimate physical places. A journey to an island is often regarded as the antidote to the madness of modern society, but travellers are also conscious of the limits involved, such as the risk of being cut off due to bad weather, for example (Péron, 2004). In Patel's *Le Silence des Chagos*, the captain of the *Nordvaer*'s represents this outsider's view of the island, in particular, of Diego Garcia, echoing Péron's arguments above. He sees the Chagos archipelago as an appealing, dream destination: "[...] l'archipel des Chagos, qui s'offrait comme un songe réalisé" (p.54). He feels lighter and better able to breathe each time his ship approaches the island. The captain is keen to spend more time on the island of Diego Garcia in the future, yet, he worries that true integration into the island community will be impossible, because the sea will always draw him back:

Il s'était demandé s'il n'essaierait pas de trouver un poste à terre, pour y rester, y partager l'existence simple de ces gens qu'il avait appris à connaître et à apprécier. Mais il savait qu'il risquait de s'y sentir vite à l'étroit. Son territoire à lui, c'était la mer. Et la *promesse de la terre* (p.54) (my emphasis).

The captain displays considerable self-awareness at this point in suggesting that the seaman is motivated by the promise of what lies ahead, more than by the desire to

actually inhabit the island space. While the captain experiences the lure of the island, especially in his descriptions of the exotic smells that draw him towards Diego Garcia, Patel does not allow this character to fully embody the Eurocentric view of the faraway island in the style of colonial island narratives, or in the manner suggested by Péron, above. Rather, the captain questions the likelihood of ever truly being part of the island community. In vividly describing how the island has an enticing smell, the captain imagines the island as more than a visible physical space. Its effect on the senses is vital to understanding the attraction of the island for visitors, and we see how the island's sensuous presence compels the captain to step ashore. Interestingly, in order to highlight the island's appeal, the captain differentiates between island and continent:

Une sensation intense l'envahissait chaque fois qu'il sentait l'île, un parfum de terre et de sel porté par la brise, si différent de l'odeur âpre et saturée des continents, trop grands pour que les vents les balaient tout entiers (p.54).

This evocative passage employs the senses to explicitly draw the difference between island and continent. The use of the sense of smell to evoke the island of Mauritius in Baudelaire's famous *Parfum Exotique* (1857)⁴⁵ with its reliance on synaesthesia, has

⁴⁵ Quand, les deux yeux fermés, en un soir chaud d'automne,
Je respire l'odeur de ton sein chaleureux,
Je vois se dérouler des rivages heureux
Qu'éblouissent les feux d'un soleil monotone;

Une île paresseuse où la nature donne
Des arbres singuliers et des fruits savoureux;
Des hommes dont le corps est mince et vigoureux,
Et des femmes dont l'oeil par sa franchise étonne.

Guidé par ton odeur vers de charmants climats,
Je vois un port rempli de voiles et de mâts
Encore tout fatigués par la vague marine,

Pendant que le parfum des verts tamariniers,
Qui circule dans l'air et m'enfle la narine,
Se mêle dans mon âme au chant des mariniers.

influenced the ways in which the senses have inscribed themselves as an essential element in metaphors and descriptions of the island in literature since.

The outsider's view of the island is also evoked in Berthelot's *Le Désamour*. Manu is aware of Timothy's European gaze and summarises the island's appeal for visitors; the antithesis of life on the continent and the object of a quest:

Je crois fermement que j'ai été pour toi une sorte de symbole d'exotisme; tu m'as connue en tant que « fille des îles », représentant un monde, un climat inconnus. Tu m'as retrouvée vivant dans la tiédeur d'une terre tropicale alors que tu souffrais tant de vivre, toi, dans un pays humide et froid. Tu m'as confondue avec quelque chose que tu cherchais (p.196).

Timothy's impressions of Mauritius, and consequently, of Manu as a Mauritian woman, are informed by his idealisation of the past from a European perspective. Manu remembers Timothy as a dreamer, in love with the idea of the exoticism of Mauritius; Manu, being from that island, is particularly appealing to him.

A rejection of exotic stereotyping is a prominent feature of Appanah's second novel *Blue Bay Palace*, in which tourists are described in wholly negative terms by the narrator, Maya.⁴⁶ Appanah uses the story of a disenfranchised young hotel worker to demonstrate how the word "exotic" is a relative term. When Maya recounts the story of her sixteenth birthday, when her father brings leftovers from the hotel as a treat, she observes: "Mon père avait aussi chipé des crevettes roses, des tomates découpées en fleurs et des fruits qui, pour moi, sont exotiques: prunes, pêches, framboises" (p.21). Maya's remarks immediately evoke the concept of the exotic, highlighting her personal interpretation of that word with the qualification "pour moi". Her understanding of what is exotic may not, therefore, correspond to received notions surrounding the term, when it is mostly applied to the non-European or non-Western world. The reader learns how

⁴⁶ For example : "En mer, les touristes, souvent blafards et bedonnants [...]" (p.21).

the hotel employees and hotel guests have strikingly different lifestyles: “Nous avons bu et mangé comme des riches en sachant très bien que le jour suivant nous retournerions à notre riz cassé et notre morceau de poisson séché” (p.22). The term “morceau” serves to highlight this contrast.

Mutual misunderstanding characterises relations between locals and tourists as both cultures come into contact in the novel. At a local fair, Maya notices some tourists among the crowd of families and young people from the area. “[...] touristes béats de voir enfin des gens d’ici, comme ils disent.” (p.22). From this subjectivity, the tourist seems idiotic with his laughable attempt to integrate into the so-called “exotic” island culture that considers the tourist as backward and silly as Europeans consider the islander, as we see also in Sonia’s vitriolic words in *La Noce d’Anna*. The derision of the Western concept of the exotic continues in Maya’s narrative when she recalls recounting tales to her mother of the behaviour of the tourists at the hotel in which she works. She contrasts Western values and the values and customs of her community, far removed from the liberal behaviour of the tourists:

Elle aime beaucoup que je lui raconte les caprices des touristes, leurs jérémiades quand il ne fait pas beau, comme si c’était notre faute. Elle sourit quand j’imite l’accent des Français en roulant les *r* dans la gorge et quand je lui répète ce qu’ils me disent tout le temps... Vous êtes un vrai oiseau des îles... Elle ouvre grand les yeux quand je lui dis que les femmes bronzent seins nus, en string, et qu’en général ce sont les messieurs qui les enduisent de crème. Elle serre alors les genoux et replace le pan de son sari sur sa poitrine comme pour montrer qu’elle n’est sûrement pas comme ça, elle. Ici, les seins à l’air, c’est péché. Le string aussi (p.33).

Young women are idolised by the Western visitors to the island, who are captivated by their beauty and humility. Maya’s first person narration allows the reader to observe this behaviour and to empathise with her as she endures patronising comments and behaviour from male tourists. Maya dwells on their use of language to highlight their

ridiculous comments and Eurocentric views. The act of equating the island with beautiful female inhabitants is inscribed in this European mindset, from the Western concept of the exotic and the collective memory of what faraway islands represent to the non-islander. Maya's local voice observes and reveals the unacceptable belittling and neo-colonialist mindset of the European tourist. She ridicules the notion of being compared to a bird ("Vous êtes un vrai oiseau des îles"). In fact, as the plot develops, the reader is privy to the disturbing and destructive thoughts that have been sown in her psyche by this dichotomy between myth and reality. The notion of this young woman representing innocence and passivity is undermined as we witness her true violent and murderous capabilities. Maya's vulnerability and destiny are assured as a poor young woman in a postcolonial island society in which neo-colonialist forces are at play.

The concept of the exotic is appropriated and subverted in the novel. If any exoticism is to be found here, it is in the manner in which Maya remembers her own childhood in terms of sunshine, swimming, fruit and contact with tourists:

Au fond, rien ne me différenciait des autres. Comme eux, j'avais joué dans la poussière d'été, passé mes vacances à nager et à griller au soleil. Comme eux, j'avais volé des fruits verts parce que la patience nous manquait jusqu'à l'été. J'avais joué avec eux à la marelle dans les venelles de Blue Bay où ne passe aucune voiture. Comme eux, je poussais des cris aigus quand les avions amorçaient leur descente au dessus du village pour se poser à quelques kilomètres de là à l'aéroport. Comme eux je guettais les cars de touristes, ne voyant en eux que dollars, peau blanche, et ainsi, un bonheur inaccessible, Comme eux, je croyais que tout Blanc était riche et que tout Blanc était heureux (p.27).

However, any vestiges of exoticism or idealisation or nostalgia are tempered by references to the tourism industry and to the differences between the less well-off local families and the seemingly excessively wealthy visitors. Appanah's approach to the topic is also riven with conflicting elements. While the novel is a well-intentioned attempt to delve into the paradise myth, the writer risks distilling the effects by catering to a foreign audience in a narrative that at times includes too much detail and blatant

observation rather than allowing the local colour of the text to speak for itself. Appanah refers to local prices in euros, rather than in the local currency, the rupee, for example. As such it appears to be written from an outsider's perspective, thereby, albeit unwittingly, inserting the novel into a neo-colonialist discourse. It could be argued, however, that in so doing, Appanah is speaking to her largely French target audience in a vocabulary they will comprehend.

While nostalgia stems from actual knowledge of the island, remembrance of time spent therein or from cultural transmission (see Chapter Four), the exotic view of the island is normally an expression of desire or interest on the part of those that have not actually visited the island space that they idealise and regard as wholly opposite to their own cultural experience. The faraway island represents the antithesis of European cultural norms; a Eurocentric notion deeply imbedded in island narratives in the canon such as *Robinson Crusoe*, *Treasure Island* or *Paul et Virginie*.

In *La Noce d'Anna*, Sonia, a Mauritian living in France, expresses exasperation at the constant curiosity aroused by her nationality or ethnicity. She is frequently asked:

“Vous êtes de quelle origine?” and later muses:

Que veut dire exactement cette question ? Le pays où vous êtes né, certainement, mais quand vous avez passé plus d'années en terre étrangère que dans votre patrie, de quelle origine êtes-vous vraiment ? Devons-nous nous enfermer au pays d'ici, au présent, rester dans le liquide amniotique du pays d'origine, du pays rêvé, parce que forcément, l'origine, ça a quelque chose de beau, de magnifique, de pur comme les sources de la montagne. Vous vous devez, pour les autres, pour ceux qui vous posent cette question, vous devez être droite et fière de ces origines-là, avoir le regard qui scintille, la larme à l'œil, le soupir long, vous leur devez de regretter que ces origines ne soient qu'un vague passé, vous ne pouvez, sous peine de passer pour un insensible, renier vos racines. On vous refuse tout simplement le droit de dire merde à vos origines (p.110).

Others project an idealised identity upon Sonia: an individual reduced to a stereotype and othered by a European gaze. Expected to be proud of her country of origin, Sonia actually refuses to inhabit this ideal of the exotic. Her use of sarcasm (“la larme à l'œil,

le soupir long”) conveys a scathing criticism of such simplistic Eurocentric views. She rejects definitions of nationality and more particularly, the expectations of others as to what that nationality represents. Appanah is keen to put this debate on origins to rest, insisting, as she does, that it has no significant role to play in her writing.⁴⁷ Yet her novel is nonetheless full of local colour with frequent references to Mauritius. It becomes clear that it is Sonia’s rejection of exoticism that motivates this sense of exasperation with the many people who, because of Sonia’s foreign appearance (in stark contrast to her blonde daughter) are curious about her provenance. The very term “exotic” is problematic. When Sonia notes that Anna prefers her Spanish babysitter Madeleine to any of her other carers, Sonia assumes it is because she finds the girl exotic, or different. She quickly reproaches her own choice of term and its connotations:

[...] pour Anna, c’était très probablement exotique – un mot qu’elle n’a pas le droit d’utiliser devant moi. J’ai peu de règles pour ma fille mais celle-là en est une. Le mot exotique n’est pas un mot juste, pas un juste mot, c’est un à-peu-près dû à l’ignorance et au paternalisme. Un exotique n’est jamais un Prix Nobel. Un exotique c’est toujours un peu con, qui ne connaît pas les choses de ce monde, un gentil, un arrière (p.98).

The word “exotic” evokes anger and frustration in the narrator. She reveals how the term expresses all of the colonial prejudices of a European view of small faraway islands with its assumptions of beauty, simplicity and backwardness. It is clearly not how Sonia remembers her island, but rather how she remembers visitors to the island and their perception of it. In having recourse to this most problematic of epithets, Sonia unwittingly reciprocates the European gaze.

3.6 The island as metaphor for alterity

Contemporary local writers have little interest in perpetuating the myths and embellishments that have led to islands being imagined as perfect worlds, yet for the

⁴⁷ During a public reading at the University of Limerick, November 2005 and in many newspaper interviews.

non-islander (including literary critics) islands remain compelling imagined spaces. Whether it is to dispel myths or to seek out the current realities of island life, recent novels continue to address the lure of the island. The image of the island has already been so intensely ingrained in the Western imaginary that it is still an attractive symbol to scholars as well as writers. We only need to consider the wealth of scholarship available on this topic and referred to throughout the present chapter and in the literature review.

Literary or poetic reconstruction of the island by local writers can be seen as a response to the pastoral imagery used by outside writers (Bernardin de St Pierre, for example) who perpetuated the tropical idyll myth and the noble local peasant imagery, or vivid literary pictures of vanilla, rum, sugar cane and the beauty of the island women, in their colonial narratives. This has been reinforced more recently by an aggressively marketed tourism industry, which plays on the dreams and the popular imagination of those living far beyond the islands of the Indian Ocean. The authors of the novels in this study consciously avoid the trap of exoticism. Their novels read as an attempt to redress the exotic literary renderings of their island or other islands. Devi agrees that she feels compelled in her writing to reveal the realities of Mauritian society, which entails exposing certain taboos and myths. These myths exist from within Mauritius of the perfect “arc-en-ciel” society⁴⁸ as promoted in official discourse, and from the outside in outsiders’ views of Mauritius. Recent Mauritian narratives use effective nomination of local flora and produce to add specificity and endow the narrative with local colour and a local voice. Fragments of Creole language may constitute part of the narration,

⁴⁸ The term “arc-en-ciel” has been used to refer to Mauritius’s unique cultural mix and pluri-ethnic population. It suggests pride in the peaceful co-existence of the many communities that comprise Mauritian society (colours of the rainbow) and in fact the dominant characteristic of that society, but this very notion has come under scrutiny for being too idealistic.

such as in de Souza's *La Maison qui marchait vers le large*⁴⁹ or Devi's *Pagli*. According to Devi, the multilingual Mauritian reader is undoubtedly best able to understand all of the terms and expressions in different languages in her novels, but translating these should not be necessary because the reader needs to make the effort to understand the language of the text: “ [...] ça empêche le texte si on ne laisse pas entendre la musique de plusieurs langues ” (Devi Jun 2007). She argues that Mauritians have made an effort with reading and writing standard French texts for so long, that why not, therefore, ask French readers to take their turn and try to understand Creole, insisting that “[...]il faut qu'ils fassent l'effort de venir vers nous” (*ibid*).

Some of these novels allude to tourists who come to the island with the naive intention to discover local life, and suggest how local girls are used by them. (*Blue Bay Palace* and *Soupir*, for example). Their Otherness is drawn in terms of skin colour and wealth, but principally in their Eurocentric vision of the island as exotic. As such, recent Mauritian writing in French challenges the non-Mauritian reader. Appanah's *Blue Bay Palace*, for example, offers more to the reader than a simple representation of Mauritian life as supposedly exotic and reiterates that “exotic” itself is a relative term. By seeking inspiration in the natural world for comparisons, and appropriating island metaphors, the author reinforces the idea that local life has concerns other than the blatant materialism of the tourism sector. Devi's *Soupir*, set on another island, also portrays a story of hardship and violence. In spite of its harrowing narrative, it offers a subtle message of redemption through awareness of and union with the island space. The violence of the narrative echoes and underlines the unforgiving island environment in

⁴⁹ Carl de Souza's *La Maison qui marchait vers le large* (1996) tells the story of Daronville whose house in a mixed area of Port Louis, his prized possession and symbol of his family's heritage and perceived economic and social success, is being carried away in a landslide. The novel portrays the realities of a postcolonial insular society, its different ways of life, cultures and beliefs.

which the characters live. Even the sun, the most appealing draw for tourists, is depicted as a source of hardship and discomfort by authors such as Devi and Appanah and serves to amplify the closed and oppressive surroundings of the island.

As a marginal space located beyond the mainland, and a landscape that offers shelter from the elements, the island may be read as a feminine space on the periphery in the context of these novels. The characters, whether underprivileged women, or women and men exiled in a new harsh island space, exist on the margins of society but have profound links with their environment. The island is a space with which they can identify. It offers them refuge and security. In this symbiotic relationship, they are othered by their island environment, which serves to enhance their sense of dislocation, yet they see their alterity reflected in their islandness, and the island becomes a haven for them.

These narratives demonstrate appropriation and subversion of island metaphors. Yet the island is not simply evoked as metaphor for alterity and must be considered in the light of the wealth of its possible representations in literature. Without an awareness of how this island imagery is perpetuated and examined, we could well see the dawn of a new cliché in literature and criticism. For example, in mapping the island as a feminised space and from a feminist perspective, can it be argued, as Garuba (2001) does, that this viewpoint is itself thwarted by this appealing Otherness to which it refers? We see, for example, how some of the novels considered thus far themselves appear to borrow the myth of the exotic, on occasion, in representing another island as the ideal refuge for those unhappy within their own island-prison.

3.7 Conclusion

The island is marked out as different precisely because it has a multitude of potential representations. Its difference boils down to its individuality, a trait inherent in all its seemingly paradoxical metaphors. In fact, the island is a fascinating trope in literature precisely because of its wealth of possible figurations. Racault (2007) asserts that contemporary literature from Mauritius and Réunion is indissociable from the many representations of these islands throughout recent history, due to an imaginary constructed over the centuries through travel narratives and early descriptions of the island, both of which rely on a certain well-worn symbolism. However, this chapter has shown that Mauritian authors of the contemporary period, while aware of the traditional island imagery in literature, experiment with ways of representing islandness in all its complexities and contradictions through the use of more subdued metaphors. They appropriate island imagery, sometimes subverting traditional representations of the island to show the specificity of Mauritian life, other times employing them to highlight universal aspects of humanity. Some recent island narratives reappropriate island stereotypes in an apparent act of “writing back”. Contemporary Mauritian authors write in reaction to traditional island tropes, in representing the island from the point of view of an autochthonic population. As we have demonstrated, the resulting portrayal is at times contradictory and ambiguous, but always deeply complex. The island is the one inescapable aspect of Mauritian life common to Mauritians of all ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Writing from a local perspective in casting off outsider representations of their island, and stressing the uniqueness of Mauritian island identity in their own terms, the authors of these contemporary island narratives demonstrate the cultural richness of the creolised island.

This chapter explored the various types of island imagery present in the contemporary Mauritian novel in French and concludes that Mauritian authors both borrow, and reject traditional and idealised concepts of the island. These writings transform the island metaphor into a multifarious narrative device employed to convey the reality of modern-day Mauritius in all its diverse complexity, with the notion of the island and all its negative and positive connotations at the very heart of this literature. The following chapter develops the discussion of the island further by considering the importance of the island as a remembered place and a site of memory and the resultant interplay between Mauritian imaginary and Mauritian island identity.

**CHAPTER FOUR - REMEMBERING THE ISLAND: EXPLORING ISLAND
IDENTITY THROUGH THE MEMORY OF PLACE**

4.1 Introduction

While the previous chapter examined the island in the context of metaphors and tropes in contemporary Mauritian fiction in French, this chapter will explore the importance of the island in terms of a specifically island-based memory. We observe how writers explore and forge an island-specific identity for their characters by focusing on memory of the island whether fictional, real, positive, negative or contradictory. The chapter focuses on the island as a catalyst for memory or as a subject of memory in a selection of Mauritian island narratives. In the first instance island memory is discussed in the context of exile. Secondly we examine the island itself as a site of memory. Reference is made to a variety of texts in which protagonists from different ethnic communities and different geographical areas (within Mauritius and beyond) or different historical periods remember the island (largely Mauritius, but also other islands) as a real or imaginary space, including Appanah's *La Noce d'Anna*, Devi's *Soupir*, Berthelot's *L'Outre-Mère ou les Eaux de Mériba* and *Le Désamour*, Patel's *Le Silence des Chagos*, and Le Clézio's *La Quarantaine*.

A preoccupation with origins recurs in Mauritian fiction in French, and in much academic discourse on Mauritian writing. Origins or roots (family, ethnic, historical) feature frequently in the texts of our corpus and are evoked most frequently through nostalgia. Escapist dreams of an Other place are usually invoked by a state of voluntary or involuntary exile and the island space is a frequent reference point in the search for origins. The island becomes, consequently, a marker of present identity. This can be due to the trauma of forced separation from the island, nostalgia resulting from voluntary exile, or an awareness of the island as a witness to the memory of the history of family, ethnicity, community or nation. Contemporary island societies, such as

Mauritius, struggle to negotiate the complex relationship between tradition and modernity. In a pluri-ethnic postcolonial island society in which different groups look abroad to their places of origin a paradoxical situation ensues whereby island identity relies simultaneously on notions of isolation and belonging. That is, in order to fully belong to the island one has to isolate oneself from it. The chapter examines island-based memory and explores how and why the island encapsulates the fundamental elements of identity for the protagonists of these texts.

4.2 Exile from the island as a catalyst for memory

Mauritius has a history of inward and outward movement of peoples, and more recently, emigration to Europe, Australia, South Africa and Canada. Inward migration throughout its history is evident in Mauritius' pluri-ethnic population today. During the period of colonisation, Mauritius, was regarded as a place of (usually voluntary) exile.⁵⁰ However, the period of French colonisation was also marked by the importation of slave labour from the East coast of Africa and Madagascar and later, during the period of British administration, indentured workers from the Indian subcontinent. Mauritius therefore also became a site of involuntary exile. More recently Mauritius has become an island exile for the displaced Chagossians. Outward migration gained momentum as the island moved towards independence in 1968, with many of Mauritius' renowned writers, such as Loys Masson, Edouard Maunick and Marie-Thérèse Humbert, settling in South Africa or France. Two of Mauritius' most prolific and celebrated contemporary writers, Nathacha Appanah and Ananda Devi, live in France. Mauritians have, since independence in particular, moved abroad in large numbers to study or seek employment. It follows that several contemporary novels feature a character who has

⁵⁰ see *Georges* by Dumas, or *Paul et Virginie* by Bernardin de Saint-Pierre

spent time in Europe, a member of the family who is currently abroad, or a protagonist who, at the time of narration, evokes memories from a position of exile from Mauritius. As Maya, the narrator of Appanah's *Blue Bay Palace* remarks: "Ici, le départ est inscrit dans nos gènes" (p.20).

Exile is catalyst for memory and predisposes the individual to remembering and romanticising home. Separation from home, whether voluntary or involuntary, exaggerates a sense of loss and a longing for the home island as it used to be (or how it is imagined to have been). Recollections of the past help distinguish oneself from others and memory is therefore a key component in identity construction. Mauritian émigré characters in Mauritian novels reveal a problematic relationship with their national identity. While on a local level, negotiating identity is a complex process in Mauritius, (where memory is a divisive force and reinforces difference) we see a more singular Mauritian identity reinforced through distance from the island. Characters in some recent Mauritian novels are not defined by any particular ethnic affiliation when abroad. Their Mauritian national identity is categorised by others as foreign, or "exotic". They are neither French, nor English, nor European. In fact, the exile's Mauritian identity is frequently established in terms of what he or she is *not*. The island is a distinguishing marker of Mauritian identity, from a character's own perspective and also from the European gaze. Memories of a geographical place and its role in one's past become markers of identity. The Chagossian people, deported from their islands to Mauritius, are also defined by their provenance, by their traumatic separation from the Chagos Islands, and in particular, by what they remember of their archipelago. Place therefore informs identity and memory.

4.2.1 Voluntary exile and nostalgia for the island in Berthelot's *L'Outre-Mère ou les Eaux de Mériba* and Appanah's *La Noce d'Anna*

Berthelot and Appanah reveal their characters' deep-rooted nostalgia for the island in the novels examined below. Nostalgia has been described as a mood or colouring of memory rather than a specific type of memory (Bal, 1999: xi). Easily dismissed as romantic and escapist or sentimental, nostalgia can encourage a longing for the past as it never really was.⁵¹ Nostalgia is often considered unhelpful, unproductive, regressive or a form of romanticising, in that it expresses the desire for an idyllic past and can lend itself to political or misguided manipulation. It can serve, nevertheless, as both a source of conflict and comfort, such as in Berthelot's *L'Outre-Mère* and Appanah's *La Noce d'Anna*.

Berthelot acknowledges that *L'Outre-Mère* and subsequently *Le Désamour* are partly autobiographical: "Il y a des petites leures d'autobiographie [...] je crois que les premiers livres sont obligatoirement personnels" (Berthelot Jun 2007). The novel is mainly set in Mauritius, but travel is also significant, incorporating journeys undertaken by the protagonists to faraway destinations, such as Ireland, and personal journeys through memory. Memory is integral to the novel, which follows the fortunes of a Mauritian bourgeois family across different generations, evoking family secrets and scandals that shed light on Mauritian society of the time. The non-linear narrative and multiple narrative voices add a richness of experience and perspective to the novel. The full title of the novel, *L'Outre-Mère ou les Eaux de Mériba*, evokes the sea and the island, and situates the novel in a geographical and cultural context with its allusion to Outre-Mer, France's former island colonies and territories, the DOM and TOM. The

⁵¹In his novel, *Ignorance* (2003) Milan Kundera's narrator suggests that the Odyssey is the founding myth of nostalgia, and that the word itself comes from the Greek *nostos* and *algos*, the words for return and suffering, respectively, suggesting the suffering caused by the desire to return. (p.7).

play on words also evokes the theme of motherhood, a recurring trope in Berthelot's work. Furthermore, the title contains a biblical reference in the word "Mériba"⁵², and introduces the inserted text (a diary by an Irish monk), which further anchors the novel in the past, and endows the novel with a spiritual dimension.

The island is conceptualised and remembered through the character of Michael. Having moved to Canada many years previously and longing to return, Michael has always seen Mauritius as his home and refuge. His nostalgia for Mauritius becomes increasingly apparent as the narrative progresses. Separation from the island causes an intense desire to return and rediscover the place that has informed his sense of identity. He re-discovers his knowledge of Mauritius when speaking with a stranger on the plane from Canada: "C'était vrai, en somme, sous l'effet du souvenir, Michael retrouvait une documentation engrangée, inconsciemment, dans sa mémoire lointaine ou plus récente, et se faisait une joie d'en parler" (p.86). The narrator highlights the role and effects of memory. Recalling his past in Mauritius has transported Michael to a dreamlike or anaesthetised state, which he describes as being "sous l'effet du souvenir". Recalling the island facilitates the recovery of long repressed memories and reveals the extent of his knowledge and familiarity with Mauritius.

The most striking aspect of Michael's character is his continued fascination with the island. The island is seen as the giver of life, a mother figure or nurturer. The term "île berceau" posits the island as the cradle of childhood and the foundation of the self. It is particularly important in linking the island to childhood and development, as mentioned

⁵² Mériba is the place in the Old Testament where Moses, leading the thirsty Israelites through the desert, strikes a rock which then spouts water. (Exodus 17: 1-7)

elsewhere in the narrative: “Les Mauriciens d’origine partis s’établir ailleurs reviennent tôt ou tard vers île berceau” (p.77). The island cradle calls her exiles back sooner or later to relive the freedom and happiness of their island childhood. The island is enunciated explicitly in the text with possessive adjectives, as in “mon île” or “son île”, highlighting Michael’s sense of belonging to it. Other examples, such as “île-sœur” or “île-mère” reveal how the island is considered inherently feminine, a common trope in island narratives, as we have seen in the previous chapter.

Island memory is frequently represented in terms of the sea. Proximity to open water is an integral aspect of the islander’s life experience and the desire to be close to water is more pronounced in the exiled islander, even after a considerable period of time has elapsed since last visiting the island. For Michael, the island is a reassuring environment and ingrained on his imagination to the extent that he attempts, in Canada, and elsewhere, to recreate an island environment in homage to Mauritius:

Dès qu’ils s’étaient établis dans l’Ontario, son premier souci avait été de vivre au bord d’un lac, et les lacs canadiens sont si grands et peuvent être si houleux qu’ils figuraient facilement l’océan Indien ! Puis c’était des vacances invariablement passées sur un îlot, dans un beach-house pied-dans-l’eau. Souvent, la nuit, le bruit du vent dans les arbres réveillait en lui les échos du chant des filaos des plages de sable d’enfance et la rumeur des vagues glaciales rappelait le déploiement soyeux de l’eau tiède, jamais oubliée (p.77).

Proximity to the sea is one of the defining aspects of life on small islands. To be at sea alone, if he did nothing else while in Mauritius, is enough to justify Michael’s return to the island: “ – S’il n’y avait que ça, il valait la peine d’être revenu. J’appartiens à cette île, à cette région. Je ne pourrai jamais l’oublier” (p.118). His attachment to the island is informed by a measure of nostalgia that distance from the island has intensified, yet his sense of belonging - after he has returned to the island and experienced life there many years later - reinforces the notion of a magnetic hold that the island has on individuals and communities. Berthelot’s novel reveals a strong attachment to islands

and an appreciation of island identity. The recurring references to other islands in this novel and *Le Désamour* highlight the cultural and geographical specificity of the island environment, as discussed in Chapter Two.

Appanah's *La Noce d'Anna* also problematises the relationships between memory and nostalgia and exile and belonging. The narrator recalls her desire to leave Mauritius, unmoved by the idealisation of the island "destination", the exotic idyll marketed by the tourist industry and the media. Her desire to leave is fuelled by her dream of discovering life elsewhere, in a colder climate, with different smells, scenery and sounds. It can be argued that in this idealisation of life in Europe, the narrator was no more authentic than the tourists clamouring to experience the "exotic" life in Mauritius, and interestingly, she notes that she continues to marvel at the clichés of Paris that she had dreamed of as young girl.

It becomes clear that Sonia, and her daughter, Anna, are separated by the lack of a shared childhood experience. The significance that Sonia attaches to souvenirs or memories of Mauritius sometimes leaves her daughter cold:

Le t-shirt « Allez Maurice », un souvenir des jeux des îles que m'a offert il y a des années une amie Mauricienne. C'est mon t-shirt préféré qui fait grincer des dents ma fille qui dit que, dedans, j'ai l'air d'une « vieille-idiote-âge-mental-quatorze » (p.26).

The t-shirt celebrates the Island Games that took place in Mauritius in 2003, but Anna has little time for the sentimentality that it represents. For Sonia, the t-shirt represents an attachment to her home country through friends of the same nationality. Given that her daughter has never lived in Mauritius, Sonia, somewhat unreasonably, is upset that her daughter's wedding retains none of the Indian traditions or customs of her mother's old life in Mauritius. Mother and daughter have been separated by a lack of shared

cultural memory and by the continuing sense of culture shock that Sonia experiences in France.

Earlier, Sonia acknowledges: “Anna me dit alors que je ne parle jamais de là-bas. Elle dit là-bas, comme si c’était un endroit un peu maudit ou un paradis [...] Un lieu interdit” (p.71). Mauritius is remembered, therefore, as a fictitious country, an imagined Other space and unfamiliar to her daughter. A significant contrast is highlighted by the choice of term “là-bas” which exaggerates the sense of distance and establishes opposition between the faraway island and continental Europe, as well as between mother and daughter. Mauritius is evoked as an unfamiliar place at the other side of the world. We also see the Chagos Islands evoked in similar terms, as “là-bas” by the exiled Chagossians, for whom their homeland is described in terms of distance from where they now live. In the case of Sonia, in *La Noce d’Anna*, her daughter’s use of the term is disparaging, while in Patel’s *Le Silence des Chagos*, “là-bas” is a euphemism that allows the Chagossians to refer to home without enduring the pain and distress caused by evoking the real name of their islands.

Sonia is not an agent for the cultural memory of Mauritius, but comes to reject the idealised memory of visitors to Mauritius, and the cultivation of the myth of the “exotic” (although paradoxically, she practises this herself with descriptions of France). The smallest item or smell is enough to reconnect her with *her* Mauritius. Recollections of self and place are markers in a process of self-discovery. The relationship between self and the island is nonetheless problematic and Sonia’s voluntary exile is the cause of internal conflict. Hers is an ambivalent nostalgia for the island; at times the narrator is resolutely critical of the society she has left behind yet, at other times, is utterly

consumed by the intense sensations that the island evokes. The island continues to be a paradoxical space even when the subject of memory of those who are exiled voluntarily from it. While it is integral to personal and cultural memory and sense of self, the reader sees how the island is such a subject of fascination for others that it often becomes a reductionist instrument of othering.

4.2.2 Forced displacement from the island: separation, dislocation and remembrance of the island in *Le Silence des Chagos*

Shenaz Patel's novel captures idealisations of island life through the memories of the protagonists and the comparisons drawn between the Chagossians' life on Diego Garcia and later in Mauritius. The reader sees that their memory of the islands is a central element of their identity. This memory, romanticised or real, becomes a collective phenomenon, negotiated with other displaced Chagossians and transmitted to the next generation of Chagossians in exile. Vivid images of their place of origin are inspired by a real and lived experience, allowing them to retain a link with their homeplace and reinforce their identity. "Je pense que pour ne pas mourir ils avaient besoin de se raccrocher à quelque chose et on ne peut pas se raccrocher à ce qui n'est pas vivant" (Patel Jul 2007). An idealised memory of their archipelago is a means for the Chagossians to survive in their host country and preserve their identity in the aftermath of their deportation. Chagossians rely on their memory of a carefree life to protect themselves from the traumatic memory of their forced departure from home, or indeed from dying from sadness and loneliness, as Patel remarks:

Je me disais « est-ce que ça s'est vraiment passé comme ça ? », et je pense que moi, après avoir connu les Chagossiens et en habitant chez eux et tout, je pense qu'il y a deux versions. Il y en a une qui donne une version très paradisiaque à leur histoire, mais on se rend bien compte que c'est un peuple qui a connu un passé très colonial, ce sont des gens qui étaient quand même très dépendants, ils n'ont pas reçu des salaires [...] mais c'était une relation d'asservissement, en même temps, eux, c'est la seule vie qu'ils ont connue. [...] je pense en fait que l'idéalisation, c'était peut-être un moyen pour les Chagossiens de ne pas mourir (Patel Jul 2007).

Patel argues that nostalgia and idealisation of the islands are inevitable given the trauma the Chagossian people have endured.

Drawing on the mythology that emerges from their traumatic experience, and highlighting their sense of separation from their islands, Patel's retelling of the Chagossians' stories occasionally recalls a paradise lost. In a lively description of a *séga* evening (pp.64-69) frequent references to their traditional musical instruments, the vibrations and cacophony of this community celebration reinforce the carefree nature of their life prior to their forced departure. Bragard (2008) notes that the central character, Charlesia, experiences immense distress caused by a sense of uprootedness. Her desperate feelings of loss at being separated from Diego Garcia are coupled with a profound sense of nostalgia for a simpler and more pleasant life left behind. Yet Bragard also identifies within the text a willingness on behalf of the characters themselves to question their tendency to reimagining the Chagos islands as a paradise lost. They also demonstrate a capacity for objectivity by wondering whether the islands were really as perfect as they would like to remember them. Patel also examines this aspect of Chagossian memory by incorporating references to memory and recollection into the dialogue towards the close of the novel.

Parts of the novel appear to be drawn from colonial mythology of Diego Garcia, for example, in the scenes claimed to be inspired by oral testimony, which are reminiscent of pastoral scenes and the myth of the "noble savage" so prevalent in eighteenth century narratives. When the narrative evokes Diego Garcia pre-deportation in 1963, the narrator describes daily life on the island. The reader learns about Chagossian culture, rituals and lifestyle as their work life, family life, school life and social life are recalled.

The overall image is of a society founded on neighbourliness, co-operation, respect, hard work and sociability, recalling scenes from *Paul et Virginie* of an idyllic island space. The British-run administration organises the adults' work schedules; tasks are allocated daily and the work usually involves harvesting coconuts or domestic chores. Attendance at school is compulsory for children at the behest of the administration: "En passant devant l'école, elle les entend tous en chœur égrener l'alphabet sous la conduite autoritaire de Miss Léonide" (p.44-45). It smacks of the colonial school in the old days of Mauritius and elsewhere in the French or British Empires. The narrator speaks of happy-go-lucky childhoods, where children run around the island and play on the beach after lessons, or perhaps even during lessons, such as Mimose, Charlesia's daughter who:

[...] s'ennuie dans cette classe où les enfants de tous âges sont réunis, elle préfère caracoler à travers l'île. Pourtant l'administration a bien insisté: les enfants doivent être à l'école pendant la journée (p.45).

The third section of the novel concludes with the description of the end of a typical work day on Diego Garcia: "Assis en demi cercle devant la porte de la case, ils mangent en silence, en pensant au sommeil qui ralentit leurs gestes" (p.51). While it appears that the narrative highlights the island paradise and a utopian society of sorts, there is an emphasis on community and hard work. The island is not merely remembered as an idyllic refuge of the indolent. In this regard the remembered island is in stark contrast to the colonial island image put forward by Dennis Greenhill or by Paul Gore Booth, a senior official at the British Foreign Office. The following comment by Denis Greenhill a British diplomat, in 1966, is quoted prior to the second chapter of the novel, which describes what life was like on Diego Garcia before the islanders were removed. Greenhill's comments appear in a report sent by the Colonial Foreign and Commonwealth Office in London to the British Mission at the United Nations in August 1966:

The object of the exercise was to get some rocks which will remain ours; there will be no indigenous population, except seagulls, who have not yet got a committee (the Status of Women Committee does not yet cover the rights of birds). Unfortunately along with the Birds go some few Tarzans or Man Fridays whose origins are obscure, and who are hopefully wished on to Mauritius.⁵³

The Greenhill quotation negates the deep attachment between the Chagossians to their islands and underscores the strategies employed by colonial powers in erasing specific versions of history. The islands were emptied in order to facilitate the expansionist neo-imperialist plans of Britain and the United States, and the first step in the process was to belittle the islanders' legitimacy by ridiculing their origins. This patronising view is an attempt to sweep aside the Chagossians' cultural memory by replacing it with a more satisfactory version for the British administration to convince them that the Chagossians are not historically or culturally linked to the Chagos archipelago. The implication is that if the inhabitants of Diego Garcia do not have a history or a cultural memory of the archipelago, they cannot be regarded as Chagossian, but as a transient people willing to move from island to island. It negates their sense of national identity and, by extension, their claim to live in the Chagos archipelago. Patel's narrative attempts to redress the balance, giving voice to the islanders and their experience of their islands, and agency in narrating their story. The Chagossians recall how they worked hard, ate well, dined together and looked forward to a long sleep after their tiring day. There are very detailed accounts of the most menial of tasks, lovingly performed. The Chagossians' dignity and diligence are highlighted in the narrative, which at times may risk lapsing into sentimental nostalgia (p.47). Food preparation is vividly described to such an extent that the reader has the impression that the Chagossians are always preparing a sumptuous feast, even with the humblest of facilities, and limited quantities and varieties of foodstuffs:

⁵³ Attributed to Denis Greenhill, quoted by Patel, in *Le Silence des Chagos*, p. 39.

Trois tours dans la caraille et elle y met à frire les tranches de poisson, qui frétilent dans l'huile en faisant éclater ça et là des bulles chaudes qui retombent en une pluie pétillante sur la peau rissolée. Puis elle ajoute un peu de chair de coco tendre finement râpée et quelques épices (p.48).

These passages call to mind Devi's novel, *Pagli*, and the eponymous narrator's impressions of Agalega, an island she has never visited, but which she imagines in similar terms (see Chapter Three). In *Le Silence des Chagos*, the emphasis on the peaceful and simple pastoral life of the Chagossians serves to draw heavily laden contrasts between two different islands and island spaces. Diego Garcia is the smaller island, relegated to a remembered island and destined to be the subject of recollection and idealised as an image of idyllic island life into the future by those Chagossians now resettled in Mauritius. However, Patel does not rely solely on the use of nostalgia to provoke a desired reader response. Rather, the characters drawn in the narrative are representative of the collective and individual trauma of the Chagossians, and the narrator reminds us of their sense of loss and dislocation throughout the text. Mostly this sense of loss is drawn in terms of their separation from the island home, sometimes evoked in the simplest items, or through sensations. When, for example, Raymonde unpacks some of her belongings, a few specks of sand are enough for her to take stock of her loss: "Quand elle déplia les langes, quelques grains de sable s'en échappèrent. Alors Raymonde s'est assise, et elle a pleuré" (p.110-1). The grains of sand confirm the physical distance between Raymonde and her home island. The only physical evidence that remains of her island and a poignant reminder of her life on Diego Garcia, the sand intensifies her sense of exile.

The cynical and cruel manner in which the islands were evacuated is also alluded to in the novel, when Raymonde lapses into recollection and considers the impact of such a hasty departure on their memory:

Plus tard, elle avait pensé que c'était cela que le bateau attendait pour démarrer. Que la nuit tombe, pour qu'ils ne puissent pas voir ce qu'ils quittaient. Ni même inscrire dans leurs yeux une dernière image de leur île, de leur vie (p.99).

The Chagossians were deprived of one last chance to see their islands and engrain the image of their island in their memory. Raymonde's comments highlight the voluntary nature of memory and our conscious attempts to preserve images in memory for the future. Their rushed and forced exile from their islands has interrupted this memory process for the Chagossians.

Bragard (2008) argues that the ship is a significant motif in the novel in that it appears to empathise with the deported Chagossians and functions as a "murmuring vessel", a repository for their memory and a witness to their trauma and loss. I would contend, however, that memory is even more effectively articulated through the conceptualisation of the island and, in particular, through the use of contrast between the two island spaces juxtaposed in the novel:

Rien ne va ici. Des rues aux contours braques, des culs-de-sac vous arrêtent soudain en pleine descente. Marcher ici n'a pas de sens. Là-bas, les yeux fermés, elle glissait ses pas dans l'inclinaison naturelle du sable, la mer devant, la mer derrière, calme et belle, pour caresser et faire frissonner leur terre comme un corps alangui au creux d'un corps amoureux (p.21).

Mauritius is evoked in the first instance as an urban jungle with unfamiliar and complicated paths that require careful navigation. Such obstacles were not part of life in Diego Garcia, where the inhabitants had intimate knowledge of every part of their island. The use of body imagery enhances the sense of union between inhabitant and island in the above example in which the island is personified in its intimate relationship with the sea (see Chapter Three). This imagery creates a sense of spiritual appreciation for the home island.

Separation from the island is a cause of profound anxiety, which manifests itself in a physical sense. It is also the catalyst for the reliance on memory of how life used to be. This memory of happier times causes profound distress for the islanders as they realise that life will never again be as idyllic as they remember it to have been. Departure from their island, and the resultant state of involuntary exile, has left a profound mark on the Chagossian characters featured in the novel and is the source of their intense attachment to memory of their island life on their archipelago, in whatever form that memory takes, and however reliable it reveals itself to be.

4.2.3 The island and sensorial memory

Memory is highly sensitive to images and sensations, and personal memory is therefore frequently dependent on a sensorial process. Physical sensations represent a particularly intense aspect of the memory process, combining to fix an image in memory and are a powerful tool in the preservation and recovery of the past. Of particular significance is the olfactory experience, which is an evocative link between the protagonist and their past. Recent Mauritian novels offer an abundance of examples of sensorial memory and striking memory images, in particular, Appanah's *La Noce d'Anna* in which the island is remembered and reconstructed through the senses, but also in *Le Dernier frère* and *L'Outre-Mère*.

In *La Noce d'Anna*, Sonia's personal journey is evoked through images of Mauritius, which are frequently awakened by the sense of smell. We see how scents are evocative of time and place and can provoke the resurgence of a sequence of memories. When the rich aroma produced by the new coffee machine, a gift from her future son-in-law, wafts through Sonia's apartment, she notes that she loves the smell of coffee even

though she does not actually enjoy its taste. The reader associates Sonia's appreciation for the smell of coffee with the love she has for her daughter. This banal experience is the starting point for a reflection on the smells and odours that fill her with joy: "Le rhum, le cigare, l'essence, la peinture, un homme en sueur dans le bus" (p.35). Rum is evocative of the tropics and causes Sonia to recall memories of home. These are a specific type of memory image, not of an event, but of sensations, impressions and consequent emotions. The brief memory of a sensorial experience quickly unleashes a series of images and sensations from her past. The passage is full of colour, detail and vivid evocation of smell and demonstrates how one particular scent is powerful enough to unleash a deluge of memories:

Quand j'étais encore chez moi, là-bas, de l'autre côté de l'Afrique, j'aimais l'odeur douce-amère du jacquier, coller mon nez contre le tronc râpeux, inspirer, inspirer encore jusqu'à ce que j'aie l'impression que l'arbre n'avait plus d'odeur et que j'avais tout avalé. J'aimais [...] les rouge à lèvres rances de ma vieille tante, l'odeur de la poudre à visage anglaise de ma mère (p.35).

The reference to the jacquier, a tropical tree native to Mauritius, sets this image in its geographical context, thereby according her memory a cultural specificity. Yet, the evocation of her family ties is equally important, and these brief images lead to the continuation of recollections from her past, leading in turn to a reconstruction of her childhood. We see, for example, how the smell of oranges is associated with her schooldays, inspiring Sonia to remember this time of her life in great detail and with considerable clarity:

La gomme élastique à rayures qui sentait l'orange, que je grignotais et recrachais en pluie. Depuis, l'orange me fait penser à l'école [...] L'orange me fait penser à mon enfance si lointaine, presque irréaliste (p.36).

In this case, snapshots of the past are recaptured by tangible sensations. This particular taste relates to the classroom, and the smell and taste of oranges are sufficient to recall her entire childhood. Interestingly, her love of France is expressed in similar terms, the taste of hot chocolate for instance, or "le parfum un peu fétide de la Saône les jours

d'été" (p.35). However, Sonia is cautious not to depict an idyllic childhood. The smell of oranges is the catalyst for her recollections from her youth. Recalling these days from an adult perspective allows a more learned interpretation of her experience of being a school child in a developing country, yet she is nonetheless capable of recapturing the pride and innocence of this same childhood:

Nous étions en rang, le verre de lait dans une main, la poire dans l'autre, la moustache blanche au-dessus des lèvres, mastiquant à grand-peine. Nous pensions que tous les enfants du monde étaient comme nous, sages, si sages dans nos uniformes, mangeant et buvant avec cérémonie et reconnaissance un lait qui nous donnait envie de vomir et un fruit sec qui écorchait le palais et cassait les dents (p.36).

The event is given added realism and heightened drama through the evocation of the taste and texture of specific food and drink. In Appanah's *Le Dernier frère*, we see further evidence of memories of childhood evoked through the senses. Raj recalls smells very clearly while remembering certain images from his past and he demonstrates how the sensorial experience of smell is particularly effective in fixing itself in memory:

Aujourd'hui, comme je me souviens des boucles de David, je me souviens également de l'odeur de rouille et de sang sur mes mains. Dans la forêt en rentrant, je reniflais mes paumes comme si elles étaient une drogue et à chaque inspiration, une bouffée de sérénité et d'espoir me remplissait (p.101).

The above excerpt shows how Raj's memory of David is sustained because of associated sensorial memories, in this case of the smell of rust on his hands. The memory is linked with how he found comfort in a particular smell during this specific moment during childhood.

Although Sonia was eager to leave Mauritius because of the conservative and stifling nature of Mauritian society and of her intense desire to travel, she finds herself drawn back to her memories of images and sensations of her home island as the narrative progresses. Sonia's complex relationship with Mauritius is evident in the conflicting sense of memory and nostalgia she expresses:

Il y a des nostalgies que je me refuse, sinon je perds la tête. La nostalgie de la mer, quand elle surgit après une montée et, à ce moment-là, avoir la certitude qu'ici est le bout du monde ; la nostalgie des fleurs d'été si douces si parfumées ; la nostalgie d'un je-ne-sais-quoi de pur dans l'air, de serein, de sain ; la nostalgie du jus sucré de la canne qui fait crisser les dents et poisser les doigts ; la nostalgie du ciel bas et noir de la nuit et des milliers d'étoiles qui semblent proches, si proches qu'elles donnent illusion d'être à portée de main (p.58).

Drawing on powerful sensorial imagery of the sea, the air, flowers, sugar cane and the night sky, the narrator demonstrates the powerful hold of the memory of place, in particular its impact on smell, sight, taste and touch. Sonia insists that she tries to avoid romanticising the island. She consciously attempts to avoid any sugar-coating of her memories of Mauritius, yet understands the power of the island's landscape and its feast for the senses and adopts the European gaze when evoking the beauty and lure of the island nonetheless. In her evocation of nostalgia and memory the narrator relies on rich sensorial imagery to portray the island.

Other characters' pasts are also evoked in terms of sensorial memory. The reader learns that Sonia's close friend, Yves, is still grieving for his wife, who passed away six years earlier. At one point he remembers bringing her a present of local jam from a trip to Africa. This memory is particularly intense and painful for him. "Ensemble, c'était elle sa force. Depuis qu'elle n'est plus, il ne mange plus les confitures sucrées africaines parce que ça lui rappelle trop ce qui lui manque désormais" (p.60). Aware of the power of gustatory memory, Yves avoids tasting jam as it is inextricably linked with his loss. His voluntary recall is selective and the different senses are affected to varying degrees to the extent that a photograph is easier to tolerate than the intense suffering brought about by taste or smells associated with happy times with his wife. This example shows how taste can be a more effective conduit for the resurfacing of memories than sight. This serves to confirm Warnock's assertion, and echoes Proust's notion that the visual is in the realm of intellectual memory and that because sight is practical and the most

familiar sense since birth, it has less impact than the other senses in the memory process (Warnock, 1987).

Sensorial memory is not confined to isolated recollections. As noted earlier, Warnock asserts that when a series of memories floods back, past sensations cannot be separated from one another. Other sensations inevitably follow if one is recalled, resulting in a complete fragment of the past being remembered, rather than just one image or sensation. In the following example from *La Noce d'Anna*, Sonia describes the return of memories as an intensely physical experience, as if she is being assaulted by images from her past:

Quand la voiture s'arrête devant le restaurant 'La Ferme du Bugey', j'ai mal à la tête de tous les souvenirs qui me reviennent, une claque que je prends en plein visage, je tremble de la houle d'insatisfaction qui me remplit: qu'ai-je fait de ces années, de cette vie [...]? (p.69)

The violence associated with the intense experience of a series of memories is painful, both physically and psychologically, and causes Sonia to take stock of her life. In Berthelot's *L'Outre-mère*, Michael is also struck by a series of images to the extent that it becomes a physical sensation similar to that experienced by Sonia in *La Noce d'Anna*: "Ces souvenirs sont si vivaces que Michael en souffre, littéralement" (p.92). He is assaulted by a chain of memories so vivid that it almost causes pain. However, these memories include images of time spent with Cécile surrounded by nature, and he notes in particular, the smells and sounds of their environment:

L'odeur des conifères est fraîche, un peu enivrante [...] Les oiseaux, d'abord dérangés par leur intrusion, s'étaient remis qui à pépier, qui à roucouler. Une odeur indéfinissable montait du sol, faite en partie des effluves de l'humus, des feuilles froissées et du tranquille parfum des balsamines sauvages (*ibid*).

Michael's recollection relies on sensorial memory, in particular the sense of smell. The odours and aromas from that day are fresh, earthy and fragrant. However, the narrator also notes that a romantic scene framed their encounters: "Ainsi, ils avaient connu

l'amour dans un décor de poésie digne des Romantiques du Lac qu'il enseignait!" (*ibid*), as if constructed as such to enhance the future memory of the day itself. The narrator further reveals an awareness of nostalgia and idealisation, remarking that Michael had once asked his students to analyse the theme of memory in romantic literature. This knowing aside acknowledges the importance of memory as a theme in the novel and reveals the author's awareness of memory in the construction of her own literary narrative.

Sheringham (1993) highlights how Warnock's study regards memory as the key to continuity; in this context she emphasises the causal links between present and past. Two centuries before, Baudelaire showed how we are subject to, and subjects of, various kinds of memory. His work deals with fragmentary and momentary memory. According to Sheringham (1993: 293), memory in Baudelaire's work can be the cause of violent disruption; the subject is depersonalised and attacked by memory and brought to a "temporal abyss". Referring to Baudelaire, Sheringham observes:

Memory breaks up the habitual routines of self-awareness and, rather than fostering unity, threatens everyday self-consistency. The unassimilable past lodges in the present like a foreign body, while the familiar past is disrupted by the invasion of a forgotten dimension (*ibid.*).

How can we explain the effectiveness of sensory triggers in the memory process? Warnock suggests that it is due to language. Because we are so conditioned to seeing and describing images since birth, sight is the most important sense in our development, our related vocabulary is extensive, which allows for a more intellectual discussion. While visual aspects are undoubtedly important in rediscovering the past, our vocabulary for describing sounds, smells or tastes is less refined and therefore our recollection of memories by these senses is more instinctive and more intense (1987: 96). Also important to this discussion is the value of what Warnock calls "memory

images”, a significant feature of art and literature. A memory image is so clear that it becomes a sort of sensation, and the enjoyment of a memory image can represent the promise of images to come, to the extent that memory images, and not those of events or a location, are what invigorate us (1987: 85). Memory is therefore a sensorial experience: through smell, taste and touch we can effectively relive a moment from the past. Sensory triggers are frequent in literature and intrinsically linked to involuntary memory.⁵⁴

Sensory triggers are an effective narrative strategy in evoking memory, in particular, memories of childhood or time spent in Mauritius. The sensations evoked create a link between character and place, notably the island space. The island is evoked in this instance as much through smell, taste, touch and sound, as through visual imagery.

4.3 The island remembered from within: the island as a site of memory

Island myths and metaphors include the image of islands as sacred sites, thereby entrenching the island in discussions on memory. Contemporary Mauritian novelists’ reworking of paradise island imagery is an appropriate starting-point in the reconstruction of island memory, as the trope of the island paradise is synonymous with the colonial past of slavery, prison, and alienation (in the outsider’s view of the island in island narratives such as *Robinson Crusoe*, for example).

Nora describes sites of memory as physical or imaginary places that serve to locate national memory. Inspired by the fear that national memory will disappear, Nora looks

⁵⁴ Consider Proust’s madeleines, for example.

to locations in which memory is most effectively represented including through the conscious efforts of man throughout the ages to safeguard certain symbols (Nora: 1984). Drawing on Nora's theory of sites of memory, we can consider the island a site of memory because it is a geographic feature or location that transmits the memory of those who lived there. In some cases, this memory is tangible and written into the landscape through man-made structures such as crosses, graves, signs or headstones, monuments, or planted fields. Furthermore, the island's natural landscape is testament to how the elements carve out a particular lie of the land over time.

In Devi's *Soupir*, the harsh natural island environment is a site of memory and a trigger for the inhabitants' remembrance of previous hardships. Devi's narrative outlines how the characters' individual and collective hardships echo the island's traumatic history of slavery:

On n'avait pas droit à la fête. Du moins, pas tant que restait en suspens le fer rougi des noms d'esclaves, leur fin effrénée hors du temps et de l'espace, leur faim de honte et de culpabilité qui nous demandait à nous, leurs peut-être descendants, de leur rendre droit à l'espoir. Mais comment pouvions-nous leur dire que leur règne, fût-il un règne de douleur et de doute, était terminé, qu'il nous fallait passer à autre chose, passer outre leur peine pour être nous-mêmes, ni les fils de ces hommes sans futur, ni les géniteurs d'êtres sans passé qui posséderaient l'île comme nous ne l'avions jamais possédée ? (p.185).

While aware of the relevance of the island's history of slavery to their own lives and their duty to commemorate it appropriately and respectfully, they are nonetheless keen to move beyond their stifling sense of mourning and guilt. Slavery remains a ghostly presence on the island. The realisation that they share the same enclosed environment with the slaves who once walked on the same earth in this same part of Rodrigues reinforces the characters' sense of imprisonment. They experience the same desperate desire for freedom that the slaves must have experienced during their incarceration on the island:

Tu sais que toutes les terres défrichées par des esclaves portent en elles la dureté de la pierre ? C'est inévitable. Leur cœur refusait ces terres, et ils y ont semé leur rage... Ici, tout le monde ne prie qu'un dieu : la liberté. Vous n'êtes liés à rien d'autre (p.115).

The narrative emphasises the transmission of memory through the island environment. The limited boundaries of the small island reinforce the sense of a visible and tangible history, and that history is etched in the stone and soil of the island. The island is a site of memory; a limited surface area that captures and resonates with the secrets of its inhabitants. It offers the possibility of rebirth through the use of recreated collective memory. Their awareness of the fragility and the vulnerability of the island reinforces their desire to assert a collective island memory. The island's confined space appears to echo the secrets and memories of its inhabitants and their predecessors and holds Devi's characters captive in an unrelenting cycle of imprisonment. In *Soupir*, appropriating the past and respecting it, whilst working hard to build a happier future, offers freedom to the islanders and leads to a rebirth of the island as a symbol of hope. This merging of past, present and future echoes the creolisation of Mauritius and the island's role in cementing that creolised identity.

Devi's *Pagli* sees the island, or more particularly small village communities within the island, as a site or sites of memory, evoking the area's past of slavery and indentured labour. The red earth of Terre Rouge is of historical significance and appears to be literally bursting with secrets from the past:

Terre Rouge est lourd d'histoires [...] D'esclaves morts en certains lieux touchés à jamais par leur présence et qui gardent la couleur des larmes. De travailleurs engagés qui ont donné leur vie à chercher ce qu'ils ne trouveront jamais : le repos. Et ce rouge, dit la terre, vient de tous ces sacrifices impardonnés. Elle ne peut pas oublier si facilement son histoire, les crimes qui ont été son origine et sa fin, les douleurs qui ont coulé directement dans le sol et se sont logées dans les noyaux de lave qui n'attendent que de rejaillir. Et tant que les gens n'auront pas compris et accepté cette histoire, tant qu'ils croiront que ces souffrances les séparent au lieu de les rassembler parce qu'elles ont été leur lieu de reconnaissance, la lave continuera de bouillonner et de rugir (p.29).

The soil's red hue is evocative of the blood and the suffering born during a dark period of Mauritian history. Similarly to how slavery is evoked in *Soupir*, the earth is respected as a site of memory and the protagonist is conscious of its presence in daily life. The era of indentured labour and the adversity the workers faced are etched in the soil. The villagers walk in the shadow of their ancestors who suffered hardships in order to make a better life for themselves and their descendants. This awareness of past sufferings evolves within a context of deprivation and cruelty, suggesting that Terre Rouge is destined to be a site of memory within an unbroken cycle of hardship, at least until their suffering is recognised. The narrator uses evocative language (“la couleur des larmes”, “ce rouge”, “ces souffrances”) and active verbs (“couler”, “loger”, “bouillonner”, “rugir”) to enhance the sense of the earth as a living being that continues to resonate with the memory of important events in the village's history. While the setting of the novel is local, this echo of slavery helps to situate the village's past within the wider context of Mauritian history. Pagli challenges the villagers to recognise that they are united in their history, rather than separated by their various past sufferings. The interior monologue asks that the mixed heritage and histories of the Mauritian people be recognised so that a Mauritian cultural memory will not rely solely on competitive claims about whose suffering should carry more weight.

Much of Le Clézio's Mauritius-based *oeuvre* focuses on the relationship between islands and memory, and reveals his nostalgia for islands and fondness for island myths. In *Le Chercheur d'Or* (1985) and its follow-up *Voyage à Rodrigues* (1986), the narrator, Alexis, traces the footsteps of his adventurer grandfather on the island of Rodrigues and evokes his own childhood in Mauritius. *Le Quarantaine* (1995) is a longer transgenerational epic, a multi-layered narrative about travellers who are forced

into quarantine on a small island during their voyage to Mauritius. All three novels are inspired by the author's own family history and reflect common elements of Le Clézio's fiction: travel, adventure, exile, and heritage. The novels frequently depict memory as written into the landscape of the island through visual artefacts and monuments or show the island as a receptacle for memory. Furthermore, Le Clézio evokes how the natural environment of the island is shaped by the elements over time, and as Racault notes, to the extent that it is possible to literally read the landscape depicted in his novels (2007: 238).

In *Voyage à Rodrigues* and *Le Chercheur d'Or* the myth of *l'écriture des pierres*, of messages communicated through the very geography of the island, is the most dominant of all the myths that create a sense of cultural specificity for islands, according to Racault (2007: 237). The land bears the signs and traces of ancient memory and these are evident in even the earliest literature in French from the Mascarene islands. Racault notes, for example, that *Paul et Virginie* begins and ends with scenes of the island and its topography and, in particular, with places associated with the hardship and sacrifice of ancestors (such as Baie du Tombeau or Cap Malheureux). Therefore, the island takes on the imprint of history, and legends in particular.

The image of history written in stone and guarded by the island environment is a visible motif in *La Quarantaine*. Léon Le Disparu wishes to engrave, on wood or on rocks, the names of those who have died in order to preserve their memory as if written into the landscape they will remain for posterity. He acknowledges the difficulty in constructing a memorial: "Je voudrais laisser un signal à la mémoire de ceux qui ont disparu, mais l'îlot est désert [...] Tout ce que j'ai pu faire, à côté du brasier, c'est quatre tas de

cailloux” (p.165). Léon undertakes the most basic of actions to ensure that their memory is not erased from this area. At a loss for materials with which to write a message or to design an image, he constructs small stone formations as a monument, in an attempt to redress the absence of signs of his people’s presence on the island landscape. The memory of those who died on îlot Gabriel will be built into the landscape so that they too become part of the island environment. The island landscape therefore becomes a site of memory and facilitates the preservation and transmission of the past. There are numerous references in the text to the cemetery on Île Plate, and Léon le Disparu includes transcriptions from headstones to add veracity to his narrative. Just as written texts are key elements in the composition of the narrative (see Chapter Five), the physical monuments of the headstone and plaques on îlot Gabriel and more communally, the entire graveyard on Île Plate, are concrete signs of the past, of the passing of generations. They are also reminders of the endless cycle of suffering and death on the island. The present inhabitants of the island-quarantine could succumb to the same fate as their predecessors.

Îlot Gabriel, where the moribund and most contagious individuals are kept in strict confinement, is a small island off the coast of Île Plate, where the passengers initially disembark. When Léon takes it upon himself to discover the truth about the function of îlot Gabriel for the pseudo-administration representing Mauritius, of Île Plate, he stumbles upon graves and headstones, so neglected that they seem to have merged with the island landscape:

Alors j’aperçois des tombes. Elles sont à quelques pas de moi, devant les citernes. Elles se confondent avec les blocs de basalte qui parsèment la pente du piton. Du haut de la citerne, je distingue une aire qui a dû autrefois être éclaircie et que les buissons de lantanas et les batatrans ont envahie à nouveau. Il y a là une vingtaine de tombes, pour la plupart de simples rochers à peine équarris, plantés dans la terre. Je marche au milieu des tombes, je cherche des noms, des dates. Mais le vent a tout effacé. Une des tombes pourtant, est plus récente, encore lisible. C’est

une pyramide tronquée de basalte, et sur la face exposée à la mer, je peux déchiffrer un nom et une date :

*Horace Lazare Bigeard
died 1887 from smallpox
Age 17 (p.163).*

This same headstone is alluded to later in the text when the younger Léon attempts to retrace the steps of his granduncle. Still standing over a century later, it is the only indication of the period of quarantine on îlot Gabriel. Such repetition of symbols and events between the narration of Léon le Disparu and Léon, the younger narrator, underlines the continuity of experience and cultural transmission of memory. Other monuments are constructed by the present inhabitants. John Metcalfe's wife commemorates the date of their arrival on Île Plate, the first day of their incarceration, and the date of the botanist's death on a little plaque. Metcalfe's grave and plaque face the sea. His wife is concerned that he should be able to see the dream island of Mauritius, even in death. She remarks: "Il est près de la porte, là il peut voir tout le temps son paradis. Il peut voir son île, il doit être bien content, tu sais" (p.337).

We see further echoes between the two Léon characters, just as Léon le Disparu was conscious of the continuing presence of the Coolies who had lived and died on the island before his arrival:

J'aime toucher le ciment chaud des citernes, sentir la froideur de la profondeur. Il me semble que je perçois la vie des coolies qui ont vécu ici avant nous, des voyageurs abandonnés. Ce sont eux qui ont construit ces citernes, apportant chaque pierre, la soudant au mortier. Ils habitent encore ici, dans les roches noires, au pied du piton, devant le bleu irréel du lagon devant la mer aux vagues très lentes, je sens leur regard sur moi, dans la lumière qui se répercute. Ils ont scruté jour après jour la ligne de Maurice, attendant le bateau qui ne venait pas. Ils ont été brûlés les uns après les autres sur la plage, leurs cendres emportées dans l'Océan. Et maintenant, je suis au même endroit, je marche sur leur corps (pp. 349-350).

As in Devi's *Soupir*, the narrative evokes the sacrifices of previous generations and an awareness of their ghostly presence on the island. Le Clézio's text highlights the physical constructions still present on the island which seem like monuments to the

Coolies and a physical reminder of their labour and sacrifice. The island is effectively a cemetery and memorial to its previous inhabitants.

The volcanic origins of the islands are also evoked in Léon's narration, which reminds the reader of the islands' longevity. Léon respects the power of nature and acknowledges the ephemeral aspect of human presence on the island. Looking towards Mauritius, he reflects: "J'imaginai l'éruption du volcan qui a rejeté cet énorme caillou au milieu de la mer, il y a des millions d'années, quand Maurice est sortie des profondeurs de l'Océan" (p.86). There are frequent references to rocks, craters, and peaks in the narrative to emphasise the volcanic origins of the island and to place man's arrival on the island within its wider historical and geographical context.

Léon, the younger narrator, visits Île Plate as part of his pilgrimage, to see the important sites that marked the lives of his grandparents and granduncle. He takes photographs of the site of the quarantine but comes to the realisation that he is more motivated to take pictures of his pretty companion, Lili. This leads him to philosophise on the meaning of souvenirs and emblems:

Qu'importent les images? Ma mémoire n'est pas ici ou là, dans ces ruines. Elle est partout dans les rochers, dans la forme noire du cratère, dans l'odeur poivrée des lantanas, dans le froissement du vent, dans la blancheur de l'écume sur les dalles de basalte (p.512).

It is suggested, therefore, that memory is transported within the self and not necessarily found in the external expressions of memory on which humans rely in an attempt to re-acquaint themselves with a desired identity. Memory is at its most powerful in its link between people and place. The link between man and island is an intense bond to the extent that the past is tangible in the island environment. Léon concludes that his origins are as much to be found on Île Plate and îlot Gabriel as in Mauritius. His family heritage may be based in the derelict sugar plantations of Mauritius, but he feels more keenly

aware of his past on these smaller offshore islands. He believes that this geography is a more revealing emblem and testimony of the past than any family photograph could be:

J'ai longtemps cru que, par faute de la Patriarche, je n'avais pas de pays, pas de patrie. Nous étions des exilés pour toujours. Mais tandis que la pirogue traverse la passe et s'éloigne vers Maurice, bousculée par la houle [...] je comprends enfin que c'est ici que j'appartiens, à ces rochers noirs émergés de l'Océan, à cette Quarantaine, comme au lieu de ma naissance. Je n'ai rien laissé ici, rien pris. Et pourtant, je me sens différent (ibid.).

Le Disparu's comments also highlight the transformative nature of the island, a key island trope in literature discussed in the previous chapter.

The constant sense of vibration that Léon le Disparu experiences during his time in Île Plate and îlot Gabriel is a further evocation of memory in the novel. This smaller island (*îlot*, rather than *île*) literally resonates with the past. Léon explicitly describes this vibration as a very physical sensation that has its origins in the centre of the island. The vibration originates in nature yet makes itself felt through the body, in particular through the heartbeat. There are a number of examples of the vibration motif in the narrative, many of which mention it coming from the very interior of the island, or of memory vibrating within the island or within the individual. The vibration motif is evoked as the sound of the elements and also of human emotion. These vibrations come together at different points to express an awareness of the union of the past and the present through the activity of nature and the elements on the island:

[...] cette vibration, dans le socle de l'île, une onde qui traverse le basalte et qui vient jusqu'à moi, me fait trembler sur mes jambes. Comme si cette île tout entière était mémoire, surgie au milieu de l'océan, portant en elle l'étincelle enfouie de la naissance (p.299).

Vibration is also present in a very physical manifestation of memory. Léon mentions Surya's family history and their voyage across the ocean from India towards Mauritius.

He regards the voyage as part of the island's memory, which he feels resonating within himself:

La vibration du navire qui les emportait sur l'Océan vers l'inconnu, vers l'autre côté du monde. C'est cela, je le sais bien maintenant, c'est la mémoire qui vibre et tremble en moi, ces autres vies, ces corps brûlés, oubliés, dont le souvenir remonte jusqu'à la surface de l'île (p.300).

Léon's sensitivity to the island's memory encapsulates the variety of experience of those who came to the island. He appropriates their cultural memory and foundation myths to construct his identity. La Mothe (2001) identifies the trope of the vibration as a core part of a writer's experience, as a quiet, inaudible vibration of the heart. He notes that the "vibration" comes at night, but has its origins at the bottom of the Ocean, in the heart of the earth and that it then seems to invade the body. This sensation has its origins in the past (as when Léon le Disparu hears the sea after his father's death, which suggests that vibrations are inextricably linked to sound). La Mothe sees the vibration motif, therefore, as a significant element of the novel's autobiographical narrative (2001: 449-500). I believe it more likely, however, that the vibration trope in Le Clézio's novel is indicative of a physical and emotional union between Man and place. A motif that reinforces the image of the island as a living entity and an agent in the process of remembrance, it leads the character towards an understanding of the island as a site of memory.

Devi and Le Clézio present islands as sites or receptacles of memory by focusing on recurring references to a character's awareness of walking on the same earth as past inhabitants of the island, or ghost imagery that reinforces the sense of past merging with present in an endless cycle of hardship and toil. Physical reminders of the past are plentiful and readers are reminded of the contributions of previous generations in

building island communities through hardship and sacrifice. Devi and Le Clézio's texts, with their references to slavery and Coolies, draw on Mauritius's colonial history and underline the role of the different communities in the island's development.

4.4 Conclusion

This chapter has examined remembrance of the island as an element in identity formation. In the novels discussed above, the island is evoked as a remembered object and a memorising subject. The remembered island is a source of comfort and inspiration, or conversely a source of anxiety and loss and also a keystone in the process of constructing, or reconstructing, Mauritian and Indian Ocean cultural identity. In *La Noce d'Anna*, *L'Outre-Mère* and *Le Silence des Chagos* the home island is remembered from abroad through imagination, invention, and nostalgia by those voluntarily or forcibly exiled. Such recollections are overwhelmingly positive. In contrast, in *Soupir*, *Pagli* and *La Quarantaine*, the island is remembered as a negative, unforgiving space, a site of memory that creates awareness both of one's place within a wider historical context and the repetition of events in a tragic cycle. These narratives underline the important role of memory in identity negotiation for those who have experienced displacement and disconnection. In fact, a writer living in a different country, essentially lives between two spaces and negotiates the space between homeland and host country. Memory plays a role in bridging this gap, both for writers and for their characters. Memory of the island - of leaving the island, returning to the island, nostalgia for the lost island, and memory of the initial journey to the island - is the unifying trait for the diverse ethnic communities and memory communities (particular communities or groups - family, clans, tribes, ethnic groups, or nations that are united in a cultural memory or preoccupied with memory) that constitute the population of Mauritius.

One could argue that remembering the island is no more significant than remembering the city, or the countryside, if indeed those locations are central to the action or to narrator or character's identity. However, the island's appeal as a powerful metaphor in literature consolidates its role in the process of remembrance of place. We have noted that the appeal and the difficulties of island living make the island a unique place in the eyes of islanders and outsiders, as identified by Péron (2004); the limitation of space and the island's distinctive environment influences their lifestyle and their concept of island identity. Where the island is a meeting ground of different cultures and histories, the unifying trait amongst the many constituent elements of national identity is therefore the sense of belonging to a special and distinctive place, and part of a wider cultural phenomenon involving neighbouring islands. This sense of attachment to an inimitable environment is heightened by voluntary or involuntary separation and often powerfully reconstructed through nostalgia and the senses. This island-based memory is an instinctual and sensorial experience in which even the most ordinary item or sensation is enough to recall important events and people from their past on the island, leading to a negotiation with their present situation and identity. The island resonates in contemporary culture as a location that embodies vulnerability, a paradox of isolation and belonging, in a distinctive geographical space. Island literature, and in this case, the Mauritian island narrative, therefore reflects a unique island identity through specific memory processes related to place and space.

While this chapter explores island-based memory, the following chapter will consider how personal memory is both a theme and narrative strategy in the contemporary

Mauritian novel in French and an instrument in the struggle to assert personal identity
in the multifarious island society.

**CHAPTER FIVE - PERSONAL MEMORY AND THE RECONSTRUCTION
OF INDIVIDUAL IDENTITY**

5.1 Introduction

“La mémoire pour moi est une source inépuisable de formation et de renseignement”
(Berthelot Jun 2007)

Memory is a significant trope in Mauritian literature, with many contemporary novels exploring its individual and collective aspects. The frequency with which the theme of memory appears in contemporary Mauritian fiction underlines the importance of cultural heritage and the quest for identity in Mauritian society today. While the preceding chapter addressed memory in the context of place, specifically the island, the present chapter explores personal and family memory and their role in the development of individual identity. Memory functions both as a narrative device and as a theme in the novels examined hereafter. Furthermore, the protagonists may be viewed as memorising subjects in their negotiation of personal memory and identity. We will explore the memory process and its bearing on personal experience and the forging of individual identity within Mauritius society. While some of the novels are concerned with personal experience and its role in establishing a sense of identity at the time of narration, we must underline that identity in a pluri-ethnic state such as Mauritius is a construct of many elements, not least personal and collective memory, as Asgarally (2005) has asserted, drawing on the work of Maalouf (1998).

We will draw on theories of memory in literature and will consider such concepts as personal memory and trauma in the context of a selection of contemporary Mauritian novels in French. Theorists of memory such as Halbwachs (1950), Warnock (1987), or Nalbantian (2003) acknowledge that memory is dependent on language and our capacity to articulate and assess images from the past. The importance of the written

word (letters, diaries, or written testimonies generated by oral history) and the use of intertextuality in finding an appropriate starting point from which to recover the past and to establish a present identity will therefore be examined for their contribution to narrative construction.

Memory functions as an essential component in character development. Yet, while a character may be nostalgic for a certain period or event in the past, it is unlikely that he or she is seeking to restore an original identity, for, as many studies on memory in literature (such as King, 2000) have concluded, personal memory is an endless process of reconstruction, which we observe in these novels. As Warnock (1987) has noted, humans are naturally curious about, and have a powerful urge to assert, identity. Our interest in identity, she affirms, is “bound up with man’s capacity for memory, and the pleasure in remembering that the species as a whole displays” (1987: 74). Literary texts can be a particularly useful source in the study of the process of remembering itself, as authors, their characters, and the imagery used in fiction can reveal to readers and critics the workings of memory. Nalbantian (2003) has asserted that memory is not merely a thematic element in literature, but that literature can also help illuminate the reader as to the benefits and pitfalls of remembering and on another level, on the actual process of memory itself. Mauritian literature is therefore certainly not unique in employing memory as either narrative device or trope, as memory is frequently a key element in the construction of literary narratives.

The novels analysed are those that evoke a sense of personal memory⁵⁵ and emphasise the use of memory in the process of the protagonists' construction or reconstruction of identity. Repressed memories and resurging memories facilitate character development in some of these novels. In others, the emphasis placed by the protagonists on ancestry, and the destructive potential of this relationship with the past, will be examined. Memory will also be considered in the context of trauma. We observe the protagonists negotiating their present identity in the light of trauma in childhood or in the recent past, examine how trauma is represented in such narratives, and how the unreliability of memory comes under scrutiny by the self-aware protagonists.

5.2 Selective memory and identity construction

Character development in literary narratives is made possible by the construction and reconstruction of identity through memories of important events in the protagonists' lives. In novels examined hereafter we see how continuity is maintained through a series of memories that trace the character development necessary for a coherent literary narrative. Personal narratives involve voluntary and involuntary memory processes, relying on strategies such as flashback, selective remembering or the use of sources and artefacts such as diaries, letters or photographs to evoke memory and construct or reconstruct identity. The reconstructed self is a recurring theme in these novels. They reveal the protagonists' struggle to reconcile their individual or family memory with their present identity. Selective memory and idealisation of the past allow the protagonists to reconstruct their own personal trajectory or their family's history in order to assert their place in present-day society.

⁵⁵ Personal memory is also referred to as "recollective memory" or "direct memory" especially in philosophy, and otherwise referred to as "episodic memory" by the sciences.

5.2.1 Conscious and unconscious remembering in *La Noce d'Anna*, *Le Désamour* and *Le Dernier Frère*.

Both *La Noce d'Anna* and Berthelot's *Le Désamour* employ a catalyst for the resurfacing, conscious or otherwise, of memories that cause the protagonists to reflect on the paths their lives have taken. In *La Noce d'Anna*, the narrative event which triggers the stream of memories is the narrator's daughter's wedding and for Emmanuelle in *Le Désamour*, it is the news that a former lover wished to re-establish contact with her decades after their relationship had ended. In *La Noce d'Anna*, the narrator, Sonia, experiences frequent resurfacing of images from her past, mainly of her daughter Anna's childhood, and her own love affair with Anna's father, Matthew. Throughout the narrative, Sonia remembers the time she spent in London and Paris, as well as her childhood in Mauritius. In *Le Désamour*, the narrative is largely concerned with Emmanuelle's memories of her days as a student in Paris and other related events following this influential period of her life.

In written narrative form, memory alone is not sufficient to produce a literary narrative, given that a story, whether in oral or written form, is a construct: a mix of imagination and memory, such as in the writing of letters or diaries, or in the writing of a short story or novel. In fact, the sharing of memories is made possible by both language and imagination, as highlighted in many studies of memory to date (Nalbantian, 2003 or Warnock, 1987). Furthermore, a story can only achieve true coherence if the continuity of its protagonist's existence is preserved (Warnock, 1987: 126-127). Appanah and Berthelot demonstrate the narrator's struggle to preserve this continuity through voluntary and subconscious recall of past events and through relying on letters, diaries or images to aid in narrative construction.

In Berthelot's *Le Désamour*, the arrival of a letter serves as the catalyst for the recollection of the protagonist's past. In the resulting *voyage intérieur* Emmanuelle, known as Manu, examines her past and present relationships. Manu's relationship with her husband has become tense as a result of his drinking problem, yet, also arguably due to her preoccupation with the past and consequent withdrawal from their relationship. She becomes increasingly distracted by a past friendship with Timothy Waddington, an Englishman she met during her studies in Paris. The novel emphasises the role of written correspondence in expressing disillusionment with the present and the hope of reconciliation with the past. Manu is keen to discover how Timothy remembers her, but wishes to keep these memories private:

Ce qu'elle aurait aimé lui écrire, c'était: gardons nos souvenirs entre nous, raconte-moi ce que tu me disais, comment tu me trouvais quand j'avais 19 ans. Quand est-ce que tu as cessé de penser à moi avec un peu de tendresse ? (p.11).

Manu longs to remember every last detail of their conversations and her feelings towards Timothy at the time, but is disappointed that she is unable to do so. She is only capable of recapturing seemingly insignificant details from that period of her life and associates these with her love for Timothy: "Emmanuelle aurait tellement voulu, aujourd'hui, se remémorer chacune des phrases qu'ils avaient échangées mais cela lui était impossible" (p.21). However, from the details provided in the main narrative or in the letters Manu writes to Timothy, the reader notes Manu's tendency to be selective with details at different stages of their relationship. At one point, Manu recreates the story of her life as she wishes she had lived it. To reconstruct this memory, she will simply suppress the undesirable elements of her background. The narrative suggests that this selective memory is due to her disappointment with what her life has become:

Ce n'était pas, évidemment, des choses à écrire à Timothy. Non, elle lui dit ses allées et venues d'étudiante entre les Sciences Politiques et la Sorbonne littéraire; ses études en mathématiques, son retour à 38 ans aux Humanités (et à l'université), son travail, en résumé, son mariage, ses

enfants. Honteuse, elle lui cacha qu'elle n'avait pas de grands diplômes comme lui: femme du tiers monde, elle avait refusé des bourses d'études pour ne pas quitter ses enfants en bas d'âge. Ici, elle n'avait pu mener de front les études universitaires et sa vie de femelle, même intelligente (p.10).

The noun “honte” is particularly revealing; Manu is ashamed that her life does not correspond to all the promise of her youth. However, from the present she is able, with the benefit of hindsight and life experience, to analyse her feelings and emotions. The novel's third-person limited narration allows for a more impartial analysis of Manu's memories than a first person narration, which would allow the reader access to her most innermost thought and doubts. Nonetheless, the narrative strategy of letter writing facilitates a more complete representation of the character than the traditional third-person narration allows, thereby establishing for the reader Manu's real and invented selves. Within this narrative, her thoughts are placed in context quickly and analysed with cool detachment, coupled with abundant commentary on her state of mind and awareness of her reconstruction of identity: “Emmanuelle n'était pas amère. Loin de là. Elle fut espiègle et spirituelle en écrivant; elle tenait à garder envers Tim le même ton qu'il avait employé, mi-neutre, mi-évocateur” (p.10). As the novel progresses, the third-person narrator displays more confidence in assessing the importance or insignificance of certain memories from Manu's past.

Berthelot also highlights the importance of the written word in recording memories whether in written correspondence, through letters from Timothy, letters to and from her son in Australia and her daughter in France, in written testimony in diaries, or through historical research and the subsequent writing or rewriting of history. Memory is transactional, and can be communicated through documents. Even if destroyed or lost, the act of reading the written word ingrains them on the consciousness, as we observe when Manu attempts to rid her life of reminders of her time with Timothy:

“Elle avait détruit toute sa correspondance précédente. Détruit sa lettre, mais en te souvenant clairement de ses mots, hein, murmura sa conscience. Ou sa mémoire” (pp.13-14). Manu is conscious, therefore, of the power of writing. Once written, words are committed to memory. In Berthelot’s *L’Outre-Mère* Cécile questions the role of photographs and written sources in the reconstruction of memory, and the relevance of relying on such artefacts to recapture one’s past:

Pourquoi était-elle revenue? Mais pourquoi relit-on ses devoirs d’écolier? Et les lettres du passé? Pourquoi regarde-t-on les photos des maisons de l’enfance, des disparus? Est-ce pour satisfaire un besoin d’appartenance, pour se souvenir de ce qu’on a été, de ce qu’on a pu être? Pour resquiller un bonheur inaccessible? (p.94).

Her examples of catalysts for memory are tangible documents that date from childhood. Cécile questions the human instinct to try to reconnect with one’s past and suggests several possible reasons for this insatiable desire to look back upon the past using photographs or other sources. Such souvenirs can give a sense of belonging, help us to remember what we were, or moreover, what we could have been. Berthelot’s character also refers to our need to extract some happiness from the past, if such happiness has proved to be elusive in adulthood. Her remarks conclude that a desire to recall the past is an inevitable aspect of the human condition.

Personal memory is also an important element in the narrative progression of both *La Noce d’Anna* and *Le Dernier frère*, in which the adult protagonists remember key events in their past and attempt to rediscover these events with a view to understanding their present lives. In *La Noce d’Anna*, Appanah relies on the technique of flashback in the development of Sonia’s character and in representing the problematic mother-daughter relationship that is the key source of conflict in the novel. Flashback combines the illusion of distance with the immediacy of evocation in the present. The function of this technique and the consequent nostalgia evoked in *La Noce d’Anna* facilitate the

representation of a character who is ill at ease in the present and searching for refuge in the more pleasant images of her past. It is also symbolic of a process of negotiation, of accepting the past and an awareness of the journey travelled towards the present time of narration. As her only daughter prepares for her wedding, Sonia experiences very frequent resurfacing of images from her past. She attempts to reconcile her past with her present in order to gain more insight, but accepts that she has not yet achieved this:

[...] Je marie ma fille aujourd'hui [...] je veux dire ne plus avoir peur du lendemain, regarder mon passé et sourire, avoir accompli ce dont j'avais envie [...] j'aurais voulu avoir assez de recul sur ma propre vie pour encourager ma fille, mais, non, je ne suis pas tout cela, je n'ai pas tout cela (pp.19-20).

The protagonist attaches importance to the ability to review her past and measure her personal development accordingly. Achievement is regarded as synonymous with happiness and is traced through memory, which aids the individual in evaluating his or her personal development and is an essential point of reference in the reconstruction of identity.

Flashbacks are frequently unleashed through simple sensorial experiences. In *La Noce d'Anna*, when her daughter asks her about the origin of some old, fragile teacups that she sees her mother using for the first time on the morning of her wedding, Sonia trembles at the memory and is immediately brought back in time. The very action of holding the teacups bridges time between past and present:

Ensuite je glisse mon index dans l'anse comme autrefois je glissais mon doigt dans le passant du pantalon de Matthew, je présente la tasse à ma fille, je dis « à la tienne, que vous puissiez vieillir ensemble, Alain et toi. » (p.38).

This brief image leads to very detailed and rich descriptions of her time in London, and introduces the reader to Michael, Anna's biological father. The simple action of touching the teacup has a narrative impact; the narrator is led to recall key events and characters from her past thereby allowing the reader to piece together her journey.

Memory is also a visual experience and can be effectively captured in images such as paintings or photographs. Sonia becomes aware of her feet as she sits in the car on the way to the restaurant before her daughter's wedding. This causes a vivid memory to resurface:

J'enlève mes chaussures et remonte mes pieds sous moi. Dans cette voiture, je me sens protégée. Je ne sais pas pourquoi je pense, à ce moment-là, à une photo qu'on a prise de mon pied quand j'avais trente ans (p.60).

The image is then set in context. The narrator tells a detailed story about attending a book festival in the South of France when she was thirty years old. Writers had been invited to do public readings and Sonia recalls reading a passage from Camus' *L'Etranger* on stage as part of her participation at the festival. The inter-text (p.61) is a quote from the final chapter of *L'Etranger*. Mersault, a condemned man on public display under the hot sun as onlookers cry at him in hate, seems to have resonance for Sonia. Exhausted after the reading, she retreats under a tree with a bottle of water where she notices a man with a camera looking at her. He takes a Polaroid picture of her and politely offers her the developed image. The printed image of the captured moment is processed within seconds. In the car, when Sonia finds the photograph in her diary it causes her to ruminate on the ageing process and her own mortality. Her foot seems to reveal her true age. During the period of her life captured in the photograph she had dreamed of living in another country to start her life afresh. Seeing the photo from her early adult life has caused the same feelings and emotions experienced at that time to be recaptured at the time of narration:

Quand je regarde cette photo, dans la voiture où on se laisse bercer par le défilement du paysage et le ronronnement du moteur, les sentiments que j'avais ressentis à trente ans en voyant ce cliché me reviennent (p.68).

The photograph has elicited a profound response and has led her to relive the moment memorialised in the photograph and to reflect on her life to date. One image or one

memory can lead a character or narrator to reflect on an entire life. Allusions to photography are an effective technique for reinforcing memory in the narrative. Furthermore, the use of the reference to a seminal literary work adds weight to the event, reinforces the impression that the event is being relived and places Sonia's experience within a wider literary consciousness.

Sonia's awareness of the workings of memory is omnipresent. Conscious of the process of recording and processing memories, she evokes memory as a type of storehouse or repository for which we can select our favourite moments and from which we can then admire the resultant memory images:

À quoi pense-t-on dans des jours pareils? Que veut-on retenir, emprisonner sous une cloche en verre qu'on pourra admirer longtemps après ? Une couleur, un éclat d'un rire, le souffle d'un baiser, la moiteur d'une main serrée, la teinte du ciel, le bruit du vent éclaté dans les arbres ? (p.136).

Her examples are revealing. Evoking colour, taste, smell, sound and touch, they confirm the notion that memory is essentially sensorial.

The narrator not only relies on memory in the construction of narration but ruminates on the nature of memory itself. Self-awareness runs through her narration, leading up to and culminating in Anna's wedding. In the first paragraph of the novel, the narrator expresses the need to relate the story slowly, to think clearly and not to rush, reminding herself of the need to remain calm and composed. The narrator's fallibility is revealed when she recognises the tendency to embellish when telling a story from the past. There is a natural tendency to change words or small details slightly (p.28).

A notable characteristic of Appanah's fourth novel, *le Dernier frère*, is the sense of uncertainty expressed by the narrator throughout. The narrative relies on the adult Raj's

recollections of his childhood in order to reconstruct the story of important events that marked his early life and continue to have resonance for him in adulthood. Raj regularly questions the reliability of images he harbours from his childhood. At times, he remarks that he still sees certain images as if they were from yesterday; yet, at other times he wonders if he is imagining or inventing certain details. The narrator's recollection is often speculative. He is aware of the limits of his memory and the narrative is peppered with verbs such as "imaginer":

Nous avons traversé la moitié de l'île, du nord au centre. J'imagine que sur cette longue route vers Beau-Bassin, nous avons voyagé sur des charrettes conduites par des bœufs ou des ânes, peut-être avons-nous pris un train, car il en existait à l'époque, nous avons marché, nous avons dormi dehors [...] Malgré tous mes efforts, je ne me souviens de rien. Etais-je collé à ma mère, me tenait-elle la main, pleurait-elle ses fils, sa maison, la communauté des malheureux que nous quitions ? Que faisait mon père pendant tout ce temps? [...] (p.37).

The use of rhetorical questions also implies doubt and insecurity. Memory has its limits, and in spite of his best efforts to recall images from the past clearly and in the correct chronological order, Raj admits the difficulties of such a task:

J'aimerais me souvenir des premiers jours à Beau-Bassin aussi clairement que je me souviens de mes premières années à Mapou mais, même en me concentrant, je n'arrive qu'à réveiller des images éparpillées, comme jetées dans un livre sans mots, sans titre. Les murs de la maison envahis de lianes aussi solides que du bambou – on ne croirait pas à les voir ainsi – formant de jolies frises (p.40).

Raj continues to question the validity and accuracy of his memories of particular incidents in his childhood, whether his memories are influenced by an adult viewpoint, or whether he recalls them just as he perceived them as a child. When remembering his father's violence towards his mother, he is unsure whether he is embellishing and imagining certain aspects of the recalled image:

Il s'occupait toujours de ma mère en premier et tandis qu'il avançait vers elle, elle reculait, les mains devant, écartées, ses pauvres mains ridées, ridicule barrage, risible protection. Est-ce que j'invente maintenant le sourire sur le visage de mon père ? Est-ce que j'invente ses yeux soudain si vivants, si cruels ? Et si je dis qu'il prenait plaisir à faire cela, c'est ma voix de vieil homme ou mon souvenir de gamin qui me le dicte? (pp.69-70).

We note the use of questions again in the above example. The highly self-conscious narration is clouded by doubt and speculation, and the narrator is aware of the risk of inaccurately remembering how things may have been. The adult narration interrogates him on his memory of events and seeks clarification. This process reinforces the impression of autobiography; it also calls into question not only the veracity of memory, but that of official historical accounts. Such uncertainty elicits a compassionate reader response. The reader, knowing that Raj was a very young boy in extraordinary circumstances, will be sympathetic to his possibly unreliable narrative, asking whether he is too judgemental and critical of himself, notably in the face of the traumatic series of events that marked his childhood.

When Raj recalls his first meeting with David and their conversation in French about their respective homes and families, his adult self considers that his memory of the details of this meeting may not be entirely reliable:

Je crois que c'est comme cela que ça s'est passé. Après toutes ces années, je gratte et je fouille dans mon souvenir et il faut me pardonner car parfois c'est plus difficile que je ne le pensais. Il est possible que ce ne soit pas dans cet ordre-là qu'il m'ait dit les choses, il est probable que mon esprit arrange un peu les souvenirs mais ce que je sais très certainement, c'est que nous avons parlé très lentement, pendant des heures, dans la lumière déclinante de l'après-midi. (pp.80-81).

Conscious of the limits of memory, he addresses the reader directly, asking for patience and forgiveness. The concept of memory as a repository is evoked when he remarks: "Je gratte et je fouille dans mon souvenir", as if to suggest that personal memories can be searched through and arranged, echoing the long-held spatial notion of memories (such as in Augustine's *Confessions*, which employs the metaphor of a vast space or storehouse of memory, see Sheringham, 1993: 289). Raj is aware of the influence of reason on the memory process and considers the possibility that he has subconsciously arranged his memories of this time in a certain order that may not correspond accurately to the chronology of the actual events.

Raj is therefore conscious of his ability to recall events and spoken words accurately, as well as the difficulty in doing so, such as at this moment when he and David are making their way through the forest:

Nous avons à peine fait quelques pas que David glissa sur des branches humides et s'étala de tout son long. Il me regarda avec douleur et quand je l'aidai à se relever, je lui dis ces mots-là, exactement ceux-là, dans cet ordre-là :

- Reste avec moi, fais comme moi et nous n'allons pas nous séparer. C'est promis.

Ce ne sont pas des mots extraordinaires, mais je me souviens que je les avais séparés en les prononçant, comme si je soupesais chacun d'entre eux, comme si j'apprenais à les dire pour la première fois et pourtant, je n'avais pas réfléchi, cette phrase simple m'était venue naturellement car c'est ce que mes frères m'auraient dit et ce que moi j'aurais dit à mes frères s'ils avaient besoin de moi (pp.117-118).

He emphasises the accuracy of this recollection, arguing that it was a phrase he would use often with his brothers. It follows, then, that he would have uttered the phrase to his new friend, when they found themselves in a similar situation. This contrasts with the sense of doubt about the chronology of events that he has felt at other stages in the narrative. At times he expresses a sense of confidence in his capacity to remember, while at other times he is keen to emphasise the difficulties that the act of remembering entails.

The novel relies therefore on the process of narrative memory, a chain of events that compose a narrative in the form of foreground, background, small events and climactic ones (in Proust, for example). These memories are, more often than not, resurrected through gestures and sensations and characters reflect upon these memories and arrange them in sequence, thereby socially constructing the memory in question. Narrative memories can therefore be considered a social construction, as noted by Bal (1999).

The protagonists of the above novels reveal an awareness of confronting, reshaping and constructing memory. Memories, once images, become texts when they are described and arranged in a chosen sequence. We could also argue that writing dilutes memory

such that memory loses its intensity once written and described through language. At this point, the act of writing takes over and holds a power over memory as suggested by King (2000: 176). Once an event or person is described, it is more likely that the description is remembered more clearly than the original memory itself, having been replaced by words. Even only a few moments after an event, it may be impossible to capture every aspect of that event or one's feelings in relation to it. It will inevitably be embellished with other tiny details that may or may not be true. Diaries, confessional writing or autobiographies can be considered fictional when regarded from this perspective.⁵⁶

These novels show that images from the past are evoked in tracing the development of the adult in order to renegotiate present identity. In some cases protagonists need to exorcise the past in order to extricate themselves from the burden of difficult memories. Berthelot acknowledges that the evocation of memory is due to the author's intrinsic need to address the past : "En tout cas pour moi, ces romans parlent du passé, c'était un besoin...c'était vraiment un soulagement, et donc je suppose que pour mes deux héroïnes, c'est la même chose" (Berthelot Jun 2007). When examined in the light of Berthelot's comments, we see how characters can in fact become an extension of the author's lived experience or family memory.

5.2.2 Reinventing and reconstructing family identity in novels by Humbert and Le Clézio

⁵⁶ See also Milan Kundera's novel *Ignorance*: "if he should want to recount that recollection as a little anecdote that made sense, he would have to insert it into a causal sequence with other events, other acts, and other words; and since he had forgotten them, all he could do was invent them, not to fool anyone but to make the recollection intelligible; which is exactly what he did automatically for his own sake when he rethought that passage in his diary" (p.125).

Humbert's two Mauritius-based novels *À l'autre bout de moi* and *La Montagne des Signaux* lack the striking catalytic device of Appanah and Berthelot's narratives, however both narrators are preoccupied with the memory process, and there are characters who function as memorising subjects. Humbert evokes Mauritian childhoods and their significance for the adult subject. In *À l'autre bout de moi* the protagonist's personal memory is evoked at the time of narration, from a situation of voluntary exile in Paris years after the events in Mauritius that compose the body of the narrative. Family memory is also explored in Humbert's *La Montagne des Signaux* in which the narrator, Cecilia, constructs a story of a time of internal conflict and upheaval in her family through a narrative largely composed of a variety of childhood memories. Memory plays a crucial role in these novels as a narrative device, in particular for character development. We observe the value placed on heritage by the protagonists and its importance in their identity construction.

In *À l'autre bout de moi*, the identity of Madame Morin is reconstructed through the posthumous revelations in her diary. The reader learns about other aspects to the character of Madame Morin, and in turn learns more about the two key protagonists in the novel, her twin daughters, Anne and Nadège. Identity reconstruction through memory is apparent on another level in this novel in that the narrating subject, Anne, pieces together the story of her childhood revealing the seminal chain of events that have led her to exile in France. As the narrative advances, she reflects on the difficulty she has had in reconciling her present life with the overwhelming amount of memories from her childhood:

Maintenant...je me demande pourquoi je n'ai jamais mentionné sur le moment même cet exil et le désarroi où je me trouvais. Mais la réponse je crois la connaître: il m'était impossible de mêler ce présent-là, si peu actuel, à ce passé débordant, encore bouillonnant comme un fleuve en crue (p.315).

While the novel is a first-person narrative, it nonetheless expresses a measure of detachment; Anne recalls her youth from an adult perspective, which is emphasised at various stages during the narrative and her narration, much like Sonia's narration in *La Noce d'Anna*, emphasises the difficulty attached to the task of reconciling the past with the present.

The ghost-like presence of Madame Morin, Anne and Nadège's mother, haunts the narrative. The twins' present difficulties find resonance in their mother's own experience; information gleaned from her diary and notes found after her death reveal the hardship endured by women, and her fears for her daughters' future. We learn that not only are the twins of mixed race and, as such, figures of suspicion in a country where individuals are identified by colour or race, but also as young women in pre-independent Mauritius, their opportunities for economic independence or social mobility are further limited. Their mother's diary and letters are the twins' only source of reference for women's experience in their society, apart from their domestic aide, Sassita. The ordinariness of the copybook is alluded to, and a measure of realism evoked when we learn that it contains "de grosses fautes d'orthographe" (p.129), evidence of the limits of education to which she makes reference. Madame Morin recorded how her husband behaved at the beginning of the relationship. Strikingly, the twins have difficulty in recognising their father from the descriptions they find in their mother's diary. Her writing reveals her fears and lack of confidence because of her gender and skin colour: "Je voudrais tant avoir des enfants à la peau blanche. Ils seraient sûrement plus heureux" (p.130). Anne, in particular, is affected by the revelations in the diary and the discovery that her mother felt disappointed by the birth of dark-skinned girls. The twins' opposing world views are highlighted by their reactions to the

diary, as they are faced with evidence of their family's past and a new image of their mother. Nadège's reaction is to burn the diary. Her impulsive action is an attempt to rid the twins of the troublesome discovery of their mother's disappointment. The twins come to reject the feelings of shame and unworthiness that marked their mother's life. This rejection facilitates a reconstruction of their background in which undesirable aspects of their family history are destroyed in order to allow the foregrounding of the more positive aspects of their identity.

The absence of a nurturing mother figure in their lives leads the twins to each seek out their own paths in life. When she dreams about marriage, the narrator remarks: "Toute la nuit j'avais lutté contre le souvenir de ma mère" (p.285). Her sister, Nadège, has a potential French suitor who would elevate their social status and, thereby, help Anne to appear a more acceptable match for Pierre Augier, the white boy she wishes to marry. However, the twins' deceased mother continues to influence the narrative at regular intervals, in spite of her physical absence. The narrator frequently remembers her mother's comments on gender and race in Mauritian society. This constant reminder of Mme Morin adds a sense of haunting to the narrative while also reinforcing the notion of intergenerational transmission of memory. Anne and Nadège are both influenced by the words and ideas contained in their mother's diary, and in the striking phrases she used to utter during their childhood. Her words have endured in her children's active memory and in the visible and tangible artefact that is her diary. The twins internalise their mother's voice, each in her own manner. Anne demonstrates her link with the past by holding similar views on race and class as her deceased mother. Her skin colour is a source of shame, she is embarrassed by her Creole family's lowly socio-economic status and longs for upward social mobility. When she learns that her sister is expecting

Aunauth's child, Anne adopts a matriarchal role. She appropriates her mother's beliefs and expresses disapproval at her sister's willingness to reinforce her marginalised socio-economic position.

Humbert's useful narrative strategy of writing the protagonists as twin girls has been well documented. Both Lionnet (1991) and Cox (2002) have assessed the significance of Nadège's function as the mirror for the narrator, her twin sister Anne. The twins, polar opposites in their political views, seem destined to be in perpetual conflict. Class-conscious Anne strives for her father's affection, while Nadège, the free spirit, actively indulges her interest in other cultures. Ultimately, Nadège, who struggles to find a sense of belonging in other cultures, dies tragically. While the metaphors are evident, the novel is unique in that it broaches taboo topics related to *métissage*. Lionnet affirms that Anne's "predicament":

[...] is analogous to that of all individuals who have internalized their society's negative view, or ignorance of their specificity [...] Anne's journey back to the past aims at deconstructing that indoctrination, peeling off the layers of damaging belief in the importance of origins and rootedness (Lionnet, 1991: 269).

The reconciling of individual desires or impulses with the difficult reality posed by gender and race can lead to a state of divided loyalties. This complexity manifests itself in a process of reconstruction of the past, which features in both *À l'autre bout de moi* and *La Montagne des Signaux*. Similar narrative techniques are employed in each text: the narrator is at the heart of the process of recalling the past, and the reader is a witness to the evocation of memory as a means of reconstructing or reinventing the Self.

In *La Montagne des Signaux*, nostalgia for childhood and images of Mauritius as a type of Garden of Eden are evident in Cecilia's narration, in spite of the critical eye that she casts over the events and relationships that marked her family during her adolescent

and young adult years. In the following excerpt, she recalls their homestead in Points-aux-Sables:

La Râpeuse...Il me suffit encore de prononcer ces mots pour me retrouver la saveur ensoleillée de mon enfance. Jamais je n'ai connu un tel sentiment de plénitude, jamais plus, je crois, je n'éprouverai un tel bonheur (p.33).

The memory of her childhood is described in terms of its impact on the senses (“la saveur ensoleillée”). Cecilia is convinced that she will never feel such a sense of contentment again. While she relies heavily on memory to construct her narrative, she becomes aware of how others do the same. Her mother’s British roots are remembered and the birthplace of the grandfather, “né dans le Warwickshire”, is particularly significant. Dolly constructs Warwickshire, which she has never visited, as a mythical place. In fact, she looks back to England all her life and according to Issur (2001: 189) she seeks to re-discover it through the intermediary of her children. In the following excerpt, Cecilia expresses disillusionment at discovering her mother’s attempt at reinventing her past:

[...] elle est également ainsi, notre mère : il lui faut toujours remonter aux origines, reprendre les choses par le commencement. Or, pour elle, au commencement n’était pas le Verbe ; au commencement c’était John Sheringham et John Sheringham est né dans le Warwickshire, et tout ce qui est du Warwickshire doit infailliblement y retourner. Voilà l’évangile selon Dolly, voilà sa Bible, quiconque y trouverait à redire se verrait excommunié d’office, voué séance tenante aux flammes de la Géhenne, cris, plaintes et grincements de dents (p.77).

Cecilia, adopting an ironic tone, derides her mother’s unflappable attachment to the family’s English heritage, by using the gospel analogy, and implies that her mother’s sense of Englishness was even more important to her than any attachment to religion. In her correspondence Cecilia expresses how she despises this reinvention of Self, that is, her mother’s craving to justify her choice to remain in Mauritius and her need to convince herself and others she is a success in spite of living outside of Europe. Throughout the text, Cecilia refers to Dolly’s relentless efforts to redefine the family in terms of its Englishness. Dolly imagines her identity in terms of a family attachment to a place in which she has never lived, and the image of Warwickshire has now imprinted

itself into her own personal memory. She has reconstructed her identity, and by extension the family's identity, around the image of England (which is not actually part of her working memory). Dolly is portrayed as an almost pathetic figure, which allows Humbert to break with the conventions of the European literary canon, turning her back on the colonial ideology of exotic difference, according to Lionnet (2001). *La Montagne des Signaux* shows a character ill-at-ease in the present and seeking to reconstruct her own identity through an ancestral link beyond Mauritius. Similar identity reconstruction based on an idealised ancestor can be observed in de Souza's novels discussed later.

Le Clézio's Mauritius-based novels portray the complexity of Indian Ocean identities by relying heavily on ancestral characters, particularly those without fixed roots or "pure origins", as Issur notes:

La Quarantaine met aussi en avant la conception d'origines métissées, ce qui diffère grandement des autres romans qui exposent l'idée de la pureté de la lignée. Le récit permet la reconstitution de l'ascendance mélangée du personnage-narrateur (Issur, 2001: 192).

La Mothe (2001) underlines the connection between Le Clézio and writing, that the act of writing is an integral part of Le Clézio, that he sees himself as "inachevé".⁵⁷ La Mothe sees this as the reason why Le Clézio is so consumed with the quest for his origins and by history, displaying a need to invent a language to address his past. Léon le Disparu embodies this in his decision to go to Mauritius, as the character remarks in the novel: "Je viens ici pour m'enivrer. Pour entendre le bruit qui m'avait réveillé quand j'avais treize ans, à la mort de mon père" (p.65). Significantly, most other characters in the novel reveal a desire to recover their past, such as Ananta, Suryavati's mother, who seeks Léon's help to remember details of her past. Suryavati also expresses the same

⁵⁷ See Le Clézio's *L'extase matérielle*, p. 56

wish to know more about her mother's past. Both mother and daughter engage Léon and use his knowledge of England in the hope of eliciting memories of Ananta's past and Suryavati's heritage. Memory is evoked here as a repository to be unlocked, as

Léon remarks:

Même Ananta semblait attendre que, grâce à cette musique d'anges, je retrouve la clef de sa mémoire, le nom de sa mère et de son père, l'endroit où elle était née, sa maison, sa famille, tout ce qui avait été englouti dans la tuerie de Cawnpore (p.261).

The familiar metaphor used to describe memory, such as an archaeological excavation or a door that can be locked and unlocked and containing images or narratives from the past, interprets remembering as revealing or unlocking a secret. In literature, the initial discovery of a long-buried secret triggers a process of remembering and is the motivational force behind the novel's plot or even a key moment in the development of a character's identity.

La Mothe (2001: 502) regards *La Quarantaine* as an example of Le Clézio's viewpoint that literature is not just about creating an original work, but involves elaborating on what has come before and the layering of other such narratives. Reading is a process similar to writing; a work in progress. For example, at the beginning of the novel a series of memories flood back to the narrator and he becomes transformed by them, to the point of becoming Léon le Disparu. (pp.20, 24, 26) These memories, along with the doubts and other sentiments they evoke, allow the narrator to compose his narrative. Other memories will be evoked by the possibilities, negations and affirmations of these existing memories. The reader observes in the section entitled "L'empoisonneur" that Léon is in the process of constructing his narrative. In the section entitled "le voyageur sans fin", it is memory that drives the narrative (La Mothe, 2001: 503). The narrator, the younger, contemporary Léon remarks wisely: "il me semble que je porte en moi la

mémoire de cette journée comme le moment où mon père a été conçu” (p.25). At this early stage in the narrative, the gradual merging of the two Léon characters takes place with the emphasis on memory that will continue to feature as an integral element of the novel.

Intertextuality is an effective means of reinforcing the theme of memory, as we observe in other contemporary texts from Mauritius, such as Berthelot’s *Le Désamour*, Appanah’s *La Noce d’Anna*. The allusions to the work of other writers and poets, as well as the early references to the life of Rimbaud and his relevance to Léon’s ancestry, reinforce a sense of tradition and building on the literary traditions of those that have come before. Aside from the references to well-known literary figures such as Rimbaud, Baudelaire, Jules Verne or Longfellow, the narrative is enhanced by inserted texts, which create a layered effect of writing. Firstly, the two sections “le voyageur sans fin” and “l’empoisonneur” are narrated by the younger Léon, writing about his heritage from the perspective of a young man in 1980. Furthermore, the main narrative of the novel carries the title *La Quarantaine*, narrated by Léon (Le Disparu) and tells the story of the tragic voyage of Léon, his brother Jacques and the latter’s wife, Suzanne, on Île Plate, in quarantine, due to the outbreak of disease on the ship transporting them from Marseille to Mauritius. The final part of the narrative, entitled “Anna”, is once again narrated by the younger Léon, and dated 1980. The return of the younger narrator towards the close of the novel brings the story of the Archambau family heritage full circle. In addition to the two principal narrators there are diary entries, botanist’s journals, copybooks and an indented text called the “Yamuna”, which recounts the story of Suryavati and her mother, Ananta, Indian characters who represent Hindu mythology and culture.

Identifying memory as a prominent theme in the novel, and not merely as a narrative strategy, Ravi (2007) asserts that Jacques' memory of Mauritius had also become Léon's reason for going there, in the hope of rediscovering his family origins. The sojourn on Île Plate leads Leon to reject Jacques' version of childhood in Mauritius. He becomes resolved to create his own story, his own memory in order to assume his own identity (2007: 136). This is a conscious process undertaken by Léon le Disparu. Aware of the importance of memory in the development of personal identity, he actively sets about detaching himself from his family heritage in order to fully embrace life with Suryavati on Île Plate, and later in Mauritius: "Jamais je ne me suis senti plus libre. Je n'ai plus de mémoire, je n'ai plus de nom" (464). He denies his family history, adopts a new name in order to fully integrate into Suryavati's culture and to assume part of her identity: "Ainsi, maintenant, j'ai un nom, une famille. Je peux entrer à Maurice" (p.483). Ridding himself of the heavy burden of family memory signals his rebirth and marks the start of the reconstruction of his own identity.

5.3 Memory and ancestry

The relationship between memory and ancestry cannot simply be deemed "ancestral memory", which is a term sometimes used to denote an innate and instinctual memory that is inherited (part of one's DNA, for example), explaining one's behaviour within family and culture. Such a connotation, applying as it does biological factors to race and culture, risks racial stereotyping. The term "ancestral memory" has also been utilised to refer to cultural heritage.⁵⁸ Rather, remembering one's ancestry falls within

⁵⁸ Such as in the title of the book by Medina, (2004) *The Afro-Latin Diaspora: Awakening Ancestral Memory, Avoiding Cultural Amnesia*, in which the term "ancestral memory" is posited in opposition to the concept of "cultural amnesia" which suggests that the former explains a phenomenon of cultural remembering.

the realm of “personal memory”, if the impact on the individual’s personal development is highlighted, or “collective memory” when the impact on a greater community is concerned. It may also concern “cultural memory”, if the ancestor is regarded in terms of a wider cultural significance for the community. Defining a memory of the ancestor will depend largely on the function such a memory fulfils for the individual or the community.

Issur (2001: 179-180) states that the peoples of Reunion and Mauritius have always known uprooting, or at the very least, loss of their mythical, historical and cultural references. Their literature is therefore focused on the search for origins. Issur further notes that many contemporary novels include the thematic or mythical character of the ancestor who may be a fictional character or inspired by a real ancestor of the author-narrator, as we have seen in Le Clézio’s *La Quarantaine*. The character may embody the traits of a collective ancestor, that is, a character that collective memory has conserved and assimilated and who exists as a historico-mythic ideal of the reader’s imagination (2001: 188).

Issur (2001: 189) also argues that the theme of ancestry occupies a more important place than the character in *Le Voile de Draupadi*, *L’Arbre Fouet*, *La Montagne des Signaux*, *La Maison qui marchait vers le large*, *La Quarantaine* and *Le Chercheur d’or* and that the ancestor acts as a motivating force in the unfolding narratives. Firstly, the action takes place at the time of writing and there is an identifiable move towards past generations as if retracing a family tree, a process identifiable in *La Maison qui marchait vers le large*, *Le Chercheur d’or* and *La Montagne des Signaux*. Alternatively, the action may take place in the past, creating an historical novel. In Mauritian literature

the ancestor is primarily ethnic-specific and serves the purpose of memorial for one particular community (Issur, 2001: 193).

Magdelaine (2006: 199) holds that the novel creates a type of linearity that actual memory or existing historiography cannot provide, which allows it to reveal the interplay between memory and history. The novel also remedies the lack of a collective consciousness of memory in popular Creole⁵⁹ cultures in that the historical figure, a collective figure, merges with the private person, such as father or grandparent. Historical research, real testimony and rare documents are often explored and the individual is placed within this framework in the character of the self, the descendant: “Le privé s’inscrit dans le collectif et inversement, l’histoire collective permet à l’individu de se situer et de récréer généalogie et mémoire familiale” (2006: 200). Magdelaine reiterates the notion that recalling the ancestor is an integral part of the process of composing a narrative in that it reinforces the relationship between history and memory. The following two subsections evaluate the role and impact of the ancestor in some contemporary Mauritian novels in the light of these aspects of memory in literature.

5.3.1 Intransigent memory: memory and heritage in *La Maison qui marchait vers le large* and *Le Sang de l’Anglais*

De Souza’s protagonists attach paramount importance to their ancestry in order to assert their position within Mauritian society. The struggle to assert personal identity can be read as a metaphor for the complex question of Mauritian identity. In *La Maison qui marchait vers le large*, Daronville’s grandfather is evoked almost obsessively by his

⁵⁹ In terms of its meaning in Réunion, meaning “born on the island” or “of the island”.

grandson. The grandfather is associated with the building of the house of the title, which becomes the focus of the narrative and a leitmotiv in the novel. The house assumes a life force of its own, as an important symbol of the narrator's lineage and of his family's historical attachment to the area:

Vous savez, on est en sécurité ici. On l'a toujours été... Mon grand-père, Norbert Daronville (z'avez peut-être entendu parler de lui) il a creusé, creusé, creusé jusqu'à ce qu'il atteigne la roche. Quinze pieds de foundation! Quinze pieds, Haffenjee! Ce n'est pas rien ça! (p.298).

The fifteen feet are symbolic of the perceived stability of the house's foundations thereby emphasising the depth of the family's link to the area. Daronville also describes the physical effort and sacrifice made by his grandfather to build the house and establish the family there. His claim to the area is reinforced by the imprint of the house's foundations in the earth, a symbol of belonging and stability.

Daronville, aging, infirm and facing financial ruin, rents a floor of his colonial-style house to a Muslim family and his resentment of them is as much borne out of the anger at the prospect of losing his family home, as it is out of racism and class prejudice. While secondary narratives, concerning Zermaine, his housemaid, and the Haffenjee family, form part of the narrative, Daronville's memories of the house and its significance for both protagonists drive the plot. The colonial-style house is situated in the La Motte district of Port Louis, an area of the city housing a mixed population of Indian Muslims, Creoles, Chinese and Daronville, a mixed-race man, proud of his white heritage and suspicious of all of his neighbours. La Motte is affected by flooding and the threat of landslides. The difficulties posed by these circumstances for the relationships between neighbours of different ethnic backgrounds, and the day-to-day interaction between the different communities that constitute Mauritian society, are highlighted. The title of de Souza's novel is thought-provoking and requires a layered reading of the text. Some commentators, such as Toorawa (2001), see the house as a

metaphor for Mauritius. Its instability is representative of the fragility of the nation as it grapples with suspicion and rivalry between different communities. While it is possible to read the events at La Motte as a metaphor for Mauritius, it is more likely that the novel is more than merely allegorical. De Souza's novel portrays a group of well-rounded characters and subplots while also evoking important social issues in contemporary Mauritian society. The variety of characters and the substantial part of the novel given over to dialogue, much of which is in Mauritian Creole, represent the reality of Mauritius's pluralistic society. The spectrum of characters reaches across community lines, thereby giving a comprehensive profile of a mixed district of the capital Port Louis, in a complex portrait of a living city.

The Haffenjee family provides an interesting foil to the character of Daronville. The reader is privy to the many difficulties the Haffenjees face and learns about the family's history. Both central characters, Daronville and Haffenjee, are faced with loss. Daronville, already feeling abandoned by his children, now risks losing his house. The potential loss of his house causes him to reflect on his past and his family's ties to the area. Daronville's sense of identity is bound up with his memories of the house and its status in La Motte. He reinforces this identity by evoking his past in terms of his family home and his physical resemblance to his grandfather. Haffenjee, meanwhile, faces the demolition of the local mosque. His son, Omar is involved in crime and his wife, Roza, suffers from poor health. The house represents social improvement and stability to Haffenjee. To Daronville, it encapsulates his family heritage and is the site of happy times from his childhood. Two situations are juxtaposed: the possible descent into poverty and loss of social prestige of one family, and the social improvement of another.

The author acknowledges the role that shocking real events have played in inspiring his work. De Souza admits being particularly susceptible to such stories, as he outlines here:

Je me souviens pour *La Maison qui marchait vers le large*, j’enseignais encore dans un lycée et à la rentrée un jour [...] je leur ai demandé ce qu’ils avaient fait pendant les vacances. Il y avait ceux qui racontent leurs vacances en Europe, mais il y avait un qui est arrivé et m’a dit “moi, il y a ma maison qui a bougé”. Donc vous imaginez la maison, qui est la chose la plus stable, la plus protectrice possible, et qui se met à bouger... et ce genre de chose me fait vibrer absolument et je trouve que dans la mesure où un événement pourrait être actuel, qui pourrait être fait divers, il y a une résonance chez vous qui remet en question tous les édifices (de Souza Jul 2007).

The house of the title is a metaphor for constantly shifting identities and awareness of the tension between the desire for order and the reality of change. Such tensions are amplified and telescoped in a small island situation, with ancestry becoming a focal point and marker of identity. Real events are the catalyst for de Souza’s writing, from whose perspective, such events are more than the subject of the novel, but rather the starting point for a discussion on Mauritian identity and the concept of insularity:

Donc c’est toujours partie des choses qui frappent l’écrivain de façon beaucoup plus dure que ça ne frappe des autres habitants du pays. Et c’est cette résonance-là qui est [...] dans la littérature et qui fait non seulement la chair d’un roman mais qui fait aussi un début de pensée sur notre insularité. C’est ça qui est ma démarche (*ibid.*).

Le Sang de l’Anglais, de Souza’s debut novel, differs from its contemporaries in that its central character, an Englishman, is a rarity in Mauritian literature. The novel is set at a critical juncture in Mauritian history, when the former British colony gained independence in 1968. At this point Mauritian francophone literature tended to celebrate the island’s historical attachment to France rather than Britain, a point highlighted by both Joubert (2001b) and de Souza (in interview, Jul 2007). In de Souza’s novel, however, the protagonist celebrates his English heritage and seeks to integrate it into his life, at any cost. In his excessive attachment to his English heritage, Hawkins is ridiculed both by other protagonists and by his interlocutor’s narrative, which perceives that while this behaviour was interesting and different when both men

were young, his obsession with Englishness is increasingly incomprehensible and meaningless in their adult years.

Hawkins is the child of an English doctor and a Mauritian woman, therefore a *métis* and an Outsider. This mixed background (or “bâtardise”, as Joubert (2001b) terms it) makes integration and acceptance into Mauritian society difficult. He chooses to leave for London at Mauritius’s independence, where he eventually succumbs to depression and mental illness. The narrator is St. Bart, a childhood friend of Hawkins who reconstructs Hawkins’ life story. The reader follows his struggle to understand his friend and the path his life has taken. The narrative is full of suggestion, as Joubert (2001b) notes:

[...] tout est dit, sans être vraiment dit, comme dans ces sociétés cloisonnées, où l’on vit côte à côte sans chercher à connaître les voisins des autres groupes et où il faut surtout ne rien faire, ne rien dire qui pourrait faire éclater la fragile cohésion sociale (2001b, 122-124).

Hawkins’s letters reduce the distance between reader and protagonist. In awe of the city’s history, he is upset that Londoners do not appreciate their surroundings and their city’s past:

Ainsi avait-il parcouru les rues avec révérence, conscient du passé qui l’entourait, certainement plus attentif que les gens qui y vivaient. S’attendait-il à voir ceux-ci cohabiter avec leur passé, et comme il le disait, avec leurs responsabilités ? (p.141).

Having craved a real link with his place of origin, he is overwhelmed to discover that others do not have the same appreciation. Hawkins is incapable of negotiating his place in England where his pronounced sense of Englishness becomes increasingly misplaced. Eventually admitted to a psychiatric hospital in London after being found wandering in a distressed state, he is later repatriated. Hawkins’ daughter asks for his personal effects to be brought to the apartment she has rented for them both, in an

attempt to bring some sense of the past to Hawkins and to make him feel more connected to his family and to his surroundings:

Comme il allait nettement mieux, elle pensait qu'en l'occupant avec ses outils, ses collections de timbres et ses vieux objets, elle le ramènerait à une existence normale. Normale ? Enfin, oui, ce qu'il vivait auparavant, ce qu'il avait toujours connu (p.205).

Familiar objects and images from the past are therefore seen as instrumental in the recovery of memory and a refuge from present difficulties.

More childhood memories are evoked when a violent conflict erupts between Hawkins and St. Bart, with St. Bart acknowledging how Hawkins must have suffered from bullying during their school days. Hawkins has rebuilt an identity based firmly on a sense of Englishness, which was the cause of ridicule in his youth. The narrator is aware of the elements of his past that Hawkins wishes to bury: "J'étais seul. Seul représentant de la jeunesse de Hawkins" (p.221). Here we see a familiar thread of identity reconstruction, as observed earlier in Appannah, Berthelot and Humbert. We see, for example, in *À l'autre bout de moi* that the narrator's father idealises and reinvents the image of his French ancestor, the corsair "Morin le Rouge", from Normandy, who, the reader later learns, was no more than a common pirate. Anne and Nadège had heard tales of his bravery but when they take it upon themselves to investigate the facts in Poussin's history, they discover the true tale of a "pirate frustré et sadique" who had a sordid history with women. We learn that the family preferred to emphasise his other qualities in an attempt to recreate a glorious past for their most distinguished ancestor, thereby constructing his identity from a more favourable and admirable historical foundation. This act of betrayal has disguised the fact that not only was Morin more criminal than valiant hero, but that his story was falsely reinterpreted to create a more favourable familial history. The cultural transmission of their family memory entails

lies and embellishment in order to reconstruct a specific identity for the family and to distinguish it from other Creole families in the community.

Hawkins, however, is unable to cope with the burden of his past and his mixed-race heritage. His exaggeration of one particular element of his identity in order to carve out a unique place within Mauritian society for himself, and his over-reliance on memory drive him to the point of madness. St. Bart's relationship with memory shows its importance for character development in general, as he strives to understand his friend's identity crisis and studies his own memories of the past and those of his friend in order to do so.

Ravi (2007: 65) states that novels which highlight racial differences employ grotesque representations of racial otherness in order to do so. Hawkins' exaggerated adoption of English appearance and behaviour, for example, provokes unease in others because he is clearly *métis*, and he becomes a figure of ridicule. In departing for London in his quest to explore his origins, he escapes the alienation that is a feature of his life in Mauritius (2007: 79). Hawkins' anglomania is portrayed as a make-believe dream world, a fantasy with no basis in reality, yet the narrator is both enthralled and repulsed by Hawkins behaviour.

Le Sang de l'Anglais and *La Maison qui marchait vers le large* consider the consequences of cultures in contact in Mauritian society. Attachment to heritage and ancestry are therefore key thematic aspects of the novels. De Souza reveals the destruction caused by intransigent views of the past and by the refusal to accept the present and to integrate oneself more completely into the society in which one lives.

Over-emphasis on memory and ancestry is ultimately seen as destructive and counter-productive. De Souza's protagonists's insistence on ancestry as integral to their identity leads to defensive arrogance and eventual capitulation, in the case of Daronville or madness and destitution, in the case of Hawkins. The solution offered to remedy an excessive reliance on family memory is moving towards intercultural relationships and a cross-community effort at bettering living conditions for all members of Mauritian society.

5.3.2 Lineage and identity in *Le Portrait Chamarel*

The themes of family and origins are central to Patel's *Le Portrait Chamarel*. Having recently discovered that she has a family she had known nothing about, Samia's excitement of the discovery of family secrets and the thrill of delving into her own family history are evoked when Kursheed takes her to her grandfather's old office. The smell of mould is evocative of the passing of time and decay, and the reference to the French East India Company shows how the family's history is entwined with that of Mauritius. The family can therefore place themselves within a wider national history:

Un grand bureau au bois patiné sur lequel trônait un globe terrestre aux couleurs ocres portant d'anciennes mappemondes, un secrétaire style Compagnie des Indes dont les multiples petits tiroirs étaient une irrésistible invite à la curiosité, et une chaise pivotante dont la modernité jurait dans le décor.

Au mur, derrière le bureau, un portrait.

-Le grand-père, laissa tomber Kursheed. Samia s'approcha lentement. Il était là.

Dans le grand cadre rehaussé à la feuille d'or, il la regardait (pp.38-39).

The grandfather's image is an imposing presence in the room. The portrait, a tangible artefact and a manifestation of the family's memory, becomes a focal point of Samia's voyage of discovery. Artefacts such as the portrait play a key role in the consolidation of family memory and supplement the stories and legends transmitted from generation to generation.

Having informed her of the family's origins and explained the differences within the Muslim communities who came from India to Mauritius, Kursheed remarks: "Chacun portait l'orgueil de son appartenance propre" (p.44), insisting that upon arrival in Mauritius it was important for immigrants to differentiate themselves from other communities. Samia learns that a scandal was caused when her grandfather, Hussein, opened a spice stall in an area where fabrics had traditionally been sold. Such a story has echoes for contemporary Mauritian society; uttered in the present tense Kursheed's words suggest that little has changed since Hussein scandalised his neighbours:

Ici, vaut mieux être solidaire de sa communauté, pour pouvoir faire face aux autres communautés. Seul on n'est rien. Ou peut-être trop. Trop difficile à digérer. Trop impossible à réduire. Tout ce qui n'entre pas dans une petite boîte avec sa petite étiquette fait peur. On a toujours peur de l'inconnu, du désordre. Ici, tout doit être bien classé bien rangé. Lui, il était né pour déranger. Il était né libre dans sa tête (pp.46-47).

Kursheed shows that communalism is engrained in pluralistic societies such as Mauritius. The narrative highlights the fear of the Other and a general rejection of interculturalism. Ancestry and ethnic affiliation are key markers of identity and reinforce one's place within the multi-ethnic island society. Hussein and Samia, generations apart, both cross these fixed ethnic boundaries. Samia shows some curiosity about her own motivations, wondering why she agreed to stay with this family to whom she feels no connection. She considers the tendency of many Mauritians to reconstruct an identity around exaggerated stories from the past, to see themselves as part of a worthy lineage:

Était-elle si désintéressée, elle, en acceptant de se laisser embarquer dans cet espèce de conte, pour elle aussi enfin une ascendance un peu valorisante dans ce pays dont tous les fils de roturiers sans le sou, d'esclaves et de coolies se fabulaient descendants d'une illusoire noblesse française, de princes indiens ou de shahs persans? N'était-elle pas un peu usurpatrice aussi, ici? (p.60).

Samia thus demonstrates awareness of the reconstruction of identity through glorification of the ancestor or the embellishment of family memory. Yet, for all her

determination to reject ethno-specific notions of identity, she recognises her own need to situate herself within this charade.

When Samia's skin colour becomes a talking point for the ladies who have gathered in the house for a wedding she realises that she remains a curiosity for those who have come to see her. She comes to understand the importance attached to saving face within the family, of secrets kept in order to maintain the appearance of honour, and adhering to acceptable norms. Samia notes that Mumtaz refers to the family as a "tribe". Samia is not a name associated with Catholicism or European traditions and her ambiguous identity and lack of enthusiasm to declare herself either Muslim or Christian arouse curiosity and disbelief in others: "Mais vous êtes quoi, alors?" (79). The dialogue reveals the importance placed on categorising and defining others according to their affiliation to a particular community. A despairing Rehana pursues her questioning:

Mais il faut bien être quelque chose! – Je suis Samia. Un long silence suivit cette affirmation bravache qui déplut à Samia elle-même. L'incompréhension, elle le sentait, était totale entre elle et ces jeunes femmes" (p.80).

Samia therefore rejects fixed notions of ethnic or community identity, seeing identity as inherently unique and not determined by name, family ancestry or ethnicity. Samia's rejection of communalism recalls Sonia's reaction in *La Noce d'Anna* when asked about her origins (see Chapter Three).

When Samia argues that she has no more need of stories to explain her family history, Kursheed tries to reason with her:

Il tenta de la calmer. De lui faire comprendre que c'était pour son bien. Que tout le monde avait besoin de racines. Surtout ici, dans cette île livrée aux flots et aux caprices des cyclones, si petite qu'il fallait prendre bien soin de délimiter son espace en s'ancrant profondément dans une histoire, une tradition. Qu'il était prêt à l'aider à retracer la vie de sa mère, même de sa grand-mère, cette belle et énigmatique Jeanne. Tous avaient essayé de lui fournir des pistes, de l'aider à découvrir son passé (pp.127-128).

Kursheed's words reveal the belief that identity is as much a physical concept as a metaphysical one. Identity is regarded in terms of assuring one's place within society through history and tradition, conceptualised through physical acts of anchoring oneself and carving out one's own place within a limited geographical space. His reference to "roots" is placed against the image of the cyclone, thereby highlighting the vulnerability of those who do not demonstrate an attachment to a particular ethnic or community identity. The reader is led to consider the role of ancestry in navigating the complexity of identity construction in Mauritius's multi-ethnic postcolonial island society.

One aspect of her new family's identity with which she most identifies is that of being an Outsider. The final scenes at the house in Souillac, in which the house resonates with significance and functions as a tangible souvenir of the past, reinforce at the same time rejection and embracing of existing memories and awareness of the potential to create a new memory. Magdelaine (2006) suggests that the narrative is a symbolic space which allows for coincidences between different generations to exist without having to express the actual temporal distance that exists between them. The older character leaves the scene thereby allowing the descendant to occupy his space and voice. The narrative possibilities of the novel allow for history to be remembered, as we observe in the reconstruction of a strong heroic individual in *Le Portrait Chamarel*. The family patriarch has identified another route through which the once destructive story of the family can be rebuilt, and subsequently provides a complement to the real historical context within which events happened (2006: 205).

Samia places little value on the sense of belonging to a community or family, contrary to the notion of belonging cherished by others in her society. She blatantly sets out her position against established notions of identity and community:

Je n'ai que faire de vos racines. Elles m'entravent, elles m'étouffent. Je ne veux rien avoir à faire avec vos histoires d'amour bêtement contrariées, vos lâchetés, vos concessions, votre romantisme affecté (p.129).

Patel's protagonist rejects the idea of roots and uses the possessive adjective "vos" to underline her independence. She does not associate with these "roots", believing that they belong to her family and not to her. She has no active memory of her family or her ancestry, yet her sense of identity is no less secure as a result. In fact, those characters who are preoccupied with ethnicity are presented as insecure and obsessed with defining themselves in terms of their family's heritage, much like we have seen earlier in de Souza's novels.

Patel's novel concludes with Samia moving to a house in Souillac, displaying the portrait there and inviting a single mother and her daughter to live with her, thereby placing herself within the new family tradition of her grandfather Hussein and his mistress Jeanne, her grandmother. She begins a new alternative family life in the same house on the cliff near Souillac. The portrait in Kursheed's home was a snapshot of Hussein's happiness with Jeanne in their "maison Chamarel", enduring in spite of attempts to conceal the secret that has brought shame on the family. The portrait celebrates the couple's differences and glorifies their love in the face of the disapproval of others. It is also an important artefact, a physical record and reminder of the past that occupies an important place within the family's memory. Ultimately, Samia's independence and defiance of accepted social norms leads her to relive her grandfather's experience, thereby placing her firmly, albeit unwittingly, within the narrative of that family's creolised heritage.

5.4 Trauma and unreliable memory: *Le Silence des Chagos* and *Le Dernier frère*

The traumatic seminal events in Mauritian history and their impact on individual and collective identity, particularly in adulthood, are approached in some contemporary Mauritian novels. Traumatic recall involves the resurfacing of painful memories that remain vivid in the present and sometimes resist all integration in narrative. Repression of memories of events or experiences often results in ellipsis and gaps in the narrative, or the omission of important events. As Bal *et al* (1999) note, trauma in narrative, film or literature is often represented by relentless repetition of an action, narrative splitting off, and a sense of timelessness. We can observe such characteristics in recent Mauritian novels such as Patel's *Le Silence des Chagos* in which trauma manifests itself in the expression of uncertainty and the rhythmic repetition of actions, words, and emotions of the central characters Raymonde, Charlesia and Désiré. The protagonists of Patel's novel have experienced dramatic forced removal from their homeplace. From their new place of residence in Mauritius they recall the experience of having to leave their islands with little or no forewarning and their profound sadness and powerlessness at not being able to return. In addition to the repetition which highlights personal trauma, the omniscient third-person narrator facilitates a multiplicity of perspectives thereby reinforcing the collective trauma of Chagossian community.

In Patel's novel we see how repetition of a single phrase or of incomplete sentences can be indicative of trauma. Raymonde struggles with how to transmit the story of their deportation to her son and wonders how to effectively articulate their dramatic change in circumstances:

Comment lui raconter? Par où commencer? Sa naissance, le bateau, la terre, l'autre terre. La vraie... La terre d'avant.
D'avant la peur, l'incompréhension.
D'avant la solitude et l'angoisse folle de la mer.
D'avant le bateau voleur qui avait fait douleur ce qui aurait dû être grande joie (p.87).

Raymonde's ongoing distress is evident as she repeats her desire for home as if dazed by the memory. She continues:

D'avant cette nouvelle terre aux montagnes hautaines et indifférentes, aux habitants distants et méprisants.
D'avant la colère
D'avant la fausse résignation pour empêcher que l'incompréhension et rage impuissante explosent en folie
Comment lui expliquer, à son cher Désiré, ces eaux qu'elle n'a pu endiguer ? (p.88).

The narrator's repetition of the expression "D'avant" reinforces the stark contrast between past and present and articulates, along with listing the main negative and elements of their lives now, the trauma of physical and emotional displacement and loss.

The sea and the ship are presented as agents of the Chagossians' suffering and the theft of their identity. Raymonde's experience of giving birth on board the boat to Mauritius is harrowing; her suffering is compounded by the boat's movement. The narrator's use of free indirect style allows for Raymonde's fears to be articulated in a stream of consciousness, moving quickly from one image to the next. The descriptive passage ultimately evokes a scene of suffering and confusion, as she pleads with a higher power to spare her from the sea:

On ne peut pas la livrer à cette furie. La mer veut me prendre toute entière, sortir mon enfant des entrailles, défoncer les parois qui le protègent, elle veut tous nous tuer, Seigneur, Seigneur, aidez-nous (p.102-103).

Charlesia, for her part, had come to Mauritius with her family for her husband to have essential medical treatment unavailable in Diego Garcia and discovers a month later that return is impossible as the islands are "closed". She returns to the port on the day that Mauritian independence is declared and stares out to sea: "Là-bas, l'horizon est d'une clarté éclatante. Le bateau l'a déjà traversé. Sans elle. Et elle se demande d'où

vient cette onde qui tangué soudain, dans sa tête” (p.35). Her pain of exile is therefore physical as well as mental. Learning that no possibility exists for her to return to her home island has caused a profound physical change in Charlesia. The sounds of a musical instrument unique to the Chagossians come to her at night, causing her profound anxiety. The narrative further reinforces the representation of her trauma through the observations of the port employee, who remembers Charlesia and is shocked by her changed physical appearance and profound sadness:

Ça ne peut pas être elle. Cette démarche qui traîne, ces épaules baissées. L’autre avait de l’allure, un vrai tempérament, elle imprimait fermement ses pas dans le sol. Elle l’a tellement marquée qu’il pense souvent à elle (p.23).

Un an déjà. Il lève les yeux. Regarde la silhouette au bout du quai. Un an, et elle a l’air d’avoir rapetissé, de s’être affaissée (p.36).

Charlesia’s return to the site of her trauma is a repetition of her initial reaction: she wanders around the port, wearing the same red headscarf, and looks out to sea waiting and willing for a ship to take her home. This first time, she is shrunken and weakened by the distress of her year in exile. Later, the reader learns that she visits the port from time to time over a period of seven years. The port employee remarks:

[...] sa posture n’a pas changé. Toujours la même façon de donner le dos, comme une muraille hérissée de barbelés, à la ville qui grouille derrière elle. Elle est tout entière vers cette mer et ciel comme si, d’un instant à l’autre, elle allait se mettre à marcher sur l’eau et se dissoudre dans le bleu (p.72).

Charlesia’s reluctant acceptance of her changed circumstances is outlined when the boat finally arrives and its numerous passengers, fellow displaced Chagossians, disembark.

The removal of, and lack of meaningful compensation for, the Chagossians is evidence of an official desire to “forget” what they had to endure and to treat them as a minor inconvenience. Their forced removal and subsequent lack of support to adapt to their new “home” in the slums of Port Louis demonstrates an attempt to erase any officially recognised memory of their islands. The very issue of identity is embodied in the story

of Désiré. With only vague memories of his past, his fractured sense of self is compounded by his lack of an official identity. Désiré's story is useful in highlighting the complex consequences of clearing of the islands and deportation of the inhabitants. The Chagossians no longer officially belong in Diego Garcia, but they are not easily granted citizenship by Mauritius. Désiré's fragmented identity embodies the loss and confusion of an entire people. When he is first presented in the novel he is suffering from nausea and dizziness during a family gathering and his sickness heightens when he is mocked about his nickname "Nordvaer". This character allows the author to highlight the trauma resulting from displacement and lack of official recognition. Désiré has a problematic relationship with the sea, suffering crippling sea-sickness during a fishing trip. He experiences its movements at the very core of his being. The reader senses that the rocking of the ship on which he was born remains part of him:

Enfin. Un peu de distance entre cette mer qu'il sentait trop proche de son corps. Cette mer qui lui tempête les entrailles alors que sa surface est à peine agitée par quelques remous. Cela doit être parce qu'elle l'a enfanté qu'il ressent aussi fortement ce qui l'agite dans ses profondeurs. C'est peut-être sa façon à elle de l'accueillir, de lui dire qu'elle le reconnaît, de le prendre dans ses bras, de le bercer (p.125-126).

Ultimately, however, he feels rejected by the sea, his sea-sickness an intense reminder that he does not belong there, that it is not his "patrie": "Il ne connaît pas cette mer. Elle ne le reconnaît pas. Elle ne le veut pas" (p.127). He only discovers the circumstances of his birth when he applies for a social security card and learns that he is not recognised as Mauritian. His birth certificate is error-strewn, having been completed in haste when the ship on which he was born (the "Nordvaer") stopped briefly in the Seychelles en route to Mauritius. His ambiguous official identity places his sense of personal identity in turmoil:

Désiré ne savait plus où il en était. Mauricien ? Il avait toujours vécu ici, mais n'en avait pas la nationalité. Seychellois ? Il n'avait jamais vu ce pays. Britannique? On voudrait encore moins de lui là-bas. Chagossien ? Il ne connaissait pas ces îles où il aurait dû voir le jour (p.131).

The elders in his community identify with being Chagossian and regard Mauritius as a host country. Désiré, however, has no living memory of his family's home island, nor is he officially recognised by the Mauritian state. Officially stateless, and equally ill at ease on land and on water, Désiré is on a quest to establish a sense of identity: his official identity as a Mauritian citizen and his cultural identity as a Chagossian. Désiré's curiosity also propels the narrative towards a questioning of memory processes. Towards the close of the novel, Désiré is eager to discover if the Chagossians' collective memory of their islands is reliable and whether life really was as idyllic as the images he has gleaned from the memory of his family members:

- Est-ce que c'était vraiment aussi bien que ça là-bas ? Vraiment ?
Elle semble contempler sa question, la tête légèrement penchée sur le côté. Puis elle répond d'une voix ferme:
- C'est comme ça dans notre souvenir. Et le souvenir, c'est tout ce qui nous reste.
Un silence. Elle reprend à voix plus basse :
- Le souvenir, c'est un hameçon qui se fiche sous la peau. Plus tu tires dessus. Plus il te cisaille les tissus et s'enfoncé profondément. Impossible de le faire sortir sans inciser la chair. Et la cicatrice qui restera sera toujours là pour te rappeler la crudité de cette douleur. Mais tu n'arrêteras pas pour autant d'y revenir. Sans cesse. Car c'est là que pulse toute ta vie. Vois-tu, petit, c'est plus vivant encore que le souvenir. On appelle ça la souvenance (p.149-150).

Having never lived on Diego Garcia and with no physical memory of those islands, Désiré is well-positioned to act as a cynical interrogative voice in the novel.

Charlesia also carefully considers the meaning of memories. Memory is described as an ongoing intensely physical experience, as much part of the body as of the mind. Her explanation underscores the physicality of memories, that they scar the individual for life. She feels that "souvenance" is more important even than "souvenir". "Souvenance" (recollection) best describes the type of memory the Chagossians use in keeping alive the history and culture of their island and suggests something beyond memory, such as post-memory, or re-memory. Bragard states that Charlesia's reference to "souvenance" at the end of the novel recalls Toni Morrison's concept of "re-memory", the telling and

retelling of traumatic events in order to reconcile with the past so as to reintegrate into one's family, community and nation. Bragard further asserts that Charlesia's reference to "souvenance" as a continuing memory and an intensely personal experience that is part of her present identity is particularly significant in demonstrating an ongoing need to delve into the past and is in stark contrast to the official attitudes to the same historical events (2007: 142-143). The novel may also relate "postmemory", a form of second-generation memory in which cultural memory replaces personal memory, and is "characterised by belatedness, secondariness and displacement" (Bal *et al*:1999 xii). Charlesia's remarks reveal awareness of the cultural transmission of memory to a new generation. She and her grandson question the nature and accuracy of the Chagossian recollection of traumatic deportation from one island to another, yet the importance of that memory to their personal and cultural identity is reiterated.

Appanah's *Le Dernier frère* also evokes trauma. The narrative relies on the adult Raj's recollections of his childhood in order to reconstruct the story of the important events that marked his early life and still have resonance for him as an adult. He regularly questions the reliability of the images he retains from this period of his life. Being so young at the time he wonders if a man in his seventies can accurately recall such events so clearly. At times he remarks that he still sees certain images as if they were from yesterday, yet, at other times he wonders if he is imagining or inventing certain details. The events recalled in the narrative have come to define the adult narrator. The novel traces the development of personal identity through trauma in the narrator's childhood. The story evokes trauma related to family and friendships, as well as the collective trauma of displacement and loss. Three major aspects of the narrator's childhood haunt his adult years. Firstly, the distressing experience of losing his brothers in tragic

circumstances. Secondly, his doomed friendship with David, a Jewish boy interned in a prison camp located close to Raj's home during the Second World War. Thirdly, the lack of acknowledgement by adults or in official discourse surrounding the internment of these Jewish refugees.

The loss of his brothers during a deadly storm is recalled at the end of the second chapter:

J'ai soixante-dix ans aujourd'hui et je me souviens comme si c'était hier du tonnerre qui a semblé venir de nos ventres tellement il a résonné en nous. Je me souviens de la peur, au début, du silence irréel qui a suivi le tonnerre, qui a tout figé, même la nature était en attente, et nous, nous n'osions plus bouger [...] Je me souviens du brouillard fantomatique qui est monté de la terre quand celle-ci a absorbé les premières gouttes. Nous aimions ce moment-là d'habitude mais là, c'était différent. Je le sentais, mes frères le sentaient. Très vite, des éclairs ont déferlé, d'autres coups de tonnerre ont éclaté et nous nous sommes mis à courir (p.33).

He is sure of his recollection of that day ("comme si c'était hier"), aided by how memory inscribes itself on his senses and emotions (the thunder which was so loud it seemed to vibrate through their bodies). The storm is recalled as a sensorial experience; Raj remembers his feelings of fear and the physical aspects of the fog and rain. The storm is therefore unforgettable, as it leads to the traumatic death of his two brothers. Distressed by their loss, the family moves to Beau Bassin. When storm clouds gather in the sky soon after his return from hospital, Raj seeks comfort in his mother's arms. The memory reassures him when later he thinks about David:

Je m'en souviens encore, la nature et ma mère semblaient être aux aguets et moi, le petit Raj, j'étais, oui, je crois que je peux dire ça, j'étais bien [...] à ce moment-là, je pense à David, je pense aux barbelés arrachés, la chaleur de ma mère fond sur mes bras et je suis bien (p.102-3).

The violent storm isolates Raj and his mother in their house while his father is stuck at the prison. The storm revives difficult memories and awareness of their loss. Their trauma is tangible:

Nous pleurons sur mes frères. A l'instant même où le tonnerre a crevé, nous avons eu l'impression qu'une main géante et malfaisante venait nous enlever Vinod et Anil et que la maison de Beau-Bassin, la forêt, la prison, la nouvelle école, les longs mois depuis ce jour à

Mapou, que tout cela serait volatilisé d'un coup, et notre cœur et notre douleur étaient de nouveau à vif. (p.105).

The storm is remembered as a “main géante et malfaisante”. Their grief and loss cause them to consider the precarity of life and the possibility of everything being wiped out again. The adult narrator also ruminates on loss and the inadequacy of language in expressing the loss of siblings or children: “il faudrait un mot pour dire ce qu'on devient à jamais quand on perd un frère, un fils” (p.105).

Raj's narration makes frequent references to his ability or inability to articulate his pain and trauma, which manifest themselves in the narrative as a stream of consciousness, with scant punctuation, about his brothers, about David's own experience of death and the impact of the cyclone (p.156-159). The two central characters are united by their experience of trauma, the result of tragic experiences during their early childhood. Raj, as narrator, in spite of his own sadness, never loses sight of his friend's suffering. He notes that David clings to the Yiddish language, as it is all that he retains from his past. The language, and the songs that he sings in that language, are a source of comfort to him. Later in his adult life, we learn that Raj orders a Yiddish language-learning book. Opening it once, he promptly closes it, never to open it again, because it is too difficult for his memory to process. Seeing the written version of the language spoken by David fills him with profound sadness. This unfinished action reflects the difficulty associated with recalling traumatic memories and is characteristic of the gaps and incompleting actions frequently observed in trauma narratives. As in Patel's novel, we also see the protagonist attempting to negotiate unreliable memory. His memories of the loss of his brothers are expressed more confidently than his recollection of the period of friendship with David or other events within his own family.

The impact of his childhood is profound and he suffers from feelings of guilt throughout his adult life. The adult narrator reflects on an event in which he hid David and protected him from the camp guards. However, the boys are powerless to help others in difficulty for fear of being caught and David being sent back to the prison. Raj expresses regret and guilt, and implicates himself in David's death later:

Je suis vieux maintenant et je peux le dire, avec honte, avec chagrin, en baissant ma tête le plus possible. Voilà ce que j'ai fait et j'avais neuf ans: j'ai empêché David d'aider un de ses camarades, un Juif comme lui, enfermé parce qu'on ne savait pas quoi faire d'eux et si je n'avais pas agi de la sorte, David serait peut-être encore vivant aujourd'hui (p.113).

The regret expressed by the adult Raj, added to the frequent expressions of doubt seen earlier in the narrative, creates the impression of a narrator with a troublesome relationship with his memory. "Mais quand je me souviens de ces jours d'été 1945, quand je parle de David, mon coeur est lourd, ma tête fourmille et je voudrais pleurer tellement les regrets m'assaillent." (p.160).

The narrator is also disturbed by questions surrounding David's experiences prior to being deported to Beau-Bassin. He asks if his mother knew about the concentration camps in Europe and also asks whether, had he known what his friend had endured before arriving in Mauritius, he would have chosen to take off into the forest with him. Further, he wonders whether he and his mother are as culpable as those who denied all knowledge of this period of history. Raj enunciates his ongoing trauma at this point, tormented and "haunted" by uncertainty and gaps in his memory and knowledge: "Ces questions me hantent à un point qui m'étourdit et je sais que je n'aurai jamais de réponses" (p.139).

Both novels also consider how traumatic events have an impact on personal identity. More significantly for Mauritius, the events evoked in the novels concern vulnerable groups brought to Mauritius and their treatment while resident on the island, embodied in the suffering of Désiré in *Le Silence des Chagos* and David and Raj in *Le Dernier frère*. We see that the trauma endured during childhood continues into adulthood and is represented in the novels by uncertainty, repetition of actions and emotions and an interrogation on memory processes. The narratives' emphasis on traumatic recall also furnishes social commentary on the historical events represented. Novels can therefore constitute a potent tool for emotional remembering by creating a bond of human empathy between past and present. Both narratives urge the reader to reflect on the difficulty in remembering and representing truth. This dilemma is made explicit through first person narration in Appanah's novel and through the didactic questioning of the nature of memory in Patel's narrative.

5.5 Conclusion

While recent Mauritian literature is not unique in its use of memory as narrative device or theme, it leans heavily on both strategies. This is in part because of the importance of exile in Mauritian imaginary which stem from the country's history of inward and outward migration. In *La Noce d'Anna*, *le Silence des Chagos*, and in the aforementioned Berthelot and Humbert novels, the chief protagonist lives at a distance from the country of her birth, or has done so for a considerable period of time during the past. For an exile, whether voluntary or involuntary, reliance on memory becomes intense and instinctual. Characters rely on memory to reconnect to, and express, their Mauritian identity. Therefore, because Mauritian literature is dominated by the themes of exile and displacement, it is inevitable that memory should be a key feature of the personal narrative as much as it is in the historical narrative.

Regarding personal development of the central protagonist, we have seen how individual identity is reconstructed through artefacts such as diaries, letters or photographs, and how narratives can construct the protagonist through the technique of flashback.

We see how family members seek to reconstruct a preferable identity by relying on selected aspects of their past in Humbert's, Le Clézio's, de Souza's and Patel's novels. A sense of identity in the present is evoked through an examination or analysis of past individual or family events and historical phenomena; reconciling these brings about a new and uniquely positive image of present-day society and its origins in a shared past. However, idealising the past is proven to be problematic, with contemporary Mauritian novels revealing that over-reliance on ancestry and ethnic affiliation as the key markers of identity is unhelpful and potentially destructive for the individual, the family, the community and ultimately Mauritian society.

Memory of the ancestor is shown to be a key aspect of the process of identification in a pluri-ethnic, postcolonial island society such as Mauritius, and is problematised in these novels. De Souza's novels examine human reactions to extreme circumstances and display particular sensitivity and curiosity towards the reality of living in Mauritius, underlining the importance that Mauritians attach to their background and identity and the impact of these on how events are remembered and retold. In *La Maison qui marchait vers le large* and *Le Sang de l'Anglais*, memory is employed both as theme and narrative device in the development of plot and of character. Ultimately, over-reliance on memory is shown to thwart attempts at intercultural communication or

unity. Over-emphasis on ancestry and origins in addition to the unreliability of memory lead to misconceptions and mistrust of other individuals or groups. De Souza's novels call for tolerance and cross-cultural communication, as well as celebrating the diversity of Mauritian society. Patel's *Le Portrait Chamarel* also reveals how memory can hinder the attempt to establish one's place in society. Samia's mix-race heritage is unacceptable and suspicious to many characters in the novel who struggle to accept her lack of attachment to any one singular ethnicity. Kursheed, for his part, sees his family's *métissage* as a source of pride and as symbolic of his country's creolisation. He notes the positive influence of cultural mixing especially on music:

Cet érudit de la langue perse avait aussi appris le brij bhasa et le Sanskrit. Sans doute parce que son père était un musulman et sa mère une hindoue. Une âme mêlée, dit Kursheed, d'un ton rêveur, en se levant pour aller allumer une cigarette, l'odeur brune et corsée du tabac s'éleva.
- Il a beaucoup composé. Mais il a surtout tenté d'établir une fusion entre musiques indienne et perse (p. 88).

Placing little value on defining herself by specific aspects of her cultural or ethnic identity, Samia is representative of a new culture created on the island through the process of creolisation. Patel pushes the reader to wonder whether it is necessary for the individual to know one's origins or have intimate knowledge of their family history in order to occupy a legitimate place within a pluralistic society.

We have also considered how the impact of trauma on the memory process is articulated in literary narratives. *Le Silence des Chagos* is marked by traumatic recall caused by involuntary exile. *Le Dernier frère* highlights the ongoing and repetitive aspects of childhood trauma and the impact of personal and collective memory on present identity. For the individual, remembering and accepting one's past can be seen as a form of emancipation from difficulty or trauma. Evoking childhood and placing complex social issues within the context of childhood in Mauritius allow the author to renegotiate the

past and assess its consequences for the present and its implications for a wider Mauritian consciousness.

The above novels question, directly or indirectly, personal memory and our capacity to remember accurately, as reflected in the doubt and insecurity frequently observed in the texts. The struggle to negotiate personal memory and to assert personal identity can be read as a metaphor for Mauritian identity, in all its complexity and the difficulty in constructing one's personal or family narrative within the wider narrative of the creolised island. It is, of course, impossible to dissociate personal memory from collective memory, given the individual's place within a wider community (and the complexity of Mauritian history and its resonance in contemporary Mauritian society) and as such collective memory will be given due attention in the subsequent chapter.

CHAPTER SIX - FROM INDIVIDUAL TO COLLECTIVE MEMORY

6.1 Introduction

In tandem with the reconstruction of individual memory, as examined in the previous chapter, many of the Mauritian novels in our corpus portray the memory of an entire community or region and consider the significance of memory for an inclusive Mauritian, or Mauritian *Creole*, identity.⁶⁰ In the novels examined hereunder we see memory as a significant marker of identity in the context of community and cultural heritage. In this manner, memory places the individual within a particular ethnic group or class in contemporary Mauritian society. In a wider geographical context, emphasis on a shared history facilitates the consolidation of a regional identity. Two historical narratives by Appannah, and one novel each by Patel and Pyamootoo are examined in particular. The significant absence of slavery from contemporary Mauritian novels and the importance of Indian Ocean cultural memory and identity are also given due attention.

The study of memory in cultural production facilitates an understanding of the continuity of cultural practices and the transmission of representations of a people, their customs, objects and institutions. Literature is a conduit for cultural transmission as it can honour or commemorate people or events from the past, thereby preserving their memory for present and future readers. Key historical events are remembered, with particular focus on the role of ordinary people in the midst of extraordinary circumstances. In the Mauritian context, the period of indentured labour (*Les Rochers de Poudre d'Or*), the deportation and relocation of the Chagossians (*Le Silence des Chagos*) and the internment of Jewish refugees in Mauritius during the Second World War (*Le Dernier frère*) are the subjects of recent novels that fictionalise the major

⁶⁰ My emphasis. Creole in the sense of both a mixed *and* an island identity.

important historical events and moments of social upheaval that have shaped contemporary Mauritian society. These novels place the events at the heart of the narrative in literary re-imaginings of history. Other novels, such as *Bénarès* or *Les Jours Kaya*, are set during a particular period of history which frames the narrative. The historical context is evident but not foregrounded.

The terms “cultural memory” and “collective memory” are employed in the chapter and the differences between the two taken into account during the analysis. Cultural memory allows for an individual to become acculturated, it allows for his or her identity to be constructed through discourses of a certain community (Halbwachs: 1992). Culture itself can also be considered as a narrative structuring of the past. Rigney (2005) regards cultural memory as a type of working memory that can be constructed and also reconstructed through public acts of remembrance. She considers the impact of memorial practices on how collective identities are defined or redefined. Rigney states that cultural memory is external as it is defined by the experiences of others as they have been relayed to us through public media and many acts of communication. The term “cultural memory”:

[...] highlights the extent to which shared memories of the past are the product of mediation, textualization and acts of communication. These are not just regrettable deviations from some spontaneously produced memory on the part of the participants, but rather a precondition for the operation of memories across generations, for the production of collective memories in the long term (2005: 14).

Cultural memory is therefore a cultural phenomenon, rather than a psychological or sociological one. Literature has a role in the propagation of cultural memory, as a public act of communication and cultural transmission. The action, themes and dialogue embedded in the literary narrative acquaint the reader with events from the past that

belong to his or her history and encourage a reader response to the extent that the reader can come to identify with the period or individuals represented in a text.

Collective memory manifests itself in objects and representations of the past such as memorials, monuments, museums, artefacts. Such objects encourage a shared remembrance of the past. It can also be a more subtle phenomenon, present only in the minds of those who retain memories of shared experiences and events. Collective memory involves individual experiences that are inextricably linked and stresses what individuals have in common, rather than helping to shape or influence how culture is represented or conceptualised. Cultural memory can be regarded therefore as an extension of collective memory.

Rigney (2005) asserts that as literature, because of its aesthetic and fictional qualities, is more mobile than other forms of visual memorials, and consequently is accessible to a greater number of people. Literature may, in effect, be the most effective method of transferring memories between communities and therefore function as mediator (Rigney, 2005: 25). If literature is a pliable form, as Rigney suggests, then it is an effective method of transferring memories between communities and facilitating negotiation on the subject. Art and literature are therefore cultural mediators in the process of memory recovery and the re/construction of individual and collective identity. We remember as individuals, but we can also link our memories to collective histories and traditions, and therefore insert our own personal and cultural memory within a wider collective memory. As Rigney maintains, the subjects of the narrative need not even belong to the “imagined community” with whom the reader normally would identify. Acts of remembrance add to our interest in the experiences of others

and reinforce sympathy for those they never actually knew (Rigney, 2005). We will assess the extent to which this is true in contemporary Mauritian text in the following sections which examine novels that reimagine or memorialise key events and periods in Mauritian history and their impact on both Mauritian and non-Mauritian readers and on Mauritian cultural and collective identity.

6.2 Indo-Mauritian collective memory in *Les Rochers de Poudre d'Or*

Appanah's historical narrative evokes the experiences of indentured Indian workers brought to Mauritius during the 19th century. The novel offers a human perspective on a period in Mauritian history that has had lasting consequences for Mauritian society and identity. It focuses less on specific events, on political or economic details, for example, than on the human cost of the migration of Indian indentured workers to Mauritius, such as the impact of such an upheaval on families, on workers and on the colonial administration. The novel examines the personal experience of indentured labour in detail, thereby encouraging the reader to follow the progress of individuals and assess the impact of historical events on communities; in this case the foundation of the Indo-Mauritian community. The narrative techniques of drawing on multiple points of view, of emphasising belief systems and related imagery, and of exploring cultures in contact, provide a broad-ranging picture of the colonial enterprise and its consequences for modern-day Mauritius. Appanah's use of multiple narrators, use of myth and cliché, and the insertion of a pseudo-historical text convince the reader of the authenticity of the stories being recounted.

The ship is a microcosm of colonial society, situated in the middle of the ocean to intensify the drama of this society in which normal accepted human behaviour is jettisoned in favour of a system governed purely by economic factors. The

claustrophobia which exacerbates Dr. Grant's breakdown affects the reader, who is also unable to escape from the island of the ship inhabited by human beings, both victims and perpetrators, trapped in a hell of their own making. The reader is aware that this novel is not an historical document but the sense of authenticity is, nevertheless, strong enough to elicit an emotional response. It is this emotional reaction on the part of the reader which is crucial to the outcome of the author/reader relationship. The connection elicited by the emotional bond formed through the imagination reinforces the sense of self of the contemporary reader. The contemporary Mauritian audience or the contemporary reader living away from Mauritius are moved to feel the plight of his or her ancestor or the ancestors of those who live on the island.

6.2.1 Individual and collective experience of indentured labour

Appanah's use of characterisation highlights the many experiences of colonisation: innocent young Indians duped into making a better living overseas, the weak and the elderly who die on board before arriving in the island colony, women exploited in the domestic and economic domain, and corrupt individuals profiteering from the colonial regime. Magdelaine (2006a) acknowledges that novels dealing with less well-documented communities portray diverse micro-stories without foregrounding any one key character in particular. In the case of *Les Rochers de Poudre d'Or*, Magdelaine suggests that Appanah's narrative strategy highlights how ordinary people were sidelined and considered unimportant within the history of colonisation: "Le caractère purement emblématique des personnages choisis renforce l'anonymat dans lequel l'histoire les a plongés" (2006a: 202). It may also be argued that such a variety of characters, while not developed in great detail as individuals, are an effective means to explore a wide range of experiences of indentured labour (male and female experience,

younger and older workers, urban and rural experience, illiterate impoverished immigrants and educated powerful members of the colonial administration, for example).

Appanah captures a tangible sense of hope amongst the characters who leave for Mauritius only for them to be faced with a harsh reality: unsanitary conditions on board, terrifying weather conditions and stormy seas, racist crew members and an unkind doctor, profiteering recruiters, cruel landowners in Mauritius, unwelcoming former slaves, successful Indians who have become as cruel as the French landowners, and the realisation that they will be indentured for at least five years of physical labour. Using a wide range of character types risks easy stereotyping, yet Appanah's characters are not purely emblematic or tokenistic. The author's use of characterisation serves, rather, to reinforce the human cost of the colonial enterprise.

The rumours of former villagers who had made their fortunes in Mauritius are gilt-edged, and paint a grossly exaggerated image of "Merich" (Mauritius) for those left behind, as the reader discovers in the second part of the novel, or as any reader with some knowledge of Indian or Mauritian history will be able to appreciate. In the village imaginary, the faraway island of Mauritius represents a land of plenty. Appanah emphasises the expectations of those Indians who signed contracts to work in Mauritius, and the deliberate actions of the administration, with the help of willing locals, to conceal or exaggerate the real conditions of their labour. These muddied details lead to the propagation of the myth of Mauritius as a utopian promised land. The character of Chotty is representative of those who were duped by such rumours:

Ajodha, le ferrailleur disait avoir un cousin qui vivait à Bombay et qui était allé à Merich. Là-bas, disait-il, les Indiens labouraient les champs et ils étaient beaucoup mieux payés qu'en Inde. Ajodha disait aussi, tout bas cette fois-ci, que son cousin avait trouvé de l'or sous les rochers.

Comme ça, il avait soulevé un rocher pas très lourd et là, en dessous, des pièces d'or brillantes sommeillaient. Ajodha racontait beaucoup d'histoires – Sindh disait que c'était la chaleur de la forge qui lui montait la tête -, mais une, surtout, plaisait particulièrement: le cousin qui fit fortune à Merich (pp.24-25).

Appanah's novel explores the myths ingrained in the immigrants' narrative which led the villagers to believe that Mauritius was an Eldorado, commented on ironically by the title, *Les Rochers de Poudre d'Or*, in its dual meaning: the actual Mauritian village of Poudre d'Or, situated in the North of the island, and a reference to the Eldorado myth. The juxtapositions of hope and despair and of expectation and disappointment create a poignant vein throughout the novel. In the emigrants' imagination, Poudre d'or is the mythical land full of opportunity. The title of the novel therefore symbolises the object of desire and encompasses the hope, disappointment and suffering which shaped the emigrant worker's experience in the colony. That these myths are held to be reality by the characters early in the novel reminds the reader of the role of myth and legend in the formation and propagation of collective memory. Such stories are repeated for years and remain unquestioned, thereby ingraining themselves into the collective and cultural memory of an entire community. Yet, certain less-idealistic realities are revealed piecemeal throughout the narrative from the beginning, adding a sense of foreboding to the narrative. Appanah reveals how powerful and credible such myths could be for those desperate enough to believe them and ready to seek a new life in a faraway colony.

The disturbing violence of some scenes highlights the contrast between myth and reality. For example, Chotty is already indentured, working with a local landowner to pay off his deceased father's debt. Once the true nature of the contract is revealed, he wishes to stay in India, but cannot, and now fears for the fate of his wife Reshmee and his son during his long absence:

Les policiers empoignèrent Reshmee mais elle restait accrochée à la jambe de son mari et criait: «Chotty! Chotto ! T'en vas pas ! », Un des policiers lui assena un coup de gourdin sur le dos et elle lâcha la jambe de Chotty. Celui-ci essaya de lui porter secours mais Boodhoo Khan, le Pachtoun, lui barra la route comme un bloc de pierres menaçant et poussa Chotty vers la passerelle. « Tu as signé, paysan ! Si tu ne montes pas dans le bateau, tu pourras en prison. Ou sont mes cinq roupies ? ». Chotty lui tendit les cinq billets et regarda les policiers traîner Reshmee comme un chien mort (p.37).

While Chotty is representative of the fate of many indentured workers from India, he is nonetheless a fully-rounded character in his own right. When he later dies on board the *Atlas*, his death is mourned by the other passengers and his body prepared according to tradition. The reader learns much of this detail from the narrative voice of Dr. Grant, who, throughout the voyage observes the passengers on board with a mix of curiosity, pity and revulsion. The doctor's diary provides more information about Chotty's character. Deeply respected by the other Indians on board and endowed with status as a spiritual leader or "guru" whose qualities as a human being set him above his fellows and above the White "superiors", he is not an anonymous immigrant. Doctor Grant's narrative humanises Chotty, and memorialises the events that mark his failed voyage towards Mauritius:

[...] j'essayais de me souvenir de ce type. Il avait été la cause de cet incident au départ de Calcutta. Il serrait son baluchon comme s'il n'avait pas plus précieux sur terre. Je me souviens aussi surtout de sa femme qui criait sur le port et lui qui pleurait après. Durant le voyage, il a toujours été parmi ceux réquisitionnés pour nettoyer le pont ou transporter des personnes trop faibles. Je me souviens aussi de lui près du corps du vieux pêcheur (p.84).

Dr. Grant's diary entry corroborates the events recounted earlier in the narrative and serves to reinforce the misery associated with indentured labour and the dangerous transportation of workers across the ocean. That Dr. Grant is marked by the sight of Chotty Lall's wife weeping at the port as her husband leaves Calcutta is not only poignant, but highly significant. The narrative point of view from this usually unsympathetic character somehow adds weight to the importance of this scene. Dr. Grant has not failed to notice the role Chotty Lall played in helping others. The reader follows this character's journey closely through Appanah's main narrative and the

narrative device of the diary. Already indentured due to his father's debt, Chotty leaves a wife and family behind in India. He plays an important role in keeping morale high amongst his fellow passengers, yet succumbs to an untimely death caused by a contagious illness that has broken out on board the ship. Appanah elicits a sympathetic reader response at this point; Chotty symbolises human suffering, but more specifically the suffering of similar workers from India and their families left behind.

Other characters in the novel have particular significance in the portrayal of the period. Vythee, whose brother has been in Mauritius for four years after meeting a *maistry* (recruiter) on a train, is the conduit for an exploration on India's place within the wider context of colonialism. "Au début, Vythee n'avait pas compris. Leur vie, leur mort et leur destin n'étaient-ils pas ici, en Inde? Sinon, pourquoi seraient-ils nés ici, à Manavalli, hein?" (p.38). He asks why Indians are now implicated in a wider global history, and whether they could not merely be expected to live their own lives as they had always done, in the country of their birth. Presented as a victim of the colonial system, Vythee represents loss of tradition. Portrayed as a strong and resolute female participant in the administration of a patriarchal colonial society, Roopaye is wealthy because of her collaboration with the white recruiters who exploit her feminine charms to speed up the recruitment process. She is ruthless, yet charming, in her dealings with the Indian villagers who seek work with the British. Using empathy as a strategy to build trust with her clients, she has little sympathy for other women, readily exploiting them for her own profit, which challenges the reader's assumptions about female characters and gender stereotyping. Appanah's narrative emphasises the detached manner in which Roopaye approaches her work: "Elle avait accueilli une femme qui ne cherchait qu'une chose: fuir. D'expérience, Roopaye savait que les fuyards faisaient d'excellents travailleurs" (p.48). An efficient intermediary between the colonial

administration and potential recruits, she is presented as an effective cog in the colonial machine headed by Sir Radcliffe and the workers he needs to populate Mauritius to make it a productive and profitable colony. The diverse range of characters drawn in Appanah's novel emphasise the inclusive nature of colonialism. The reader appreciates, therefore, that indentured labour was a collective experience and not an isolated event for one individual, one family, or one village.

Les Rochers de Poudre d'Or functions as an alternative to historical accounts of the period. The violence and tragedy brought to life in the narrative commemorate this period of history by encouraging a sympathetic reader response. Individual stories are largely represented as tragedies, such as the emotive ending with Vythee's terrible realisation of his fate within the plantation society.

Il se rendit compte de ce qu'il est devenu. Un coolie sur une terre étrangère, loin des siens. Il était le numéro 455890 et sa photo sur le laissez-passer montrait un homme au teint cendre, fatigué et les yeux fermés à cause du flash. On aurait dit cliché de mort (p.159).

The descriptive language and imagery employed in historical fiction are entirely different to the detached manner in which events are recounted in historical accounts through objective or academic language. The literary text's subjective narrative invites the reader to sympathise with the characters involved. It makes these events accessible to a public, (many of whom will have no ancestral link to them) thereby inscribing the period in a collective consciousness and becoming part of the reader's cultural memory, irrespective of background. Appanah acknowledges that, as a descendant of Indian indentured workers, she has a personal connection to and a significant motivation for writing about this period. Furthermore, as an author of fiction, her approach is necessarily different to that of a historian:

I have always wanted to tell stories on a human scale. I am not a historian, but I find this very interesting. With regard to *Les Rochers de Poudre d'Or*, I am a descendant of those Indian indentured labourers. And their history, one knows it without really knowing it. I have heard

many anecdotes from that period. But for me, those remained rather ordinary. I wanted those characters to come to life in another sort of context.⁶¹

The incessant imagery of trauma and suffering inscribe themselves on the narrative and on the reader's memory. The narrative of *Les Rochers de Poudre d'Or* focuses on personal loss, in particular on the loss of identity for those who cling to the smallest item or image to remember their homeland. The narrative therefore becomes a type of memorial, not just to Chotty and his peers, but to all indentured labourers from India who were transported to Mauritius during the colonial period.

6.2.2 Crossing the *kala pani*: images of haunting and ocean crossing in *Les Rochers de Poudre d'Or*

Appanah's novel makes significant reference to the *kala pani*, which refers to the sea, literally the "dark waters": an impure expanse of ocean that separates the ocean traveller from the regenerating waters of the Ganges. In the Hindu belief system, crossing the *kala pani* leads to loss of tradition, family, caste, and culture. Their reverence of the ocean allows the passengers to retain a link to their heritage. Mehta (2010: 1) notes that ocean crossings were normally associated with the expatriation of convicts, prisoners and "undesirables". In Appanah's novel fear of the ocean is evoked in such terms at the beginning of the novel:

On disait que ceux qui allaient au-delà du kala pani perdaient leur caste. Qu'ils étaient maudits pour plusieurs générations et qu'ils renaissent encore et encore et encore sans jamais connaître la paix. On racontait qu'au-delà du kala pani n'existaient que le malheur, le soufre de l'enfer et les cris des âmes errantes (p.12).

The belief is that those who board the ships leaving India to take them to work abroad will be cursed. Like lost souls, they will haunt the *kala pani*, caught in a hellish cycle of rebirth, suffering many lives of misery in the new colony. As the ocean crossing meant separation from origins and ancestry, those who undertook the voyage were

⁶¹ See: [Http://livres.fluctuat.net/nathacha-appanah/interviews/2432-un-autre-horizon-mauricien.html](http://livres.fluctuat.net/nathacha-appanah/interviews/2432-un-autre-horizon-mauricien.html). Accessed 08/02/11. Also cited in Lionnet, 2010.

destined for a life of rootless wandering. Through the myths, stories and correspondence passed through the generations, this aspect of local cultural memory has ingrained itself into the narrative of village life.

According to Magdelaine (2006b) the image of the *kala pani* is useful for novelists writing about India as it allows authors to play on metaphors in representing the complexity of cultural difference. The notion of a dark space, a sort of black hole, facilitates images of loss or of being cursed. The narrator of *Les Rochers de Poudre d'Or* conveys the sense of void in terms of the loss of caste and being cursed for generations, with the dark waters as a metaphor for exile and separation. The *kala pani* embodies the fact of abandoning the motherland of India in particular. Magdelaine notes, for example, how new communities are created on the ocean and the caste system is rendered irrelevant, leading to a new Indian culture of emigration (2006b). We can consider this newly-created culture as a first step in the process of creolisation.

A key narrative point of view is provided by Dr. Grant, who scorns the locals who are fearful of making the voyage. He learns of the passengers' beliefs from the ship's captain, thereby informing the reader unfamiliar with the term:

Le kala pani, ils l'appellent ! Le capitaine m'a dit que, pour les Indiens, traverser l'océan équivalait à perdre sa caste et à renaître sous la forme d'insectes. Selon lui, des histoires circulent sur les Indiens engloutis par l'océan, brûlés ou enlevés par des âmes maléfiques qui croupissent sous l'eau (p.60).

Dr. Grant refers to the *kala pani* with derision and ridicules the passengers' belief system as "stories". Grant has no regard for their belief system, nor any desire to understand it. However, he will become more sympathetic through his own experiences and observations on board the ship. Despite his privileged position, the memory of the harsh conditions and traumatic deaths of other Indians on board the *Atlas* will be hard

for the English doctor to forget. The gruesome death of the elderly man, and the death of Chotty, both of whose bodies are thrown overboard, soften Dr. Grant's attitude, causing him to utter words such as "pitié" and to take more interest in the individuals on board. Regularly haunted by bad dreams and images of faces of the dead and dying, he drinks in an attempt to erase disturbing images from his mind. The dark waters are seen, therefore, to have an impact on all on board.

Regarded as both a refuge and cause of illness in the novel, the sea is the burial ground of those who die on board, while the ship teems with rats and is a breeding ground for deadly diseases. Grant respects the sea, and criticises the Indians who cannot swim and who fear the ocean: "Dans l'eau, ils ne pourront plus rien faire. Les Indiens ne savent pas nager. Ce sont des incapables qui ont peur de l'eau. Je déteste les Indiens. Je déteste leurs morts" (p.89). The labourers' fear and respect for the *kala pani* highlight the different belief systems of those on board, in particular the relationship between the doctor working for the colonial administration and the human freight bound for another colony. The Englishman finds his own culture and beliefs placed in stark opposition to those of his charges and his lack of intercultural awareness is expressed as intolerance and derision.

Other characters are haunted by the supernatural imaginings invoked by the sea journey. The passengers also have terrifying dreams influenced by what they have witnessed on board:

Une heure plus tard, ils dormaient tous profondément sur leurs minces couchettes en paille et au-dessus d'eux planait le même rêve: un songe peuplé de morts vivants, de mer démontée, de bruits sourds et de lumière crue brisant l'obscurité d'une cale (p.96).

The narrative point of view alters abruptly upon Grant's death. The administration is concerned at the loss of so many passengers, with the death of the ship's doctor the most alarming of all. Even the captain now appears to believe that spiritual or mystical forces are at work and suspects that this ship was cursed from the outset. His world view now appropriates the belief system of the colonised:

Depuis huit jours je me demande si ce bateau n'est pas maudit. Cette mer plate et noire à notre départ, je savais que c'était un mauvais présage, et ces rats, tous ces rats, comme une infection qui se propageait dans les cales [...] (p.97).

The source of Dr. Grant's haunting is revealed by the captain when he suggests that conditions at sea became extremely rough after one particular incident. An elderly passenger was so ill his body had started to decompose and Dr. Grant had decided to throw him overboard even though he was still breathing. Even Chotty Lall, a strong man who was the father figure for all the Indians on board, died during the voyage. Haunting is therefore proposed as a legitimate phenomenon and a potential reason for the misfortune that befell the passengers on board. Importantly, not all of those who died were members of the lower castes; Dr. Grant's death is therefore particularly significant for the authorities. He appears to be a victim of madness and haunting resulting from the difficult conditions at sea and from the cursed "black waters". Ironically, the privileged Englishman who scorned the Indian migrants' beliefs succumbs to the threat feared by those in his charge.

The image of Mauritius sustains the passengers throughout the horrific voyage against the fear of illness, of drowning, or of accidentally suffocating their children. "...quand ils avaient peur d'être emportés dans l'enfer du kala pani, ils fermaient les yeux et pensaient à Merich" (pp.93-94). The term *kala pani* recurs throughout the narrative when the Indian workers' perspective is evoked. Repetition of the term ensures its entry

into the reader's subconscious leading the reader to note the ocean as the focus of the Indian passengers' fear and a marker of their religion and culture.

The port is a refuge from the horrors of the ocean voyage and the workers' relief at reaching Port Louis is clearly drawn: "Un port qui leur ferait oublier l'air vicié de la cale, les morts, les grondements du ventre de la mer, l'eau pourrie, les biscuits de chien et les coups de baton" (p.95). Furthermore, Mauritius is seen as the promised-land:

Certains la voyaient de loin, cette terre promise. Dans leurs pensées, les oiseaux auraient guidé le bateau. Eux, les Indiens, auraient suivi ce point flou qui aurait pris forme à mesure que l'Atlas s'en approcherait. (p.94).

This positive, and oneiric, imagery of the promised-land, which recalls the myths evoked when the narrative was set in India, contrasts starkly with earlier images of suffering and haunting. The narrative reveals that the current and previous passengers are equally haunted by memories of their experience. When the narrative moves the action to Mauritius, it gives voice to two workers, Das and Roy, who have been in Mauritius for years and had endured horrific conditions during their voyage to Mauritius. The repetition of these haunting images reinforces the tragedy of the journey across the *kala pani* and how memory, trauma and haunting are cyclical:

Ils côtoyèrent la mort et les fantômes qui revenaient parce qu'ils étaient jetés dans l'eau et qu'on n'avait pas daigné leur offrir une cérémonie aux morts décente. Ils avaient vu tout ça mais ils avaient résisté ensemble (p.121).

It is difficult to evoke the image of the "dark waters" in Mauritian literature without referring to Torabully's theory of *Coolitude*. Inspired by Césaire and Glissant, Torabully (1992, 2002) assesses the poetics of a diasporic identity that acknowledges Indianness and Africanness as constituent elements of a specific Mauritian identity, and places the ocean voyage at the centre of indentured experience. For Bragard (2010) Torabully presents the ocean as a meeting place of cultures as well as a place of memory

for Indo-Mauritians. Bragard also observes that rewriting the ocean crossing has become an important part of understanding creolisation and that consequently representing the *kala pani* has become a rite of passage for many novelists in the Indian Ocean region or the French Caribbean, such as Devi (*L'Arbre Fouet*) and Appanah (*Les Rochers de Poudre d'Or*) (Bragard, 2010: 93).

By emphasising the *kala pani* and its importance to the Indian immigrants' belief system, Appanah writes a comprehensive and convincing portrait of the labourers and others who left India and the enormity of the journey they undertook to come to Mauritius. In portraying their cultural values and spiritual beliefs, she considers the Indian migrants as a collective entity. Evoking their fear and respect for the dark waters of the Indian Ocean, and the colonial regime's derision of these beliefs, allows the author to inscribe the event on the collective consciousness of the reader, and of Indo-Mauritian readers in particular. The reader can relate to the events described, and also to beliefs and myths that they recognise, thereby creating a comprehensive picture of this historical period. As Bragard notes, crossing of the *kala pani* represents their link with India, but also their displacement from the motherland. It signals the first encounter with the colonial system of the plantations and the beginning of creolisation (Bragard, 2010: 92). Indeed, for the Indo-Mauritian community, the *kala pani* is more than an expanse of ocean to be feared, but symbolic of their very foundation as a community within the creolised island society that Mauritius was to become. Appanah's narrative therefore echoes Torabully's coolitude in placing the ocean journey at the heart of indentured history and highlighting the process of voyage and intercultural contact in forging Indian diasporic identity.

6.3 Collective forgetting: *Le Dernier Frère*

Appanah's *Le Dernier frère* relies on two core narratives to represent an historical event: a subjective narrative composed of the narrator's childhood memories, and the more objective newspaper text inserted towards the end of the novel confirming that these events took place. The newspaper article occupies only two and a half pages of the text towards the end of the novel, while the first-person narrative accompanies the reader from Raj's childhood to adulthood, culminating in his discovery of the newspaper. The events in question concern the deportation and internment of Jewish refugees in Mauritius during the Second World War, which had been given little attention in historiography, media or literature until recently. Around 1,500 Jews arrived in Mauritius in 1949, having been refused refuge in Palestine because they did not have the necessary papers to obtain safe asylum. Illegal immigrants, they were deported to Mauritius by the British Foreign Office and British Colonial Office, as Mauritius was still a colony of the British Empire at the time. During their years of internment at the prison in Beau-Bassin, 127 Jewish refugees died and were buried in the St. Martin cemetery.

Raj's first-person narrative offers a vivid and emotional account of the images from the past that have marked him for life. His testimony is a personal account and is informed by the innocence of childhood:

Une file de personnes, très maigres, traînant les pieds en silence, suivaient à pas lents le sentier en terre, puis se sont éparpillées dans la cour. Des hommes, des femmes, des enfants. Tous des Blancs. Leurs vêtements étaient trop grands pour eux, trop longs, sales et chiffonnés, quelque chose clochait dans la façon dont ils étaient accoutrés et ils ressemblaient un peu à des fantômes. Je n'avais jamais vu de Blancs aussi maigres et fatigués – à huit ans, je croyais que les personnes blanches étaient des patrons à l'usine, roulaient dans des voitures et pilotaient des avions mais jamais je n'aurais cru qu'ils pouvaient être enfermés (p.54).

His description of the Jewish families reveals his shock at their unkempt and undernourished appearance. This personal recollection of the first time he observed the

refugees contrasts with the sober account in the newspaper article. The narrative foregrounds the uncertainty of a child's memory and stimulates a more emotional reader response than would a non-fiction narrative. The subjective voice of Raj's narrative is highly emotive and casts judgements on the injustice of the position in which the Jewish refugees found themselves in Mauritius:

La cour de la prison ressemblait à la clairière autour de notre maison, jonchée de débris, il ne restait rien de la pelouse grasse et verte, rien des fleurs douces et colorées. Finalement, cette prison de Beau-Bassin où étaient enfermés des Juifs refoulés de Palestine ressemblait à ce qu'elle était vraiment : une chose monstrueuse (p.108).

The prison is an immense structure lacking any aesthetic refinement and appears monstrous to the younger narrator whose descriptions are vivid and informed by the emotion linked to his friendship with David.

Rather than relying solely on retelling of events from a child's perspective, the author uses the adult voice to allow the older Raj to interpret and to reveal events. The juxtaposition of older and younger narrators resembles a conversation between the two in which answers are provided by the mature narrator. In clearly enunciating "les Juifs refoulés de Palestine", the narrative reminds the reader of this historical reality thereby adding credibility and authenticity to the text. In school, when Raj asks a question in history class about the Jews who came to Mauritius, his teacher is incredulous and treats Raj's question with derision:

Mais il n'y a pas eu de Juifs ici. Qu'est-ce qui te prend d'inventer cela? Tu penses qu'ils sont venus d'Europe à la nage ou quoi? [...] Je me suis rassis tandis que la classe et même le professeur étaient pliés en deux (p. 204).

This exchange underscores that as undocumented chapter in the country's history the events were not widely known within Mauritian society at the time and do not yet merit mention in school textbooks or by teachers. To the uninitiated reader *Le Dernier frère* appears even more significant as a fictionalised account of unacknowledged history.

The act of writing inscribes David's life in a form of living memorial in the imagination of the writer and reader, thereby acknowledging the Jewish refugees who were interned in Mauritius, and challenges the collective memory of Mauritians and their failure to acknowledge this recent aspect of the country's history.

Official acknowledgement of the event is transmitted through the newspaper article near the end of the novel which mentions a commemorative event that recently took place at the St. Martin cemetery. This article, distinguished from the central narrative in a different font, reveals the details of the events concerning the Jewish refugees in Mauritius during the Second World War and places Raj's recurring memories of the death of his young Jewish friend, David, in the wider context of global history. The Jewish survivor who speaks at a commemorative event refers to the complicity of the British Government and the people of Mauritius in the suffering of her people during their four years of internment in Beau-Bassin. She reluctantly agrees to return to the site of her suffering in order to give voice to the memory of those who didn't survive: "Mais je suis là aujourd'hui et je pense à mes amis de *l'Atlantique* et à tous les Juifs qui n'ont pas eu la chance de survivre comme moi" (p.210). The suffering of the Jews who were interned in Beau-Bassin is therefore also placed in the wider context of the plight of all Jewish people during the War. The speaker emphasises the need to remember those who are not present. The newspaper article serves a similar purpose, as does Raj's personal narrative, and ultimately Appanah's novel. In concentrating on one particular event and on the experiences and testimony of particular individuals, they preserve the memory of this period of history, albeit in a fictionalised form, for the Mauritian and wider francophone readership. The newspaper article concludes with a measure of regret: "Malheureusement, nous ne connaissons pas tous les détails de cet épisode dramatique de l'histoire car les archives du Foreign Office sont encore classées"

(p.210). The narrative voice is vague in this passage of the text; the newspaper article may represent the author's own voice. It serves to conclude the narrative neatly and allows Appanah to represent her own or her reader's perspective through the medium of an invented source that instils confidence.

The article acknowledges : “C’est une tranche de l’histoire mondiale qui est, à ce jour, encore méconnue” (p.208). This commentary validates Raj’s memory and reassures the reader that the story may be unfamiliar to many. This paratext is a fictitious article, however, with no reference in footnotes, yet it serves to legitimise the protagonist’s memory of these events. Lionnet (2010) questions the effectiveness of this paratext, suggesting that the article is not entirely realistic in that it contains incorrect details and is incompatible with archival information from that period. The newspaper article’s “questionable status” effectively blurs the boundary between fact and fiction. This fictitious article appears to undermine the attempts by the author to demonstrate the narrator’s struggle with his unreliable memory and the invisibility of the Jews in official Mauritian history. However, Lionnet notes that this could also serve to further another discourse, that of the difficulty in representing truth (2010: 117). She argues that this is not made explicit in the text, however and that while the article suggests finality and “closure”, the narrator misses the opportunity to use it to engage in a deeper discourse on memory (2010: 118).

In referring to historical details and facts Appanah creates a bond of trust with her reader and in foregrounding the suffering of a vulnerable community she encourages a reader responses of sympathy, empathy, or outrage. In so doing, her novel encourages the reader to consider the importance of the event to one or more communities as part of a

wider Mauritian collective consciousness. A sense of collective suffering (in particular of one ethnic group suffering at the hands of the colonial system) engenders a sense of a duty to remember such events collectively and to incorporate them into the cultural and social memory of Mauritius. The fragmented memories of one individual are the starting point for a reflection on the wider questions of Mauritian memory and identity. Appanah's novel encourages a sympathetic reader response, encouraging the reader to remember the importance of the event to one or more communities, or indeed as part of a wider Mauritian collective consciousness. Emphasis on the collective suffering of a vulnerable and marginalised group encourages the reader's sense of duty to consider this little-known part of history as part of the cultural and social memory of Mauritius, as has been the case with other fictional accounts of historical events and periods that constitute the diverse history of the island.

Raj's narration concludes with a promise to transmit the memory of this event to the next generation so that it is not forgotten again: "[...] je me dis que je raconterai tout à l'heure à mon fils l'histoire de David, pour que lui aussi se souvienne" (p.211). His desire to pass on his recollection of events to his son so that he can, in turn, ensure that the continuity of David's story, reflects the author's intention to create a self-perpetuating memorial. The fictitious newspaper article begins the process of constructing a social memory of this event in Mauritian history. Appanah's novel is a continuation of this process. In placing emphasis on the headstone and the newspaper article, the author reminds the reader of the concrete artefacts that allow us to preserve the memory of people and events of significance.

6.4 Village and community memory in *Bénarès*

Memory is represented in Pyamootoo's *Bénarès* on two levels. Firstly, in evoking the memory of a small sugar-producing Mauritian village it examines the socio-economic impact of the decline of the once-prosperous Mauritian sugar industry. Secondly, the novel draws on the cultural memory of the Indo-Mauritian community, in recalling the holy city of Bénarès (Varanasi) in India and its namesake in Mauritius.

Images of the sugar cane fields and derelict windmills provoke feelings of sadness for a bygone era when their home village was prosperous and employment was plentiful. The young prostitutes with whom the central protagonists spend the night are curious about Bénarès and engage the men in conversation about their village. Through this conversation the reader understands why the already small population has declined: “[...] Je suppose que nous sommes environ deux cents. Autrefois nous étions bien plus nombreux, mais autrefois il y avait un moulin à sucre” (p.42). The spectre of the sugar industry hangs over the entire novel. When the sugar industry went into decline thirty years previously, so too did Bénarès, with only the mill's chimney remaining in its entirety, having been renovated recently:

Elle ressemble à un monument aux morts depuis que les propriétaires l'ont retapée. C'était il y a deux ans. Ils n'auraient pas dû ou alors ils auraient dû tout retaper, je pense au bureau de poste, au dispensaire et à l'école bien sûr, parce qu'il faut voir à quel point ces bâtiments sont délabrés (p.43).

The chimney is portrayed as a type of monument. Jimi questions the decision to renovate only part of the mill, surmising that it has been renovated in order to commemorate the owners rather than the former prosperity of the factory. The narrator acknowledges the ability and desire of individuals to create or manipulate history: “[...] c'était sûrement pour qu'on se souvienne d'eux comme des bâtisseurs: «Laisser leurs noms dans l'histoire, voilà ce qui les préoccupe dans la vie»” (p.44). The renovated building is a bone of contention for the group, with Jimi criticising the owners' lack of

neighbourly spirit in refusing to rebuild the rest of the village and allowing it to fall into ruin. The chimney, in particular, embodies the loss of the once-prosperous industry. This remaining part of the mill is regarded as a blight on the landscape. The chimney obscures their view and is now symbolic of the area's lifeless economy. "Elle était maintenant grotesque dans sa démesure, elle s'élevait à pic au-dessus des champs qu'elle écrasait, au-dessus des ruines dont elle gâchait toute la beauté..." (p.43). Furthermore, the chimney obscures the view of the real decaying buildings, which have a beauty of their own. These, the reader learns, are the real memorials to Bénarès's glory days. The buildings represent the villagers' collective past with their link to the sugar industry, local economy and culture.

The sugar industry is represented in Pyamootoo's novel in the context of its decline and its impact on the local villagers and on the island's landscape. While the sugar cane fields are omnipresent, there is little activity associated with sugar production, as embodied in the imagery of the old factories and chimneys as relics of the past. Jimi's romantic memories are facilitated by the presence of the dilapidated mill and its importance for the villagers' collective memory:

Et quand venait le soir, on se ressemblait devant le moulin et on se rappelait le bon vieux temps: l'aube, les yeux embués de sommeil, mais la longue marche à travers les champs qui commençait, et toujours ce sentiment de ne faire qu'un avec la terre, avec les pierres qu'on coupait, et cette enivrante odeur d'absinthe qui montait à chaque fois qu'il pleuvait, et nos pas silencieux dans la boue jusqu'au moulin, dans la fine poussière ou parmi les herbes [...] le moulin qui était notre seul repère, on n'avait qu'à lever les yeux pour s'en rapprocher, pour ne pas s'égarer quand les cannes nous dépassaient, mais le moulin était bien plus qu'un repère, il était comme une maison pour nous, et je me souviens qu'à chaque fois qu'on pouvait se faire photographe, c'était devant le moulin qu'on voulait, c'est vous dire à quel point on l'aimait [...] (p.48).

The mill, which served as a meeting point and backdrop for important events, represented the workers and, by extension, the collective identity of the entire village's population. The mill was a symbol and a reference point for the villagers ("on n'avait qu'à lever les yeux pour s'en rapprocher") and its image is now immortalised in the

many local photographs taken during its period of activity. Here, the novel also recalls the importance of photography in preserving memory.

When one of their female companions, Mina, is asked how she feels about the windmill they see along their route, her reply is influenced by her recently-acquired knowledge of the history of sugar production and its effects on this small village. Employing terms used to describe the buildings earlier in their discussions, she notes: “On dirait vraiment un monument aux morts” a répondu Mina en faisant trembler légèrement sa voix. “Ça me donne des frissons dans le dos” (p.91). Coming at the very end of the novel, Mina’s comments have a dramatic effect, impressing on the reader the desolation of the landscape. In representing the decrepit buildings as deathly reminders of the past, the novel underlines a duty to remember not only the glory days of sugar production, but the harmful effects of the decline of such industries on local populations. The “mise en abyme” technique of a monument described within the monument of the novel is facilitated by the narrative strategy of self-reflection and introspection within the dialogue. Like the decaying sugar factories and rebuilt mills described in the narrative, the novel *Bénarès* memorialises the sugar industry and traces the impact of its decline on the village memory. The dialogues are central to the novel and their didactic form guides the reader towards an understanding of the demise of the industry and its consequences for the local population.

6.5 Bearing witness and reinforcing cultural memory: *Le Silence des Chagos*

Patel’s testimonial novel, *Le Silence des Chagos*, which experiments with form and technique, incorporates local voices and oral history to depict the Chagossians’ experiences and reveals Shenaz Patel’s commitment to representing and preserving their memory. As we have examined in Chapter Four and Chapter Five, personal

memory, nostalgia and trauma are particularly dominant themes in the novel, yet the function of memory is also the subject of scrutiny within the narrative. *Le Silence des Chagos* constitutes above all a call to preserve these events and inscribe them on a contemporary Mauritian collective consciousness. Patel's novel is based on first-person testimonies and historical research, interwoven into a fictional framework. The author acknowledges these testimonies in the dedication: "À Charlesia, Raymonde et Désiré, qui m'ont confié leur histoire". The novel is also dedicated to the Chagossian people "déracinés et déportés de leur île, au profit du «monde libre»".

Patel emphasises the extensive research undertaken and the factual basis of her novel. Her interest in the subject was piqued by a photograph of a group of Chagossian women who were demonstrating outside the British embassy and being treated cruelly by the police. Regarding the responsibility such a task poses to a novelist, Patel insists that the motivation came from the need to show the human face behind real historical events:

Ce que je voulais, c'était d'aller au-delà des faits géopolitiques et au-delà de cette situation dans son contexte géostratégique, et de dire que dans l'histoire il y a des gens, et comment les gens vivent l'histoire et c'était juste ça en fait. Essayer de faire ressentir ce qu'ils peuvent avoir vécu et donc d'essayer d'aller au-delà des dates, des faits, de la chronologie et cetera – (Patel Jul 2007).

Patel's comments indicate that one of the primary motivations for writing is to record the story of those whose ordinary lives are not normally remembered by official history. The author's awareness that the act of writing involves walking a tightrope between appropriating another person's story and doing justice to stories that would otherwise be lost is reflected in the decisions taken at a narrative level. Authorial dilemma is present, for example, in the decision to use a third person narration, and in the unusual device of introducing real-life characters into the text. Some novels, traditionally, carry a foreword disclaiming any relation between fictional characters and real life persons,

for fear of litigation. In the case of *Le Silence des Chagos*, the convention is reversed. The novel is dedicated to Charlesia, Raymonde and Désiré, real people who appear as characters in the text, thereby justifying the degree of subjectivity expressed in the narrative voice.

While testimonial literature frequently uses a first-person narrative voice, Patel's third person narrative voice allows the author some distance from the events described, and the reader some fluidity in interpreting the text as one possible version of events:

Parce qu'il y a deux versions à leur histoire [...] et c'est pour ça que moi j'ai choisi de l'écrire à la troisième personne. Cela me permet [...] de marquer aussi une distance (*ibid*).

The authorial intent is not to present a definitive version of events. In writing the novel in the third person; Patel insists that the author should not try to speak for those whose story she narrates, but to allow the characters to articulate their own experience, or their story:

C'est pour ça que *Le Silence des Chagos* je n'ai pas écrit à la première personne parce que je pense que chacun a sa voix et que nous, les écrivains on a nos voix. Je trouve ça très prétentieux de dire 'je suis la voix de...' et ça me met mal à l'aise et je ne me retrouve pas dans cela (Patel Jul 2007).

Ananda Devi has described her need to speak for those who cannot have their stories heard, such as the marginalised and deprived women frequently appearing as the chief protagonists in her novels, in particular in *Rue La Poudrière*.⁶² Patel, on the other hand, claims to not have any desire to speak for the Chagossians but rather, to allow them to tell their story. The author's subjectivity is, therefore, partially masked by the strategy of using a third-person narrator.

⁶² At a public lecture at the University of Mauritius, in reply to the question posed by Dr. Kumari Issur: "Est-ce que l'auteur est capable de parler pour le subalterne?" Devi stated: "Je veux écrire pour ceux qu'on n'entend pas... même si c'est un peu orgueilleux de le dire ..."

The narrative emphasises the importance of recognising the Chagossians' forced removal as a significant episode in Mauritian history. As a Mauritian citizen Patel feels complicit in their plight, noting that Mauritian independence was achieved at the expense of the Chagossians and therefore that the clearing of Diego Garcia and the exile of Chagossians in Mauritius is now inextricably linked with Mauritian history. Although at first hesitant to tell their story, Patel is emphatic that Mauritius must recognise this episode of its history as an integral part of the formation of the independent state:

J'ai quand même hésité pendant des années en fait, est-ce que ce serait trop de responsabilité ? Est-ce j'aurais peur ? Est-ce que j'ai le droit... Je ne suis pas Chagossienne donc, est-ce que j'ai le droit de raconter leur histoire, c'est ça que je me disais. Parce que tout le monde a la capacité de fermer sa voix à cette histoire. [...] C'aurait été bien que ce soit un Chagossien ou au moins un descendant des Chagossiens qui raconte l'histoire, mais en même temps [...] ça fait partie de mon histoire etil y a aussi le fait que depuis les mois que je connais cette histoire, quand j'entends l'hymne national mauricien ou quand c'est la fête d'indépendance moi je ne le vois plus de la même façon parce que je ne peux pas m'empêcher de penser que c'était sur le dos des Chagossiens qu'on l'a eu (Patel Jul 2007).

The opening chapter of the novel juxtaposes images of war in Afghanistan, the island of Diego Garcia and the arrival of tourists in Port Louis, Mauritius. Contrast is also used to tragic effect in the opening of the novel through the juxtaposition of the forced evacuation of the island with American bombs raining down on innocent families in Afghanistan. The very mention of violence experienced by innocent women and children in Afghanistan on the second page of the novel, after a lyrical evocation of the beauty of the Chagos archipelago and its foundation myths, reveals the author's intention to highlight the greater repercussions of the evacuation of the Chagos islands throughout the narrative. The Chagos Islands archipelago is located in the heart of the Indian Ocean, an area which has had, and continues to have, strategic importance for many interested influential parties, in particular for British and American geopolitical interests and their security concerns in Asia and the Middle East. Patel's narrative also draws parallels between the Chagos Islands and the suffering of children in war and

situations of injustice throughout the developing world, as demonstrated from the vivid imagery of war employed at the outset:

Un enfant lève les yeux [...] A côté de lui, sa mère est allongée, ses grands yeux étonnés ouverts sur ses jambes, étalées pieds en dedans, à deux mètres de son corps. Dans le ciel très haut, deux masses sombres rodent. Un dernier tour au-dessus du tas des ruines embrasées, puis les B52 repartent, allégés de leurs bombes, vers l’océan Indien qu’ils rallieront en quelques minutes à peine, vers leurs bases là-bas, à Diego Garcia, point de mire des Chagos (p.10).

The author therefore relates a local story of violence and exploitation in its global context; the Chagos archipelago is inextricably linked with a war further afield. Patel’s novel reminds readers of the complicity of the governments of larger and more powerful countries in the exploitation of smaller and vulnerable nations and contributes to the memory of an important aspect of recent Mauritian history.

As the novel raises questions about the impact of memory on personal and collective identity, it also provokes the reader to ask whether novelists can or should speak for those whose memory has hitherto remained ignored in cultural production and historical discourse. Ultimately, Patel believes in an author’s right to explore factual events in fiction, on the basis that, in this case, as a Mauritian writer, these events constitute her own national history. Nonetheless, while the author emphasises the difficulties a writer faces in composing a narrative based on testimony and “official” documentation, she also justifies fiction’s role in complementing official history:

Je pense qu’un écrivain, à la base c’est quelqu’un qui a une certaine proximité avec les mots. Je me suis dit que je peux être utile pour quelque chose. [Mais] il y a la responsabilité de ne pas trahir cette histoire et en même temps de savoir où commencer, par rapport à la documentation et tout ça. [...] Paradoxalement je pense que pour moi, le roman est une des façons la plus forte de rendre l’histoire réelle [...] (Patel Jul 2007).

Patel’s use of non-fictitious discourses such as official documents, oral history and interviews, creates a hybrid text merging fiction and non-fiction. Patel regards literary fiction as one of the most convincing means of representing history. Her perspective on the role of literature in the remembrance of Mauritian history recalls Appanah’s desire

to humanise history, in exploring the human experience of history and the impact of major events on individuals and groups. *Le Silence des Chagos* shares the history of the Chagossians in order to raise awareness of the clearing of the Chagos archipelago and resettlement of the islanders. References to the Lémurie foundation myth, Mauritian independence and the conflict in Afghanistan situate the Chagossians' story within a global collective consciousness. In so doing Patel encourages solidarity with the Chagossians.

Remembrance and nostalgia have become a fundamental aspect of Chagossian identity and integral to their experience of life in Mauritius. However, their deportation from the Chagos islands remains unrecognised on an official level by world governments and it remains for novelists such as Patel to help articulate, in literary form, their individual and collective memory of life on their islands and the forced removal from their home, perhaps inspiring future Chagossian writers or historians to do so. The Chagossians' forced displacement occupies a central place in their own collective memory, and, through representations in literature and media, such as in Patel's novel in addition to her journalism, becomes part of a wider Mauritian cultural memory.

6.6 Silenced memory: the absence of slavery in Mauritian fiction

The glaring omission from the wealth of recent literary fiction by Mauritian-born writers is fictional representation of Afro-Mauritian, or Creole, history and society.⁶³ Very few novels feature black Mauritian central protagonists. Slavery is largely absent in contemporary novels in French and the Creole voice is almost inaudible. Many novels address pluralism, communalism, hybridity, or focus on specific ethnic groups

⁶³ "Creole" in the sense of being of African, Malagasy descent.

such as the Indian diaspora or Indo-Mauritian community, but few have a Creole central protagonist apart from Humbert's *Amy*, or Patel's *Sensitive*. In other novels, Creoles play a background role, such as *Les Rochers de Poudre d'Or*, *Les Jours Kaya*, or *À l'autre bout de moi*. Magdelaine (2008) also identifies some Mauritian texts in which the subject is broached and narrated by a Creole voice: *Brasse au vent* and *La Séraphine* by Marcel Cabon and *le Domaine des Hautes Plaines* by Amode Taher, both in French, and *Enn fos simé libéité* by Mohunparsad Bhurtun, written in Créole. Otherwise, references to the period of slavery are largely confined to short passages in novels by authors from other communities. Appanah's *Les Rochers de Poudre d'Or*, Patel's *Le Silence des Chagos* and the poetry of Khal Thorabully address the transportation of indentured workers and refugees. Writers have therefore been influenced by the slave trade which frequently appears as a motif in Indian Ocean literature, with many variations on this theme appearing recently in works by Reunionese and Mauritian writers. According to Magdelaine (2008) such texts employ powerful imagery such as haunting, an epic journey or odyssey, hell or the *kala pani* when evoking the slave trade. Magdelaine reminds us therefore, that while slavery remains a taboo issue in Mauritian society and absent from the contemporary Mauritian novel as a key theme or subject, it is present in some narratives through echoes or images. The reader is reminded of this period of history in the other ocean crossings and forced displacement that characterise later movements to the island. Bragard (2010) sees (as does Magdelaine, 2008) images borrowed from the slave trade as a means of criticising the practice of indentured servitude in *kala pani* literature. She notes that most such narratives are concerned with drawing parallels with other forms of suffering as a means of moving towards a rehabilitated memory and clearer notion of diasporic identity (2010: 87).

It must be noted that to date no novel dealing solely with the period of slavery has yet been published by a contemporary Mauritian writer in French. Patel identifies this shortcoming, arguing for the need to address this key period of history in Mauritian literature in order to preserve its memory:

[...] C'est vrai qu'on n'a pas suffisamment écrit dessus et je ne sais pas pourquoi. Je sais un peu, je pense que c'est une représentation tellement tabou; il y a beaucoup de descendants d'esclaves, mais qui ne veulent pas dire qu'ils sont les descendants d'esclaves. Mais la revendication c'est quelque chose de tellement récent et peut être cela n'est pas assez documenté aussi. Les recherches, elles sont très récentes aussi, et moi, c'est quelque chose qui m'entraîne. En même temps, les recherches, ça prend beaucoup de temps et énormément d'années [...] Cette question de la mémoire, en fait, de la découverte, entre guillemets, est très récente. Et je pense que ce sera important justement d'écrire des romans et des pièces de théâtre. Ça pourrait aider à faire émerger cette mémoire et à l'assumer aussi (Patel Jul 2007).

Patel asserts that novels and plays based on this period of Mauritian history would be instrumental in bringing the memory of slavery into the public domain and in allowing Mauritians to accept this aspect of the country's history as their own. Her comments highlight the importance that can be attributed to literature in the preservation of collective memory of historical events, and of the therapeutic role associated with literature as it facilitates the resurgence of forgotten aspects of a country's history.

When slavery is evoked in a secondary capacity in some novels from the Mascarene Islands, it is represented in its possible associations with the process of indentured labour, but rarely as a subject in its own right. For instance, in *Les Rochers de Poudre d'Or*, "Grand-père" establishes an opposition with the situation of the current indentured labourers from India, representing them as fortunate, considering the hardships endured by the slaves that worked on the plantations before they arrived:

-Ça suffit! Tu pouvais prendre des affaires, non? Vous arriviez avec la certitude de trouver de l'or! Vous aviez tous de sacs avec plein de trucs inutiles dedans! Ta femme? Tu peux l'emmener. Tes enfants aussi. Tu me vois? Je suis venu tout nu. Sans rien. J'avais des chaînes, couillon. Ma femme, je ne sais où elle est. Mes enfants, non plus. Pour nous il n'y avait pas de contrat, pas de paye à la semaine et on mangeait des racines, couillon » (*ibid*).

“Grand-père” is the voice of slavery in the novel and puts forward the argument for recognising the wrong done to slaves brought to work in Mauritius during the period of colonisation by the French. The reader, already aware of the difficulties encountered and hardships endured by the Indian labourers, can nonetheless appreciate that both groups were victims of the colonial machine, however different their experiences. The reader has more access to the story of indentured labour in this novel, despite the brief foray into exploring the slave experience, recounted by a character who is a former slave. Where Appanah’s novel is insightful, however, is in placing the story of indentured labour into its wider geopolitical context. Earlier in the novel, we observe the men of the colonial administration and their disdain for the Indian labourers. Towards the end of the novel, Appanah evokes the phenomenon of *marronage*. The reader is reminded that Mauritius already had a slave population and that the indentured labourers from India were not, therefore, the first group to be exploited by either the French or the British colonial administrations.

The novel contains many blunt passages that are explicit in their denunciation of the inhumanity of the colonial system, for example when Indian workers are compared to other merchantable goods in the hangars: “certains contenaient du sucre et d’autres des hommes, qui attendaient tranquillement, comme le sucre, d’être transportés ailleurs (p.102)”. The debate about the relative suffering of slaves and indentured labourers is raised through the conversation between Carter and Pratt. After Pratt describes them as “des chasseurs guettant leur proie”, Carter insists that they are helping these Indian workers:

Ces hommes ont payé pour venir travailler ici. Les esclaves, c’est une histoire ancienne. D’ailleurs je peux vous dire que dans leur pays ils sont bien moins lotis [...] Vous ne parleriez pas comme ça, si vous aviez vu l’état de misère dans lequel croupissent ces malheureux! Nous faisons une bonne action, Pratt! Regardez ceux qui ont déjà acheté des lopins de terre... (p.103).

This dialogue allows Appanah to engage in the discourse on slavery and indentured labour, and their related themes of victimhood and cultural heritage, and demonstrate that despite the terrible images of suffering described thusfar, indentured labour is not a unique experience within Mauritian colonial history.

We also see the runaway slave, Badri, treated with hostility by one of the former slaves who is angry at the better conditions the Indians have compared to the Africans. He taunts and insults Badri as he compares their different experiences and underlines that the work carried out by the slaves had prepared the land for the sugar cane cultivated by the Indian workers. His outburst allows the reader to consider the different periods of colonisation and draw parallels between the experiences of slavery and indentured labour:

- Avant la canne on était à leur disposition, quoi...tu vois? Les Anglais eux, nous ont fait travailler ! Tu vois ces mains ? Elles ont soulevé des rochers gros comme ça...
- Des rochers ? Vous avez trouvé de l'or ?
 - De l'or? Ha, ha, ha! Vous croyez encore à ces histoires? Non, il n'y avait pas d'or. Ça se saurait petit. Mais crois-moi, si nous n'avions pas été là pour enlever ces rochers, il n'y aurait pas eu autant de cannes à sucre ! (p.151).

Both groups endure hardship, with each justifying his own community's role in the history of Mauritius.

According to Magdelaine (2006), however distinct the character of "Grand-père" may regard slavery and indentured labour, both experiences are considered equal and interchangeable by the reader of such novels, thereby possibly playing down the specific experience of victims of the period of slavery,

Le partage de la traite conduit ensuite au partage du marronnage, qui n'apparaît plus comme le fait des Noirs ou des Malgaches mais aussi des Malbars dans *Les Rochers de Poudre d'Or*, de tous dans *Histoire d'Ashok et d'autres personnages de moindre importance*. Les traumatismes de l'histoire se trouvent ainsi mis en commun. Cela pourrait banaliser l'esclavage, le spolier de sa dimension absolue et unique (2006: 210).

Magdelaine notes that while the experience of slavery may be diminished as a result, a new type of narrative dealing with this social link between slavery and indentured labour is created. That indentured labourers and slaves both experienced violence in fact negates any discourses of victimhood and helps in the reconstruction of a new memory. Her comments regard this as having a negative impact on the memory of slavery, diluting its uniqueness (*ibid*). Slavery is not the key topic in Appanah's novel, however. It serves, rather, as a useful narrative and thematic device in placing the foundation of the Indo-Mauritian community in context.

6.7 Towards an Indian Ocean cultural memory

Island cultural identities, such as those of Mauritius, Réunion and the much larger island landmass of Madagascar, are based on and enriched by foundation myths. In the Indian Ocean region the dominant foundation myth is the myth of “la Lémurie”: Jules Hermann, from Réunion, developed the theory that Lemuria was the continent from which all peoples originated before migrating across the planet. The Mascarene Islands, supposedly located on the site of this ancient continent, are considered to be the natural inheritors of this original birthplace of humanity. This distinguishes the Mascarene Islands as a cultural entity that has no need for a former centre of Empire to establish or legitimise their identity. Joubert (1991) asserts that the Lemuria myth is not particularly novel and draws its inspiration from pre-existing myths such as that of “Atlantide” and numerous others. The novelist Robert Edward Hart drew on Hermann's ideas, but the Lemuria myth effectively gained momentum in the poetry of Malcolm de Chazal. Joubert regards it as problematic that so many intellectuals and writers from the region are drawn to the myth, and in particular Mauritian poets, for whom it holds particular fascination. He argues that a mythical heritage offered by the foundation myth of Lemuria is more prestigious and preferable especially to those ashamed of their

humble origins that can be traced back to the period of slavery or indentured labour. He insists the Lemuria myth in literature manifests itself through an emphasis on the island and the link between inhabitant and the island space and observes this legacy in Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, Baudelaire and more recently, Le Clézio (Joubert, 1991). The Lemuria myth, offering the possibility of an alternate world order, is useful to writers in offering an alternative to their heritage of slavery or indentured labour, often considered shameful. Their Indian Ocean identity suggests a worthier and rather prestigious genealogy, as Racault notes:

Permettre à l'insulaire de s'éprouver non plus Européen déraciné exilé à la périphérie du monde, mais habitant autochtone d'un lieu de centralité auquel le rattache une glorieuse filiation, telle serait aussi la fonction du mythe lémurien (2007 : 237).

Racault insists that the myth was developed by those displaced during the colonial period. Like Joubert, he acknowledges the sense of prestige and heritage the myth accords present-day societies:

Né dans un environnement colonial, du sentiment de désancrage et, en réaction, de l'affirmation d'identité de descendants d'Européens expatriés, le mythe lémurien est bien un mythe « créole », si l'on accepte pour une fois de donner à ce terme le sens « ethnique » - c'est-à-dire essentiellement blanc – qu'il n'a pas pourtant d'ordinaire aux Mascareignes. Se réclamer, en somme, d'une filiation « lémurienne » ou du moins d'une prestigieuse ascendance, c'est s'inscrire dans le registre de la quête généalogique, de la continuité de la lignée [...] (2007: 267).

The Lemuria myth is centred on the notion of the islands as the cradle of humanity. The area is seen to possess a history infinitely richer and more ancient than that of Europe. Joubert (2001) notes that Camille de Rauville's general concept of *Indianocéanisme*, published in 1961, brought together many texts written in or about the islands of the Indian Ocean, and identified certain areas of common interest between these texts. De Rauville believed that these texts expressed an emotional appreciation of the tropical qualities of the islands, cultures in contact and racial mixing. (He also mentions the rebirth of "civilised" visitors after their experiences on desert islands, recalling the

familiar trope of the transformative power of islands). De Rauville's *Indianocéanisme* can be read, therefore, as an extension of the myth of Lemuria.

Some contemporary Mauritian novels draw on the myth to evoke the island's cultural and historical ties to the wider Indian Ocean region. Patel's *Le Silence des Chagos*, for example, highlights the location and geographical vulnerability of the Chagos archipelago: "Chagos. Au milieu de l'océan Indien, un archipel en équilibre précaire, dans la courbe arquée de la dorsale médio-indienne" (p.9). The narrator describes how the islands were formed by volcanic eruptions and violent movements from below the ocean, and refers to the Lemuria foundation myth:

Témoins de fractures anciennes, de soulèvements de l'océan, de brutales éruptions volcaniques, de soubresauts telluriques qui fragmentèrent violemment l'hypothétique Gondwana, ce grand continent primitif qui se serait étendu entre l'océan Indien et l'océan Pacifique, pour donner naissance à la mythique Lémurie. Elle même démembrée, explosée, engloutie pour ne plus laisser que des traces éparses quelques îles affleurant sur la mer (p.9).

The Chagos archipelago was created from the breaking up of the Gondwana landmass, like the other islands of the Indian Ocean. Such small islands are not the most convincing proof of their larger origins: "Les Chagos ont-elles participé de ce mythe? Gardent-elles dans leur socle, sous leur couronne de corail, le souvenir ancien de ces convulsions de la terre, de ce déchirement fondateur?" (pp.9-10). Emphasising the significance of Lemuria and Gondwana inscribes the Chagos archipelago in the greater context of the Indian Ocean region and their "déchirement fondateur" from Gondwana, and in a possible shared heritage of all islands of the Indian Ocean, and underscores the duty of all neighbouring island nations, including Mauritius, to concern themselves with the welfare of the Chagossians.

While other novelists look towards countries with ancestral ties to Mauritius (India, in the case of Devi, and the United Kingdom, in the case of Marie-Thérèse Humbert), Le Clézio explores Indian Ocean origins in his Mauritius-based novels. Racault considers that family memory (in Le Clézio, for example) is indissociable from island identity, which is in turn influenced by an awareness of the wider Indian Ocean area. He identifies *Paul et Virginie* as a significant reference point for the majority of Mauritian-based novels, especially those that consider the island as a key element of the foundation of the Self. It is important to note, however, that the authors of the novels evoked by Racault, such as Le Clézio, write from a position of exile from the island. Mauritius-based authors show a move beyond the influence of this seminal text towards a more local subjectivity. According to Racault (2007), the problematic posed by Le Clézio's *Le Chercheur d'Or* and also by *Voyage à Rodrigues* is comparable to that posed by Indian Ocean literature in general, in how to go beyond exile in order to find one's place in a country and within a family history. He sees this theme as central to *Paul et Virginie* in which Madame de la Tour and Marguerite have been forced to leave their home country. Their children will be the first Creole generation, for whom the island is their native soil. Le Clézio also expresses the problematic relationship with Europe and with the island. This nurtures his memory of a double exile: the father who had to leave the island but also, further in the past, his ancestor's exile to the island. This unease is evident in *Voyage à Rodrigues* and *Le Chercheur d'or*, which both involve the search for the story of his grandfather. Racault posits that this desire to rediscover one's ancestry and island heritage are common features of Indian Ocean identity: "Mais cette réappropriation d'une lignée interrompue passe aussi par le réinvestissement imaginaire de l'espace des îles et d'une identité qu'on pourrait appeler l'identité indianocéanique" (2007: 235).

Racault also identifies the reworking of the centre and periphery dynamic as a key element in the identification of an Indian Ocean identity in Le Clézio, for example in *Le Chercheur d'Or* or *La Quarantaine* in which the Indian Ocean is presented as the central area and Europe the periphery. Racault (2007) has also demonstrated the extent to which Le Clézio's Mauritius-based novels are situated in an Indian Ocean reality, as revealed by the topography and toponymy evoked in the narratives. The action takes place on many recognisable islands which are regarded as important components of a geographical and cultural community with Mauritius as centre. Indian Ocean identity is embodied most effectively in *Le Chercheur d'Or* in the character of Ouma, the daughter of an Indian woman and a Manaf man. Raised in France in the Catholic tradition she represents the meeting of Asia, Africa and Europe, just as the islands of the Indian Ocean themselves are the physical meeting ground of these cultures and traditions. In this narrative, myths from Greek antiquity merge with those of the former runaway slaves and in particular, the memory of one of Ouma's own ancestors with whom the narrator identifies. Racault draws links between this revelation and the development of the myth of pirates and buried treasure in the islands of the Indian Ocean.

La Mothe considers that Le Clézio's *La Quarantaine* places itself at the centre of an interrogation on the history of the world, and concludes that:

Le double retour aux sources a donc parfaitement réussi. Mais sous la relation poétique de ces voyages, se déploient une allégorie de la condition planétaire et une invitation à la surmonter. Dans toute leur conduite, les narrateurs successifs du récit de Le Clézio formulent une objurgation à reprendre pied sur ses origines, à reformuler notre histoire individuelle et partant l'Histoire tout entière (La Mothe, 2001: 511).

Can we assert that Le Clézio refers to a greater human history in the manner in which he employs many sub-narratives and intertexts in the composition of the novel? In rediscovering individual origins, is this an argument for the renegotiation of all our histories? One aspect of the novel that appears to support this viewpoint is the evocation of many human experiences, historical periods and cultural figures. *La Quarantaine* is not only the story of the protagonist's interrupted journey back to the ancestral home, but also evokes the individual histories, experiences and cultures of the French, English, Indian, and Mauritian characters they meet. Through characters such as Suryavati, Léon le Disparu and Amalia, the author addresses the negotiation of cultures in contact and the role of intercultural dialogue in working towards a clearer understanding and celebration of a greater Creole identity. The ocean occupies a key role in the text highlighting distance and exile, but also the link between continents and islands.

The Indian Ocean is a linking mechanism for its diverse island communities. Given the continuing movement of people between islands and from island to mainland and the resultant dissolving or meshing of cultures, and because the phenomenon of globalisation can dilute island identity, there is the risk of island memory being forgotten. Cultural exchange is one positive outcome of the process of globalisation. Yet, with the influence of immigration and migration, what marks the people of a particular island out as different? In the context of the Indian Ocean, and a greater Indian Ocean cultural memory, it is precisely this movement of peoples that has become the core identifying trait, aside from the legend of Lemuria. Migration has left an indelible mark on Mauritian fiction, with its representations of voluntary and involuntary travel throughout the country's history (in Le Clézio, Appanah, Patel, or Humbert, for example). According to Hay (2006) the layering of stories creates and

reinforces a culture that can link the past to the present thereby ensuring continuity of memory. However, this integrity can easily be destroyed by changes that do not reflect historical or communal meanings of place (2006: 33). Similarly, emphasis given to aspects common to the islands of the Indian Ocean, formerly the continent of Gondwana, such as a shared heritage of colonisation and inward and outward migration, allow us to trace the foundation and propagation of an Indian Ocean cultural memory, primarily through literature.

6.8 Conclusion

Appanah's historical narrative about the movement of indentured labourers from India to Mauritius, *Les Rochers de Poudre d'Or*, relies on symbolism and references to cultural values to highlight collective experiences and reinforce collective memory. Repeated references to the dark waters of the ocean (the *kala pani*) are representative of the traumatic journey the Indian indentured labourers undertook to reach the island colony and function as an emblem or trope of their experiences. Furthermore, in drawing on a range of characters as representative of different roles within the period of indentured labour from India, Appanah's novel reflects on the collective experience of the colonialism in Mauritian history and by extension its impact on contemporary society. In a similar vein, Appanah's second historical narrative, *Le Dernier frère* addresses a forgotten or hidden aspect of recent Mauritian history and considers the impact of this on Mauritian collective memory and identity. Pyamootoo's *Bénarès* evokes the collective memory of a small village community and its cultural ties to an ancestral homeland in India. The novel reveals his characters' increasing awareness of the consequences of the sugar industry's decline for the Mauritian economy and landscape. The ending of the novel allows the reader to retain a striking ghostly image of economic and structural desolation. Pyamootoo's narrative also ties in Mauritius'

history with India and the foundation of the Indo-Mauritian community in drawing parallels and contrasts between the village in Mauritius and its Indian namesake (as examined in Chapter Two). *Le Silence des Chagos* is a product of the collective memory of the displaced Chagossians, yet by situating their plight within Mauritian and global affairs Patel's novel inscribes it on both local and international collective memory. The narrative urges the reader to reflect on the events and to consider the responsibility of different agents in the suffering of the Chagossian people.

We have also examined the absence of explicit references to Creole memory in contemporary novels and how, rather, some novels echo the slave trade in evoking other historical phenomena from the island's history. This layering of memory is visible in representations of indentured labour, which is portrayed through the prism of the slave trade. Lastly, the island has been considered within the historical context of the wider Indian Ocean region with reference to the Lemuria foundation myth in particular. In focusing on their prestigious heritage as the cradle of civilisation, island societies such as Mauritius can exclude the negative or shameful aspects of their history, such as colonialism and slavery, in favour of this positive concept as a marker of identity that unites all peoples of their diverse region.

In the novels examined in this chapter, the reader cannot but consider the events in question; key events are remembered and links, contrasts or parallels are drawn between the past and the present. Representations of the past elicit feelings of sympathy from the observer or reader for others, whom they may consider ancestors but whom they never actually knew. Literature, therefore, is an especially suitable medium in which to represent the difficulties, pain, suffering and despair that past generations experienced.

Tropes can be effective in reminding the reader of a key theme or aspect of history, and invented characters used to embody certain individual or group experiences. Memory plays an essential role, by bridging a gap for those displaced, uprooted or disconnected from the society or community to which they seek to belong. While group or collective memory can be regarded as divisive or competitive, as they are ethno-specific, Indian Ocean cultural memory, on the other hand, offers the possibility of recalling a shared and unique past for Mauritians and their island neighbours.

The novels discussed demonstrate the transcultural aspect of Mauritian literature and its echoes with Torabully's *coolitude*. *Coolitude* emphasises the importance of the ocean voyage. The novels discussed show that the voyage is central to many groups who were brought to the island, not only for the descendants of indentured labourers. The corpus reveals the repetitive nature of colonialism in foregrounding the many involuntary journeys to the island, with indentured labourers in particular echoing the slave trade voyages earlier in Mauritius's history, and the Chagossian and Jewish deportees also as pawns in the colonial machine. These common experiences underline the creolised nature of Mauritian society and its multifaceted history.

**CONCLUSION: TOWARDS HETEROGENEOUS CREOLISED MAURITIAN
ISLAND IDENTITY IN CONTEMPORARY WRITING**

The Mauritian case shows that rich literature can emerge from fractured or traumatised societies. Recent novels from Mauritius address challenging topics in their negotiation of contemporary Mauritian identities, exploring the concealed histories of their protagonists and how these intertwine with the history of their island. The authors studied draw on the island, and memory of the island, as narrative strategies and themes. They also draw together the different strands of Mauritian society in order to facilitate the reconstruction and validation of a multifarious Mauritian identity in literature. The island is a strong unifying, yet varied, motif that represents, amongst other aspects, a promised land, a site of exile, a garden of Eden, a transformative space, or the promise of a more harmonious, intercultural future. The island is a core marker of identity in Mauritius as the one key aspect of Mauritian life common to its inhabitants and those of neighbouring islands in the Indian Ocean. The corpus reflects the cultural fusion and resultant heterogeneity in Mauritian society born of the successive waves of forced or voluntary immigration to the island, and the creation of new cultures with their shifting identities which accept but break with the past and identify with their intercultural island society.

We have seen how figurative and literal representations of the island challenge the reader's perception of Mauritius. In Chapter Two we examined how physical aspects of the island are dominant and omnipresent in Mauritian island narratives. We learned that the island's distinct topography and marginality influence the writing process and frame the narrative, to the extent of influencing protagonists' behaviour, with the confined space of the small island amplifying tensions and entrenching divisions within the pluralistic island society. In considering issues of centrality and marginality we saw that in Mauritian island narratives the island is frequently evoked in relation to other

spaces, as a postcolonial space on the periphery or as a centre to outlying island spaces. In two particular cases we also observed reworkings of the postcolonial centre-periphery dichotomy with the small postcolonial island of Mauritius a centre of reference for those living in the *métropole* or ancestral lands.

As well as facilitating a spatial framework for plot, the island is also a consistent trope in contemporary Mauritian writing, and as such, island imagery was studied in Chapter Three. We showed that Mauritian authors of the contemporary period, while aware of the traditional island imagery in literature, experiment with portrayals of islandness. They appropriate island imagery, sometimes subverting traditional representations of the island - either through the use of familiar imagery or more restrained metaphors - to show the specificity of Mauritian life, other times adopting such metaphors to highlight universal aspects of humanity.

Memory is the narrative driving force behind expressions of dislocation and displacement, and a key element in individual and community identity. Chapter Four merged the two core themes of island and memory in exploring how memory of place is conceptualised, in particular how the island influences personal and collective memory. The island is evoked as a remembered object from a position of exile, or return. Movement to and from the island - the initial voyage and settlement on the island, departure, return, - is a frequent characteristic of the personal and cultural memory of Mauritius. The island also appears as a memorising subject that captures and preserves the histories of settlement and movement that have marked its topography. Furthermore, as a site of memory it is remembered as a negative and unforgiving space that reminds the protagonist of his place within a wider historical context and the repetitious nature of history in the Indian Ocean region.

Chapter Five examined the diverse manners in which personal memory is broached in contemporary Mauritian novels. A sense of identity in the present is evoked through recalling and reinterpreting individual or family events and historical phenomena. We see how family members seek to reconstruct a preferable identity by relying on selected aspects of their past. Narrative continuity is maintained through a variety of texts and artefacts. The struggle to negotiate personal memory and to assert personal identity can be read as a metaphor for Mauritian identity in all its complexity. Over-reliance on ancestry and ethnic affiliation as key markers of identity, however, is shown to be potentially destructive for the individual, the family, the community and ultimately Mauritian society.

In Chapter Six we developed our study of memory by exploring collective memory in contemporary Mauritian writing. We examined how individuals and groups articulate their past and their link to Mauritius, another ancestral home-place or to the wider Indian Ocean area. Seminal events are remembered and links, contrasts, or parallels are drawn between the past and the present. Tropes can be effective in reminding the reader of a key theme or aspect of history, and invented characters used to embody certain individual or group experiences. We also considered the problematic relationship between slavery and other historical events in Mauritian literary imaginary and cultural memory. This sharing of memory ensures that literature is part of the process of cultural memory. Literature, in inventing or reworking stories about the past, can contribute to the formation of cultural patterns that then serve to reinforce national or cultural identity. It fulfils the Mauritian reader's desire for an accessible, if fictionalised, history of their country. Literature focuses on the personal lived experience, thereby evoking a

sympathetic reader response and a sense of reliving history, exploiting the reader's emotional reaction to narrative as opposed to detached academic prose.

Many of the novels in our corpus evoke colonisation and its effects on Mauritius. Yet we have also seen an increasing tendency to represent globalisation and its impact on small island countries. Contemporary Mauritian fiction in French, therefore, makes a valuable contribution to a wider understanding of displacement and settlement in the global context with its evocation of displaced communities within Mauritian society and the resultant lack of cohesion and social fragmentation. *Les Rochers de Poudre d'Or* examines the displacement of the Indian indentured plantation workers and the consequent foundation of the Indo-Mauritian community in Mauritius. *Le Dernier Frère* tells a lesser-known story of a smaller displaced community, a Jewish group of refugees with no link to Mauritius interned on the island during the Second World War. Patel's *Le Silence des Chagos* outlines the impact of geopolitical interests on smaller and less-influential nations. Pyamootoo's *Bénarès* explores Mauritius's place in the wider world and its links with Indo-Mauritians' place of origin, and also its economic vulnerability to market forces. Devi's *Soupir* highlights regional migration within Mauritius and neighbouring islands. Berthelot's characters' literal or imagined journeys reveal Mauritius's attachment to the wider world through voluntary migration to Europe, Canada and Australia, for example. Humbert's narratives also evoke movement to and from the island of Mauritius and the cultural and social difficulties that result from exile and emigration. These novels therefore highlight the perpetual movement of people to and from the island of Mauritius throughout its history. Furthermore, the corpus reflects the diversity of authors and subject matter that characterise recent writing from Mauritius.

Not only is physical displacement common to most of the novels in the corpus, in terms of voluntary or forced exile, but metaphorical dislocation or non-belonging are also powerful tropes in recent Mauritian novels. A sense of alienation within society is powerfully evident in contemporary Mauritian writing in French, illustrated notably by Devi (*Pagli*, *Soupir*, *Le Voile de Draupadi*, and *Ève de ses décombres*), Appanah (*La Noce d'Anna*, *Blue Bay Palace*), de Souza (*La Maison qui marchait vers le large*, *Les Jours Kaya*, *Le Sang de l'Anglais* and Humbert (*À l'Autre bout de moi* and *La Montagne des Signaux*). Such evocations of non-belonging (characterised by hybridity, otherness, marginalised female characters, urban/rural divisions, or socio-economic disadvantage amongst others) place contemporary novels within the sphere of topics inherent in postcolonial literature.

The different ethnic groups within Mauritian society are immortalised in recent Mauritian fiction in French. The Creole community is the focus of de Souza's *Les Jours Kaya*. The Chagossians are the subject of Patel's *Le Silence des Chagos*. The Franco-Mauritian plantocracy are represented in *Le Sang de l'Anglais* and to a lesser extent in *Bénarès* and Humbert's *À l'autre bout de moi*. The Chinese community is evoked in de Souza's *La Maison qui marchait vers le large*, *Ceux qu'on jette à la mer*, and Patel's *Sensitive*.⁶⁴ Rather than endorsing any notion of a pure culture of origin, today's generation of Mauritian writers acknowledge the creolisation that is integral to contemporary Mauritian identity and portray this aspect of society in their writing. De Souza's corpus, in particular, reveals his interest in historical and contemporary realities and eagerness to engage with the complexities of Mauritian society and identity,

⁶⁴ The latter two novels have not been included in the corpus.

without resorting to racial or ethnic stereotypes. His Mauritius is a multicultural, indeed intercultural, island, in which different communities co-exist *and* interact.

Representations of ancestry and lineage in literature can often be associated with myths of purity of origins. However, as demonstrated in this thesis, the fictional works of contemporary Mauritian novelists writing in French would appear to embody the phenomenon of creolisation as defined by Magdelaine (2006) with its process of constant evolution and change, with one eye on history. Samia in *Le Portrait Chamarel* for example, negotiates her family history without dwelling on it as the one core marker of her identity. De Souza's urban settings embody cultural mixing, while shying away from idealising the rainbow society as portrayed by official Mauritius. Where his characters embrace their ancestry as the key constituent element of identity we see their quests doomed to failure. Humbert presents similar negative portrayals of ancestor idealisation, while acknowledging the difficulties in crossing fixed ethnic and social class lines. Historical narratives concentrating on one particular community nonetheless present their arrival in Mauritius as a building block of the country's creolisation such as Appanah's *Les Rochers de Poudre d'Or*. Devi's novels, however, remain rooted within one particular community and retain largely negative portrayals of the island as a hostile postcolony, especially for female characters.

Some of the narratives studied place the protagonists at the centre of critical junctures in Mauritian history. While the story of indentured labour is well-known in Mauritius and a key aspect of the construction of a collective memory and identity for the Indo-Mauritian community, the story of the Jewish internees is less widely recognised and consequently has less impact on the emergence of a post-independence national

identity. Appanah's *Les Rochers de Poudre d'or* treats a central aspect of Indo-Mauritian history, the journey from homeland to exile in Mauritius. It fictionalises the history of a particular community in Mauritian society and its role in the development of the colony and post-colony. In Appanah's second historical narrative *le Dernier frère* and Patel's *Le Silence des Chagos*, the call to remember is explicit, with the very themes of memory and memorials emphasised throughout the narratives. The novels urge the reader to remember significant events and to embrace them as as part of a collective remembrance of a shared Mauritian history. In so doing, the authors look beyond ethno-specific notions of identity. Being Mauritian means taking on the various strands of that country's history.

Devi acknowledges the difficult relationship many Indo-Mauritians have with the memory of their ancestors' departure from India and arrival in Mauritius, and their role in the emergence of a post-independent identity. Observing a measure of idealisation of the past and a sense of victimhood within the Indo-Mauritian community, Devi remarks:

La mémoire est trop douloureuse [...] (l'esclavage) c'est quelque chose de très tabou dans la mémoire. On doit confronter la mémoire et la maîtriser pour mieux aller en avant. Par contre il y a d'autres personnes, les indo-mauriciens, qui vivent tellement dans la mémoire du passé qu'ils ne construisent pas une nouvelle identité. Ils restent figés dans une mémoire qui les empêche de se souvenir des autres...c'est une mémoire reconstruite, une reconstruction de la mémoire, parce qu'ils oublient qu'ils avaient envie de partir, qu'ils avaient rejeté le pays, que le pays les avait rejetés et donc ils venaient vers Maurice ou vers les autres villes avec l'espoir d'un avenir différent, et un avenir nouveau. Donc ils se tournaient vers l'avenir alors que leurs descendants se tournent vers le passé [...] On a un rapport très difficile avec la mémoire (Devi Jun 2007).

Reliance on the past has led to their refusal to renegotiate a creolised island identity, as we see in her some of her novels. However, this is not to say that the Indo-Mauritians are reluctant to consider themselves creolised (Erikssen, 2007, argues that all groups

on the island have been culturally creolised to some extent) but that Devi focuses on social issues within that distinct ethnic group within Mauritius.

It should be noted that all communities have shared some degree of violence at the beginning of their life on the island. This negates any claims on unique victimhood and allows for the construction of a *mémoire exemplaire*, according to Magdelaine (2006: 210), who also argues that in more recent Mauritian (and Reunionese) literature, slavery, indentured labour and colonisation are put forward as constitutive parts of the self, demonstrating an awareness of creolisation and a break with the past. Magdelaine's assessment of creolisation in island texts emphasises the future and sees in contemporary texts a break with the trend of dwelling on purity of origins. While it is true that such novels engage with the island's multi-faceted history and identity, their representations of Mauritius's key historical events are situated firmly in the past, encouraging the reader to explore the building blocks of today's creolised society.

A notable omission from the wealth of recent literary production in Mauritius and abroad by Mauritian-born writers, in the French language, is the representation of Afro-Mauritian, or Creole, history. Slavery and the slave trade are key constitutive elements of Mauritian history, yet remain on the margins of literary representation. Writers such as Patel and Devi acknowledge this lacuna and mention the need to bring this chapter of Mauritian history into the contemporary literary novel in French in order for it not to be forgotten. Yet, the same authors have also shown a reluctance to engage with this very subject in their own writing. Ownership of memory is a key aspect of this difficulty or unwillingness to address slavery in fiction. Authors are reluctant to portray the period for fear of mis-representing it or not doing the subject enough justice in their writing.

This argument does not hold water, however, when we consider how, for example, Patel felt a duty to represent the plight of the Chagossians. The very fact of being a Mauritian citizen and seeing the suffering of a community living in Mauritius is sufficient motivation for Patel to write the novel. More important still is the culpability of the Mauritian government. The act of writing helps to acknowledge this wrong, yet ownership of memory remains a delicate issue in Mauritius, and consequently in Mauritian literature, with writers seeking to avoid reopening debates on competitive victimhood.

In engaging with their country's recent history, contemporary Mauritian authors give voice to and memorialise their country's unique past, thereby reinforcing a unique contemporary Mauritian identity. In removing the country's history from a totalising Eurocentric historical narrative, the Mauritian novel separates itself from the tradition of colonial narratives which recount history from the viewpoint of the dominant colonial power of the day and idealise islands. Contemporary novels allow for a story of Mauritius to emerge from the viewpoint of those who have lived through its history and live through its present: the colonised and the inhabitants of the postcolonial island.

Diversity of subject matter, narrative voice and authorship characterises this exciting new contemporary Mauritian writing in French. De Souza salutes this variety in contemporary Mauritian literature and the many contrasting ways in which authors represent their island in their writing, signaling a break with the past and the desire for acceptance abroad that characterised earlier fiction from Mauritius:

Je crois que cette génération a soudain décidé quelque part dans sa tête, que ça valait la peine de raconter des choses plus à l'époque. On croyait devoir justifier cette existence aux yeux du monde extérieur à l'époque, donc, c'était nécessairement touristique, écrire avec un peu d'exotisme, puis, soudain, par exemple, Barlen Pyamootoo raconte son histoire de deux hommes qui vont faire leur tour à Port-Louis la nuit. Voir Maurice la nuit, c'est quand même

drôlement différent de ce qu'on avait fait auparavant. [...] Ananda Devi noircit tout ce qu'elle touche, donc elle a écrit des romans extrêmement sombres. Je suppose que ça donne une autre image d'une Maurice qui est de son intérieur. Et ce sont des écrivains et romans tellement intéressants. Ils sont très différents les uns des autres (de Souza Jun 07).

Contemporary Mauritian fiction demonstrates writers' awareness of the interminable cycle of movement and change in small island societies from colonisation to globalisation, to which de Souza refers in his closing sentence of *La Maison qui marchait vers le large*: "Les temps changent, les choses bougent" (p.331). We have examined thirty years of writing which explores trauma, dislocation, inequality, oppression and inexorable upheaval, and traced an evolution from idealised past to problematic present with a sliver of optimism for the future. The creative method of these writers is informed by memory, ancestry, a sense of historical and geographical place, and the very act of writing itself. These contemporary authors reject the imposition of outsiders' viewpoints on Mauritian history on their literature. We are witnessing, therefore, the development of a national literary canon in Mauritius, a type of nationalising literature. Local writers have adopted strategies to distinguish between their own discourse and the canonical texts of world literature. Publishing their work in Europe allows contemporary Mauritian novelists writing in French to integrate their corpus into a wider body of world literatures thereby revealing the history and contemporary realities of Mauritius and its creolised island identity to a wider French-language readership worldwide. World literatures, and island narratives in particular, can only be all the richer for this.

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APPENDIX

Chronology of Mauritius

The island now known as Mauritius is first visited by Arab explorers in the 9th century. They name it Dinarobin.

1505-1512 The true date of their first discovery of Mauritius is disputed, but Portuguese explorers were the first Europeans to explore the Indian Ocean and their voyages of discovery in the region are dated to this period.

1589 Beginning of the Dutch settlement of the island, which the Dutch name Mauritius after their prince Mauritius Van Nassau. The Dutch settlers introduce the sugar cane crop.

1710 The Dutch abandon their failing colony, which is then largely uninhabited - apart from some runaway slaves - until 1715.

1715 Guillaume Dufresne d'Arsel takes possession of the island in the name of King Louis XIV, naming it 'Isle de France'.

1715 – 1810 The period of French colonisation of Mauritius.

1735 Beginning of a period of consolidation with the arrival of Bertrand-François Mahé de la Bourdonnais, considered the true founder of the French colony. Port Louis becomes a significant port and important naval site. Sugar cane is cultivated again. The workforce is largely composed of slaves brought from East Africa, working under harsh conditions.

1810 The last French governor capitulates after British forces defeat the French at Cap Malheureux. The new administration, under the first British governor Sir Robert Townsend Farquhar, preserves the status of the French language and the religious and cultural customs on the island. The island is renamed Mauritius.

From 1830 The British consider abolishing slavery and look to secure a workforce to ensure the continued economic success of the colony. Indentured labourers are brought

from India. As the slaves before them, these “Coolies” also endure harsh conditions on the plantations.

1835 - 1909 Approximately 450,000 Coolies are brought to the island, most of whom remain in Mauritius after being released from their contracts.

1909 marks the end of indentured labour from India.

1940 Following a row over illegal immigration, 1,584 Jewish migrants destined for Palestine are deported by the British to Mauritius, travelling on board the ‘Atlantic’ ship. They spend the rest of the war in a detainment camp in Beau Bassin. 128 internees die at the camp and are buried in the Jewish section of the Saint Martin nearby.

1965 Britain purchases the Chagos archipelago from Mauritius and formally establishes it as a ‘British Indian Ocean Territory’.

1966 Most of the Chagos islanders (about 1,500 in total) are deported, mainly to Mauritius and the Seychelles, to facilitate the construction of a large strategic American military base on the largest island Diego Garcia in a deal negotiated between Britain and the USA.

1967 Elections are organised in August to decide whether Mauritius will remain under British administration or become independent.

1968 Mauritius officially becomes an independent state in March 1968.

1971 The First Export Processing Zone is created in Mauritius and the textiles sector develops, creating significant employment.

1979 Cyclone Claudette causes devastation.

1992 Mauritius is officially declared a Republic, within the British Commonwealth.

1994 Cyclone Hollanda leaves 1,400 people homeless and causes massive damage.

1999 In February, popular seggae singer Kaya (Joseph Reginald Topize) dies in police custody following his arrest for smoking marijuana at a pro-legalisation rally. His death sparks riots and amplifies existing ethnic and economic tensions.

2008 The British House of Lords upholds a UK government appeal against court ruling that families expelled from the Chagos Islands are entitled to return home, putting an end to the Chagossians' long-running UK legal battle to return. The legal dispute continues.

