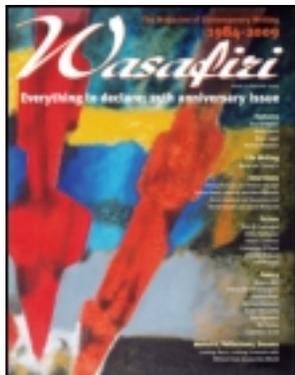


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'Strange bedfellows'? Mauritian writers and Shakespeare

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SHAWKAT M TOORAWA

'Strange Bedfellows'? Mauritian Writers and Shakespeare

Introduction

Shakespeare fascinates Mauritian writers. To date, nineteen works have appeared in English or Kreol,¹ inspired by the bard in one way or another (fig. 1). In 1998 alone, two such works appeared: the Kreol play *Sir Toby* by Dev Virahsawmy, and the long poem 'Lonorab Yago' [The Honorable Iago] by Vidya Golam. This year will see the publication of Dev Virahsawmy's translation/adaptation *Zil Sezar* [Julius Caesar]. This fascination is not limited to writers. The artist Krishna Luchoomun, for instance, has a canvas entitled 'William Shakespeare'. Resonantly, Luchoomun was the illustrator chosen for *Mauritian Voices*, 1996, an anthology of Mauritian writing in English.² Naturally, a fascination with Shakespeare is not limited to Mauritius either. In a 1997 short story, the Indian Canadian writer Rohinton Mistry, to cite one of countless examples, has his protagonist describe a wound 'as deep as a well', an echo of Mercutio's description to Romeo of his fatal wound.³ And Marlene Nourbese Philip's 1989 *she tries her tongue her silence softly breaks distantly*, yet unmistakably, echoes Romeo's 'But, soft! What light through yonder window breaks?'⁴ Far more prosaic is the anonymous, Internet-circulated adaptation of the Clinton-Lewinsky affair, *The Tragic Comedie of King Leer*, 1998, which affair the Mauritian writer Yacoob Ghanty has also adapted in a Shakespearean way as *Clinton and Cleopatra*. This work is expected to appear in mid-1999.

The purpose of this essay is to provide a brief overview of recent Mauritian writing in English and Kreol and also to initiate reflection about Mauritian writing and its recourse to Shakespeare.

Virahsawmy

The playwright Dev Virahsawmy, finding it daunting to translate *Macbeth* into Kreol, decided instead to adapt the play and published his reworking in 1982.⁵ Thus was born *Zeneral Makbef* [General Makbef], the first Mauritian work transparently to adapt a Shakespearean model, even if the protagonist's (new) name evoked crude Kreol words such as 'pimp' [Mak] and 'dolt' [bef], rather than Glamis and Cawdor. In 1998, however, Virahsawmy did publish a translation of *Macbeth* as *Trazedji Makbess*. But the work that has received the most attention, after his enormously successful and prize-winning play *Li* [Prisoner of Conscience, 1976], is *Toufann*, 1991, a play that turns Shakespeare's *The Tempest* on its head.

Recent criticism of *The Tempest* has attempted to situate the play in colonial social and political contexts. Leslie Fiedler, for example, has argued that 'no respectable production of the play these days can afford to ignore the sense in which it is a parable of transatlantic imperialism, the colonisation of the West'.⁶ Far less perceptively, but perhaps just as influentially, Eldred Jones sees *The Tempest* as a preview to colonial rule.⁷ Whether one accepts these readings or not,⁸ there is no denying the fact that there has been widespread use of *The Tempest* as a general metaphor, and as an articulate post-colonial literary riposte.⁹ And, as Chantal Zabus and others have shown, writers of the Anglophone and Francophone world have written back.¹⁰

Dev Virahsawmy does not so much write *back*, as *with*. In doing so, he enlists allies in characters from Shakespearean plays other than *The Tempest*. In *Toufann*, Alonso is instead



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Lerwa Lir (King Lear); Antonio is Yago (Iago); Polonious (Polonius) is an advisor to the King; and Miranda becomes Kordelia (Cordelia).¹¹ Through *his* Yago and Kalibann, Virahsawmy avenges a whole history of representation.¹² In the closing scene of *Toufann*, for example, Yago expresses the 'hope that literary critics will now understand that I'm not all bad.' Earlier (I.i.vi), when he is accused of being the cause of Edmon's problems, he replies as follows: 'Ever since that bastard Shakespeare used me to screw over Othello and Desdemona, everyone thinks I'm responsible for every problem in the world.'¹³ Appropriation is also patently clear from Virahsawmy's Kalibann, who is

introduced by the playwright as follows:

Enter Kalibann. He is a young man of about twenty-five, a métisse, a pretty boy who looks intelligent and resourceful (1.ii)

Ross McDonald has linked the tendency in *The Tempest* to repetition and aurally reiterative patterning with the play's profound concern with reproduction — social, political and biological.¹⁴ This concern with reproduction is evident in Virahsawmy's *Toufann* also.¹⁵ In Act II, scene iv, the cybernetic Aryel (Ariel) says to an impotent Ferdjinnan (Ferdinand), 'Mo pa kapav reprodwir...', 'I can't reproduce'. Ferdjinnan then sets about to show Aryel that he can have feelings and the two become companions. Reproduction, of which it turns out neither is capable, is thereby further problematised by Virahsawmy. What is more, we learn at the end of the play that Kordelia is expecting her lover's child, her lover Kalibann. Perhaps Soyinka was right when he insisted back in 1984 that 'The "Prospero-Caliban" syndrome is dead'.¹⁶

As with *The Tempest*, the production and re-production of language, and the creation and re-creation of language, are also a subject in *Toufann*. The characters play with it, take pleasure in it, test its capacities, and misuse it consciously and unconsciously.¹⁷ The very first words spoken by Aryel in the play, for instance, are not in Kreol but in English: 'Kapitenn, everything under control. When Prospero says do it, it is done'.¹⁸ Given Virahsawmy's abiding concern with language,¹⁹ such intentional slips repay close attention.

Ghanty

Another writer to have appealed to Shakespeare is Yacoob Ghanty. His *Macbeth Revisited* is a political work, transparently re-working the 'Affaire Bacha', an investigation into the causes of death of the wife and child of the then-Head of the Civil Service, while it was still *sub judice*. The play, published by Ghanty himself, was to be launched officially in September 1995 at, and by, the Municipality of the city of Quatre-Bornes but the launch was postponed at the last moment and then canceled altogether. The Municipality cited 'technical problems' but it was obviously the subject matter that was the real issue. The book was carried in a few fearless bookshops and, notably, by newsagents across the island.

Ghanty's cast of characters (fig. 2) provides an insight into his transposition of the Bacha case onto *Macbeth*, an adaptation to which Ghanty has evidently given much thought. He has, for example, transformed the witches into journalists. This is telling, as Vinod Bacha, the civil servant in question who was eventually cleared of all charges, was tried and convicted in the media.

Soupçons, a first novel by Marie-Lourdes Charles, was given a very different reception. The Acting Prime Minister launched it in July 1998 at the Alliance Française in the presence of the Minister for Arts and Culture. But it was lambasted in the press and by the critics; it is evidently in need of more art with less matter. *Soupçons*, like *Macbeth Revisited*, disavows its relationship to real events, but Charles' disclaimer hovers

between irony and naivete, tending toward the latter: 'Any similarities to persons living or dead, as well as any similarity to real life events, are to be considered purely coincidental. This work should not be read other than as a work of fiction'. Ghanty's disclaimer, on the other hand, is unmistakably ironic, and patently impossible too: '*Macbeth Revisited* is a figment of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons or events can only be coincidental'.²⁰ The revisitation of *Macbeth* is no figment. Did Hamlet not ask what revisitation may mean, that makes night hideous and horridly shakes our dispositions?²¹

Collen

If Lindsey Collen's Kreol novel *Misyon Garson, Mission*, 1996, has nothing obviously Shakespearean about it, the same cannot be said of her three English novels.²² The first, *There Is A Tide*, 1990, is, like the others, poignant writing about individuals struggling to go about the business of living beneath the oppressive and stifling weight of unjust social, political, and religious systems. Framed (unwittingly) in a way reminiscent of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, *There Is A Tide* is not populated by Shakespearean characters. The title, however, is certainly Shakespearean, evoking *Julius Caesar*, Act IV, scene iii:

There is a tide in the affairs of men,
Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune;
Omitted, all the voyage of their life
Is bound in shallows and miseries.

Collen's second novel, *The Rape of Sita*, 1994, sends us to Shakespeare in a different way. Collen's decision to name her protagonist Sita, after a venerated Hindu character, was the focus of much public attention, but it is Rowan's rape of Sita that captivated the minds of readers, and sent them back to Tarquin and the rape of sweet Lucrece.

The appearance of *Getting Rid Of It*, 1997, pushed aside the controversy around Collen's decision to name a character 'Sita' in a work of fiction, and brought into focus again her real strengths.²³ Her frequent reference in it to what she evidently believes are injustices in Mauritius (and elsewhere) have led some local critics to accuse her of being nothing more than a polemical writer. Collen has her own riposte in *Getting Rid Of It*: 'These days, when you write a story, you have to be so careful. People... feel attacked [...] They don't know if you're just telling a story or somehow taking advantage of them. They wish you hadn't chosen to write it like that. As if you had the choice'.²⁴ *Getting Rid Of It* is about choice. The choice of a woman to 'get rid of it' — it being a miscarried foetus concealed in an airline 'Duty Free' plastic bag; the choice of a woman freely to love a man; freely to love a woman; and freely to take her life, or another, into her own hands without having, literally, to take her own life. Jumila, Sadna and Goldilox Soo, the three main characters, are looking for a way to liberate themselves and other women 'so that,' in Marlene Nourbese Philip's wonderful phrase, 'you may dance my sister and I may build a floor for you'.²⁵

As with Collen's other novels, *Getting Rid Of It's* narrative is frequently interrupted by the 'storyteller.' Indeed, if Collen is anything, she is a storyteller steeped in the oral and in the need to give voice. To do so, she turns to Mauritian folklore — and to *Macbeth*. In describing Jumila and Goldilox Soo in the following passage, Collen echoes the three witches:²⁶

'What's in your plastic bag, Jumila?'
 'Nothing, Gold. You free?'
 'There's something red dripping out of the corner, what's in there? Of course I'm free.'
 'Nothing much, Gold.'
 'Looks like blood to me, Jumila. What you got in your plastic bag?'
 'Trouble, Gold. There's trouble in it.'
 Lucky they're invisible. There's trouble written on their bodies now. *Double double toil and trouble*. They might become visible and stick out like a sore thumb.
 And the blood
 Drip
 Drip
 Drip

In a passage a few pages later, Sadna Joyna herself echoes the witches:²⁷

'Well I never did.' She arrived, stopped in her tracks. 'What brings you two here? *Thunder, lightning or is it rain?* By now there were some full, heavy clouds building up...

The use of Shakespeare and the motives for that use by Lindsey Collen and other Mauritian writers has not yet been satisfactorily investigated. It is certainly complicated by the fact that the Mauritian readership is more at ease with literary French than literary English, and more at ease with the Indian and French literary heritages than with the English one. Dev Virahsawmy has said that he prefers to populate his works with already created fictional characters to preempt communalised readings of his characters' actions. He feels that his readers will be less likely to associate the words and deeds of characters named Toby or Beatrice-Shakti (both from *Sir Toby*) with a religious or ethnic community than characters named, say, Ram or Aisha.²⁸ Even if this is so however, it does not explain the choice of Shakespeare over another writer.

Some have argued that writers choose Shakespeare because he is utterly familiar: he is taught on the English and English literature syllabus throughout secondary school. Michelle Cliff, writing about the West Indies, has noted that 'expatriate literary models' have 'strongly influenced the educational system, creating an Anglocentric cultural mould that some contemporary writers have been unable to resist, mimicking in their works the canonical models of British literature'.²⁹ But Virahsawmy, Collen, Ghanty and Seebaluck (see below) are by no means indulging in a form of neocolonial replication. In order for such an 'appropriation' to be successful, complete familiarity with the model, in this case Shakespeare, is necessary. But one would be

hard pressed to find someone who would readily recognise 'there is a tide' or appreciate the subtlety of the character melange in *Toufann*.

Seebaluck

The example of Bhisma Dev Seebaluck, treasurer of the newly formed Mauritian Association of [English] Writers, is a case in point. Seebaluck's humour columns, which appeared in a local weekly over several years under the title 'Dear Shakespeare', are collected in *Dear Shakespeare*, 1989, and *Dear Shakespeare 2*, 1995. Although the pieces are enjoyable and very accessible, satirising and critiquing Mauritian ways, why he turns to Shakespeare is unclear. He writes in a closing essay specially written for the first volume (ie something that had not appeared in print before):³⁰

So I invented you once again, my dear Billy. And now, I have got so used to you that I cannot stop abusing you.

After this tongue-in-cheek explanation, in keeping with the tenor of his columns, he misquotes Byron and then returns to Shakespeare with the following question:³¹

By the way, talking of plays, do you know if your own *Hamlet* were written in these days, how it would be called? Judging from the trends, and the type of stuff that's in vogue today, *Hamlet* might have been entitled *The Need for a Commission of Enquiry At Elsinore*, and *Macbeth* might have been *M for Murder*. As for Julius Caesar, it might have been called *For the Sake of Rum*.

He closes the essay with:³²

And so, my dear Billy, I hope you have enjoyed reading the book. If you have, you may advise your friends to buy a copy. If you haven't, then it's time you did something about your taste. You see, my sins may be scarlet, but my books are read.

If Shakespeare and Byron were not removed enough from the average, or even educated reader's experience and exposure, Belloc surely is. 'When I am dead, I hope it may be said:/His sins were scarlet, but his books were read' is from Hilaire Belloc's *The English Graves*.

Envoi

John McRae has spoken of the narratives of 'invasion' that are common to bounded islands — islands such as St Helena, exilic and migratory even when 'natal' and rooted.³³ Mauritius has no such narrative, though at a conference on coastal fortifications the journalist Yvan Martial did insist that the island's *francophonie* was threatened by invading Englishes and — but he did not name it — Kreol.³⁴ The warriors against this kind of invention are the writers. Virahsawmy, though he has carried the

torch of Kreol, has refused to deny or reject English and French.³⁵ Collen has written in both English and Kreol. And the Francophone novelist Carl de Souza embraces English. These are writers in enclosed, bounded places – and I do not mean geological islands – looking for voice. Carl de Souza looks for it in his own home, *La maison qui marchait vers le large*, 1996, but

one that is, significantly, sliding inexorably toward the sea. Collen's enclosed space is a plastic bag carrying a life unmendable (cf *Macbeth III.i*) which will be given voice by the erstwhile mute character, 'The Boy Who Won't Speak'. Seebaluck addresses the bard in his English grave. As for Dev Virahsawmy, he looks for it on Prospero's island.

Figure 1 Mauritian works inspired by Shakespeare

Author	Title	Date	Genre	Publisher (Mauritian unless indicated) ³⁶
Dev Virahsawmy	'Odisi Lerwa Obert'	1986	Poem	Bukii Banani
Sedley Assonne	'Otelo, maure ou vif'	1994	Poem	La Sentinelle Ltd [L'Express newspaper]
Lindsey Collen	<i>There Is a Tide</i>	1990	Novel	Ledikasyon Pu Travayer — self published
	<i>The Rape of Sita</i>	1993	Novel	Ledikasyon Pu Travayer — self published
	<i>Getting Rid Of It</i>	1997	Novel	Granta, London, UK
Richard Etienne	<i>Otelo an Kreol</i>	1991	Translation	Ledikasyon Pu Travayer
Yacoob Ghanty	<i>Macbeth Revisited</i>	1995	Play	— self published
	<i>Clinton and Cleopatra</i>	1999	Play	[in press]
Vidya Golam	<i>Lonorab Yago</i>	1998	Long poem	Ledikasyon Pu Travayer
B D Seebaluck	<i>Dear Shakespeare</i>	1989	Essays	Sigma Books — self published
	<i>Dear Shakespeare 2</i>	1995	Essays	— self published
Dev Virahsawmy	<i>Zeneral Makbef</i>	1981	Play	Bukié Banané — self published
	'Odisé Lerwa Oberô'		Poem	Bukié [sic] Banané — self published
	<i>Zil Sezar</i>	1986	Translation*	[in press]
	<i>Toufann</i>	1991	Play	Boukié Banané — self published
	<i>Enn ta senn dan vid</i>	1994	Translation*	Ledikasyon Pu Travayer
	<i>Hamlet 2</i>	1995	Play	L'Express newspaper
	<i>Doktèr Hamlet</i>	1997	Play	Immedia
	<i>Trazedji Makbess</i>	1997	Translation*	Ledikasyon Pu Travayer
	<i>Sir Toby</i>	1998	Play	Ledikasyon Pu Travayer

[* Virahsawmy describes his translations as Translation/Adaptations]

Figure 2
Dramatis Personae
in Yacoob Ghanty's
Macbeth Revisited

Duncan, <i>Prime Minister</i>	Associates of Macduff
Malcolm, <i>His Confidants</i>	First Guard
Donalbain	Second Guard
Lenox, <i>A Hindu Notable, close to Duncan</i>	An Old Man
Macbeth, <i>Special Adviser to the Prime Minister</i>	A Priest
Banquo, <i>A Cabinet Minister</i>	A Populist Politician
Macduff, <i>Leader of the Opposition</i>	Dame Bellano, <i>Macbeth's Mistress</i>
Rosse, <i>A Businessman</i>	Lady Macduff
Angus, <i>An Official of the World Bank</i>	Gentlewoman, <i>attending Dame Bellano</i>
Menteth, <i>A Muslim Political Agent</i>	First Witch, <i>A Christian Journalist</i>
Cathness, <i>A Creole Political Agent</i>	First Witch, <i>A Muslim Journalist</i>
Fleance, <i>A Senior Police Officer</i>	First Witch, <i>A Freelancer</i>
Siward, <i>US Embassy Diplomat</i>	Hecate, <i>A Hindu Journalist</i>
Seyton, <i>A Confidant of Macbeth</i>	
Security Men	The Ghost of Macbeth's Wife
Intelligence Agents	The Ghost of Banquo, and
Bodyguards of Macbeth	Other Apparitions
Cabinet Ministers	

This article is based on a paper presented at the July 1998 'Festival of Writing from the Commonwealth Islands'. I am grateful to the British Council and the University of Mauritius for having invited my participation. I am also most grateful to Roger Moss for thoughtful criticism and editorial suggestions. 'Strange bedfellows' is, of course, from *The Tempest* II.i.

Notes

- 1 I use 'Kreol' to denote the language Mauritian Creole. Some writers, including Dev Virahsawmy, use 'Morisien', literally 'Mauritian'. See note 21 below.
- 2 *Mauritian Voices, New Writing in English*, ed R Butlin, Newcastle, Flambard Press, 1997
- 3 Rohinton Mistry, 'The Scream', in *Enigmas & Arrivals*, ed A Niven and M Schmidt, Manchester, Carcanet, 1997, p 81; *Romeo and Juliet* III.i
- 4 Marlene Nourbese Philip, *Her Silence Softly Breaks*, Charlottetown, Canada, Ragweed Press, 1989; *Romeo and Juliet* II.ii
- 5 L'Express, 2 August 1982; cf V Ramharai, *La littérature mauricienne d'expression créole. Essai d'analyse socio-culturelle*, Port Louis, Editions Les Mascareignes, 1990, p 97
- 6 L Fiedler, *The Stranger in Shakespeare*, London, Croom Helm, 1973, p 208; cf C Frey, "'The Tempest' and the New World", *Shakespeare Quarterly*, XXX, 1, Winter 1979; and P Hulme, *Colonial Encounters: Europe and the Native Caribbean 1492-1797*, London, Methuen, 1986. O Mannoni, *Prospero and Caliban: the Psychology of Colonization*, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1990 [1950], and M Dorsinville, *Caliban Without Prospero*, Erin, Ontario, Press Porcepic, 1974, are important.
- 7 E Jones, 'Shakespeare's *The Tempest*: A Preview of Colonial Rule,' in *People and Empires in African History: Essays in Memory of Michael Crowder*, ed J F Adi Ajaye and J D Y Peel, London and New York, Longman, 1992, pp 59-67
- 8 For two recent readings that situate *The Tempest* in the Old rather than the New World, see E Peters, 'Rex Curiosus: A Preface to Prospero', *Majestas IV*, 1996, pp 61-84, and R Wilson, 'Voyage to Tunis: New History and the Old World of *The Tempest*', *English Literary History* LX, 1997, pp 333-57.
- 9 See C Zabus, 'A Calibanic tempest in Anglophone and Francophone new world writing', *Canadian Literature* CIV, Spring 1985, p 49
- 10 C Zabus, op cit Cf *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*, ed B Ashcroft, G Griffiths and H Tiffin, London, Routledge, 1989, pp 191-93
- 11 On Miranda's link to Cordelia, see the idiosyncratic but suggestive genealogy in T Hughes, *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*, Faber & Faber, London, 1992, pp 421-25.
- 12 Cf H Napal, *Shakespeare and Mauritian Writing*, unpublished BA (Hons) English dissertation, University of Mauritius, 1999, p 19
- 13 Cf V Golam, *Lonorab Yago* [The Honourable Iago], Port Louis, Ledikasyon Pu Travayer, 1998
- 14 R McDonald, 'Reading *The Tempest*', *Shakespeare Survey* XLIII, 1991, pp 17, 26
- 15 D Virahsawmy, *Toufann*, Mauritius, Boukié Banané, 1991
- 16 B Jeyifo, 'Soyinka at 50', *West Africa*, August 27, 1984, pp 1730, 1731, cited in *The Penguin New Writing in Sri Lanka*, ed D C R A Goonetilleke, New Delhi, Penguin Books, 1992, pp xv-xvi
- 17 A Barton, 'Shakespeare and the Limits of Language', *Shakespeare Survey* XXIV, 1971, p 19
- 18 *Toufann*, I.ii
- 19 For a recent publication outlining his views on Morisien (Kreol), see D Virahsawmy, *Tetsaman enn Metchiss*, Rose Hill, Boukié Banané, 1999.
- 20 Y Ghanty, *Macbeth Revisited*, Mauritius, p 4; Week-end, 19 July 1998, p 21
- 21 Ghanty has written a critical work on *Hamlet*, and has also published three novels.
- 22 Collen's fourth English novel, *Mutiny*, will be published by Granta later this year.
- 23 See three recent unpublished University of Mauritius dissertations: P Jugoo, 'Style and Content in Lindsey Collen's English Language Novels', 1999; K Jean-Pierre, 'A Feminist Analysis of Lindsey Collen's *Getting Rid Of It*', 1999; M-P Bac, 'Language and Identity in Lindsey Collen's Rape of Sita', 1998. Cf my review in *World Literature Today* LXXII, Summer 1998, pp 690-91.
- 24 L Collen, *Getting Rid Of It*, London, Granta, 1997, p 53
- 25 M N Philip, *op cit*
- 26 L Collen, *op cit* p 5 [my italics; *Macbeth* I.i]
- 27 L Collen, *op cit* p 23 [my italics; *Macbeth* I.i]
- 28 Personal communication, 8 July 1998
- 29 M Cliff, 'Journey into Speech', in the *Land of Look Behind*, Ithaca, Firebrand Books, 1986, quoted in F Lionnet, *Postcolonial Representations: Women, Literature, Identity*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1995, p 32. (Virahsawmy dedicates *Toufann* 'To William Shakespeare and Françoise Lionnet'.)
- 30 B D Seebaluck, *Dear Shakespeare*, Port Louis, Sigma, 1989, p 109
- 31 B D Seebaluck, *op cit* p 110
- 32 B D Seebaluck, *op cit* p 111
- 33 J McRae, 'Keynote Address', Festival of Writing from the Commonwealth Islands, Mauritius, July 1998
- 34 Y Martial, 'Une île difficile à défendre,' in *Coastal Fortifications/Fortifications côtières*, ed Philippe La Hausse de Lalouvière, Tamarin, Heritage, 1998, pp 114-19
- 35 V Ramharai, *op cit* p 63
- 36 As this column makes clear, most English and Kreol language book-length works of fiction are either self-published or published by Ledikasyon Pu Travayer, an adult literacy organisation which Lindsey Collen helped found in 1976.