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An Interview with Ananda Devi

What is the place of English(ness) in your novels?

English and French are the first two languages I learned at school, and, although I have always written in French, I can say I am truly trilingual in English, French, and Mauritian Creole. Although all my novels are in French, these other languages, as well as Hindi, can be felt as an undercurrent within the text, sometimes in the form of syntactic structures (Creole in *La Vie de Joséphin le Fou*), in dialogues (Creole in *Pagli* and *Soupir*, Hindi in *Pagli* and *Indian Tango*, English in *Indian Tango* and *Les Jours vivants*), or even simply in the cadence of a sentence. English is mostly there in *Indian Tango* and *Les Jours vivants*, the first being set in India and the second in London. Furthermore, as I read as many books in English as in French, there is a distinctive presence of some of the authors I love hovering over my books: T. S. Eliot, Toni Morrison, J. M. Coetzee, to name three of the most important. I have quoted the poetry of T. S. Eliot in two of my novels, *L'Arbre fouet* and *Les Jours vivants* [*Living Days*]. *Soupir* is a novel that “owes” a lot to Toni Morrison. *La Vie de Joséphin le Fou* has a certain debt in its conciseness and in the main character’s utter loneliness to *Life and Times of Michael K*, by Coetzee. In short, all the languages I grew up with have a place in my writing, even though I write in French.

Bearing in mind plurality of languages used in Mauritius, what is your idea of “mother tongue”?

This is one of the questions that is most frequently asked of me and that I find most difficult to answer! It would take more than a few lines to explain my idea of this concept, which is why I wrote a paper for a conference at the University of Stockholm, “French Language and Multilingualism,” about this very subject. In this paper, I wrote the following: “Is it because I started to write at a very young age, around seven or eight years old, first in English and French and then almost exclusively in French, that the loss of Telugu (my mother’s language) did not seem so important to me until one day, as an adult, I was forced to face this void? For it is indeed a void. The loss of the mother tongue is the exact opposite of the presence of a baby in a mother’s womb: it is a hollowing out, a tearing apart, an uprooting of something that had so strongly, so powerfully connected these two bodies, these two people, these two lives. Perhaps I avoided thinking about it in order not to understand that it might have been a rejection not of the language only, but also of my mother’s sadness? I only came to understand much later that this had been a source of pain for her... I would now say that French as my writing language has filled in this void, and writing has become my mother tongue...”

When writing *Le Sari vert*, was it the character, such as Bissam Sobnath, that appeared to you first? What was the beginning of the writing process?

Le Sari vert was partly inspired by the main character, but the origin of the novel is the real-life event that occurs towards the end of the novel. When I was a child, my mother told me about a young woman of her family who had just given birth and who had got up to cook the evening meal. When her husband came back home, he saw that she had overcooked the rice and it was like a thick sludge. It was still on the fire, but he took the pot and poured the rice on the woman’s head. My mother said sadly that the woman went back to her bed and that she never got up again. She died some time later. This image of a woman with hot rice pouring down her head, face and body was imprinted into my mind from that time. I knew that one day I would have to write a novel about this. I tried to write it three times: once it was from the point of view of the daughter of the dead woman; once it was from the point of view of the old man’s granddaughter. But both times, I felt something was missing from the novel and I did not seek to publish it. Then, in 2008, I was doing a book tour in Portugal, and I thought again about this story and suddenly realised I could write it from the point of view of the old, violent man. Once I had this idea, Bissam Sobnath’s voice was immediately clear in my mind, I knew exactly how I would write the novel, and I wrote it in six months.

With texts such as *Le Sari vert* and *Indian Tango*, you have taken on the spaces of sexual violence, patriarchal oppression, and cruelty. Could you discuss these issues any further?

This wasn't a deliberate choice I made, but it was an almost subconscious need to talk about the people who were most silent, who neither had a voice nor a choice. This was visible from my first novel, *Rue la Poudrière*, which is a first-person, stream-of-consciousness narration by a young Creole prostitute of Port-Louis, the capital of Mauritius, a character who had never before been described or heard in Mauritian literature. Indeed, the novel was published in 1989 by the Nouvelles Editions Africaines, but it would be over ten years before it would be available in Mauritius because Mauritian bookshops and distributors were afraid that the subject and the violence of the story would shock Mauritian readers. This novel indeed dealt with sexual violence and male oppression, but also with female oppression through the character of the narrator's mother, who is a kind of mythic matriarchal figure, opposing the weak and exploitative character of the narrator's father. So dealing with these subjects was not a decision I made as a writer but something that emerged organically from the characters and subjects I wanted to write about. My novels have very much been character-driven, but my anthropology background also meant that society and relationships of dominance and coercion and subservience or rebellion were present as well. Finally, although I would say that I am writing about human oppression, the fact that even among the marginalised, women occupy a place of even greater marginalisation means that the characters I focus on have tended to be women. However, even though they may be seen as victims of the patriarchy, of sexual oppression and of societal rules in general, they end up fighting for themselves, as Eve in *Ève de ses décombres* [*Eve Out of her Ruins*], or Subhadra in *Indian Tango*, and breaking out of their chains.

Your writing style is violent and, at the same time, very metaphorical and lyrical. Your novels may remind your readers of the novels of J. M. Coetzee. Can you see any similarities between your writing and other writers?

I mentioned J. M. Coetzee earlier on, but I also tend to mention Toni Morrison as someone who has been a source of inspiration from early on. The French writer Louis-Ferdinand Céline is also someone I re-read regularly, because of the way he changed the novel in France, and despite the horror of his personal views and of some of his writing. There have always been two extremely important aspects in my writing: the subject matter, which is often violent and harsh because it deals unflinchingly with the dark territories of human behaviour and thought, and the language, which I want to use to its utmost capabilities and in as poetical a way as possible. As in Toni Morrison's books, the dark subjects are mediated by the poetic style. I like Coetzee's novels because of the ambiguity of

his characters. There are no clearly delineated “good” and “evil” characters in his books, since, as in all human beings, both are present and have to be negotiated in the course of our lives. Even in a character like Bissam, who is absolutely reprehensible and has almost no redeeming features, there have to be a few aspects that allow the reader to occasionally empathise with him, otherwise the reader would not be able to bear staying in his company for the duration of the novel. For instance, his relationship with his mother and the incident with the suffering cow are two aspects that “humanise” him despite his violence and hate. This ambiguity is important, even if it sometimes disturbs the reader.

In your novels there are more female than male narrators, but in *Le Sari vert* there is this terrifying male narrator, Bissam. The question is what was for you the experience of writing against women from a patriarchal perspective?

It was an extraordinary experience, since I was inhabiting a narrator who was my diametrical opposite, an eighty-year-old misogynist, full of hate and contempt for women and for people in general, and who had a god complex! I did not find it difficult, once I found his voice. The novel almost wrote itself in his voice. I even felt as if it was unexpectedly humoristic at times, filled with a kind of sarcastic laughter, even though most readers do not see that aspect when they read the novel. I also had to make him relatable, at times, as I said earlier. I wanted the readers, especially men, to sometimes feel, while reading his long rants against modern men, against the *gentils* and against whom we define as monsters, that he was not always wrong. I wanted men to occasionally agree with him and then remember who he was and take notice of their own prejudices and male-driven opinions. I also needed to maintain two simultaneous readings of the book, the first-degree narration told in his voice and the second-degree reading that expressed my true intent as the author. I could not afford the book to be read in the first degree only! One reader told me it was a good thing I was a female author writing this book; otherwise, if I had been a man, the readers might have thought that I was expressing my own opinions. I think writing this book also taught me about how men “own” their voices. Most of my female protagonists have a “speech impediment” of some sort: one of them is mute, another has a harelip, yet another is thought to be crazy, and does not therefore have to be heard. All of them must wrestle the power of speech and words from a society that only wants to muzzle them. But with Bissam, it was completely different. His voice is free from the start, and although he is dying and bed-ridden, he is able to exert complete control and power over the women around him simply through his words. I myself felt the difference between writing his voice and making my own voice, as a woman, heard. It was a totally different experience.

What is the symbolism of colours in your writing? Can you comment on the symbolism of the red wedding sari in *Pagli* or the green sari in *Le Sari vert*?

When I started writing *Pagli*, I just had a vague idea that I wanted to write a passionate and tragic love story, something that I had never written before. But as I was writing the first paragraphs, I thought of the place where I would set the novel, and the village called Terre Rouge [‘Red Earth’] came to mind. As soon as I thought of this name, the novel crystallised in my mind, with the symbolism of the colour red (the wedding sari, Mitsy’s sensual dress, menstrual blood, the *tikka* on Pagli’s forehead, marking her status as a married woman, and the flood of red mud that will end the novel). So yes, colours are extremely important, probably because they are linked with symbols, with moods, with states of mind and states of being etc. In *Le Sari vert*, the colours of the saris worn by Bissam’s wife are linked to the slow change in her brought about by her marriage. When he first sees her, as a young girl, she is wearing red and laughing while watching fireworks. She is at that moment completely free and he falls in love with her, with her laughter and freedom. But he will immediately try to stifle both the laughter and the colours. He begins to get angry with her when she is wearing a yellow sari and she has the same laughter, but to him it feels as if she was defying him, perhaps mocking him. Slowly, she dwindles into a silent, perhaps overtly passive shadow, even if she defies him in different ways until the end. Under his increasing violence, she begins to wear grey, she becomes herself grey, until towards the end she wears a green sari in an attempt to become who she was. But by then it is too late and the green sari will end up, like her, in flames. Bissam also cuts the pink and silver sari Kitty wore when she was married, again in a fit of jealousy. For me, the sari is paradoxical in that it is a true vision of utter femininity and grace, and yet it is also a symbol of the subjugation of women.

In *Indian Tango* you mention the figure of Kali [the goddess of destruction]. How important do you think female anger is?

Oh, I think it is extremely important! Too often, female anger is seen as a kind of hysteria. Any kind of expression of the female self, any kind of freedom in our emotions, of “letting go” of the rigid control we are supposed to maintain on ourselves is interpreted from the male perspective as a loss of rationality, of sensibility, of, dare I say, sanity. Women’s emotions are often seen as hovering on the brink of madness when they are excessive. Not so for men. Women thus cannot freely express their own emotions without this fear of being categorised as hysterical. The image of Kali, therefore, is appealing to me because she is as dangerous and destructive in the Hindu pantheon as Shiva, for instance. But she has been somewhat relegated to the margins of this religion, and there are not as many temples dedicated to her as there are to Shiva, Vishnu, and others.

Her temples are more in the nature of a cult than formalised religion. It is more comfortable to see female deities such as Durga, Parvati and Lakshmi as consorts to the male deities. Although I am not myself a follower of religion, I like to use its symbolism, especially as regards women who dare to cross the boundaries.

Do you think of yourself as an activist when you write about violence against women?

No, absolutely not. I know the difference between a writer and an activist. I do write about issues that are important and that need to be discussed, I do try to break this silence that surrounds women and men who are in a marginalised situation and who have no agency to change things. But an activist goes beyond that. I will use the example of Greta Thunberg to say that this young girl, who has had to fight against her own issues, has been able to trigger changes on the worldwide level that seem almost impossible if you think about it. There are volunteers in NGOs who fight for migrants, who physically endanger themselves to make a change and to help people. So sitting behind my desk and writing does not seem to me to be a huge endeavour in favour of people who are suffering. Still, I am aware that writers' voices are needed, especially nowadays, at this time, because we are inundated with information, with news, with discourses, with opinions that are one-sided, that lack reflection and distance, that, most of all, lack a deep understanding of why people find themselves in certain situations or act in certain ways. Writers are able to put themselves in the minds of different types of people, and therefore to understand different points of views. This is something that is missing from the discourse of social media and politicians. The rhetoric of our times is one-sided, blind and deaf to other points of view. I think writers, and artists generally, bring a much-needed perspective.

When you refer to cooking, you usually treat it as a pretext for presenting other things. How do you perceive the cultural context of cooking then?

I have been very much influenced by my mother's attitude to cooking since we were children. She did not like to see women's role as being confined to the kitchen, and she actually didn't like cooking very much. Moreover, my father was not particularly keen on my sisters and myself being taught to cook from a very young age, so I grew up without knowing how to cook – which was quite unusual at the time. When I got married, my husband on the contrary came from a family where the kitchen was the centre of family life, and where a lot of time was spent in the kitchen, as a social activity. I didn't feel as if I belonged to this milieu at all, and this showed in my writing, in *Le Voile de Draupadi*, in *Pagli*, in *Le Sari vert*, and in *Indian Tango*, where food and cooking occupy an important place, but a place that the women do not feel they belong to. Even in *Indian Tango*, where Subhadra at the beginning sees the kitchen as her sole domain,

she ends up moving out of it and occupying another territory. So cooking as part of the subservience of women is very much the way it has been depicted in my novels. In *Manger l'autre*, it takes on another dimension, as it is the father who is an excellent cook and who confines his teenage daughter to her obesity.

When you write in *Indian Tango*: “The dark angel of writing has always lived in me,” do you write not just about the narrator, but about yourself as well?

Yes. The first-person narrator in *Indian Tango* is very much based on my own self as a writer. The first version of the novel was quite different in that the first-person narrator was a male writer. But I was unhappy with that version and I left it for a while. When I came back to it, it became clear that it should be a woman writer, and I changed it to reflect my own experience as a writer who explores very dark territories, influenced by this “dark angel”. Since these parts were originally written with the “I” as a man, I didn’t change much, so that for three-quarters of the novel, the reader doesn’t know whether it is a man or a woman who is saying “I”. It was fun to play with the reader’s perceptions in this way!

What is your perspective on the relationship between the two protagonists of *The Living Days*, Mary and Cub?

This is a very good question! My novel *Les Jours vivants* was published in France in 2013. The critics were kind, and most of them understood the ambiguity and complexity of the novel. Then it came out in an English translation as *The Living Days* in November 2019. Most of the articles used the terms “paedophilia”, “post-colonialism”, “ageism”, “racism” etc. to describe the novel. The novel does address a number of issues, including ageism and racism, but the relationship between Mary and Cub, to my mind, was not of the nature of paedophilia. I wanted to talk about desire, even in a seventy-five-year-old woman, and although he is thirteen years old, between the two of them, he is an adult, capable of surviving in modern London, while she is an innocent, lost and almost invisible in a city that does not care for the old and the useless. In the book, it is unclear whether all of this really happened or whether it is all in the mind of Mary. In the current times, there is no possibility of understanding, no possibility of transgression without guilt and condemnation. Yet, Mary is not guilty of exploiting Cub. She is trying to cross a void and a barrier to reach him. Her body is yearning for a rejuvenation that he alone can give her. He is becoming aware of his powers, of his understanding. They are on opposite sides of the social spectrum. Can they meet somewhere in between? Can they understand each other? According to the novel, they can. But the way modern criticism is forced to go, they can only be categorised as a paedophilic relationship. I don’t

agree. But I am of a generation where ambiguity and transgression can still be understood. The current climate prohibits this.

Can *The Living Days* be read as signalling the situation that ultimately led to Brexit?

This novel was first published in 2013, as I said earlier. It was inspired by my experiences as a student in London from 1976 to 1982. But I feel we have come full circle, from that time where skinheads and white extremists used to terrorise dark-skinned people, to the present time where they are again free to express themselves and where social media have given an arena to the worst extremism. So yes, the novel suddenly feels even more valid today than it did in 2013, as the world of high finance has become the only one that governs the fate of the world, and as Brexit gives free reign to the worst of racist attitudes, irrespective of the fact that immigrants have built British society and made it what it is today.

Thank you for the interview.