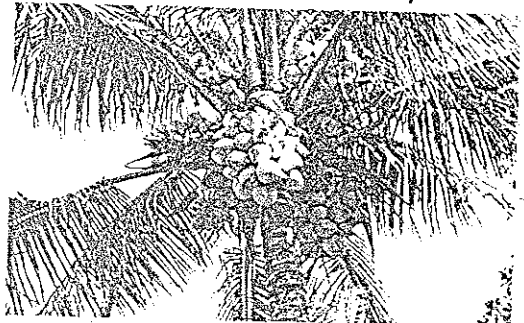


MAURITIAN VOICES



New Writing
in English

Edited by
Ron Butlin

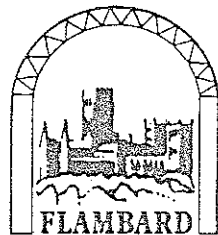
MAURITIAN VOICES

New Writing in English

Edited by Ron Butlin

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Shawkat M. Toorawa

GUAVAS AND KHAANDAAN

Outside, the light was slowly dying. The guavas on the trees, silhouetted against the darkening sky, looked like a constellation of golden earrings. Rafik Randeri stood on the veranda of his family home and stared out of the French windows at a Madagascar *fody* that had selected a low branch of the tree as a momentary perch. This bird is like us, thought Rafik, and like this house: introduced in the French period. He smiled, but then, just as quickly, began to frown.

His attention turned again to what his father was saying. Although Rafik was listening, the words were indistinct, blurred, the way they always are when anger interposes itself, like the sound of the *goyave de Chine* bushes swept by sheets of summer rain. Rafik tried to contain this rage, which surged from his neck up into the back of his head and threatened to erupt as his father continued to speak.

'He's from a good family. His grandmother was the sister of Yacoob Surti -'

'Not sister, cousin,' cut in Rafik's mother, correcting her husband. It was odd, she thought, that he should have got the relations mixed up. Rafik thought it odd too. Yacoob Surti's story was, after all, well-known, even outside the proud and insulated merchant community of which he was a reluctant member.

In 1943, Yacoob Surti had spat in the face of his only brother, Beelal, swearing that he would never again set foot in his garden - and certainly not pray at his funeral - because Beelal had dared to marry a divorcee, and from outside the community too. His outrage he had shouted in the centre of the Jummah Mosque courtyard, in God's house as it were. Those present at the time dismissed the threat as misguided and blind anger. He had even said that he did not want so

much as the shadow of his brother to fall upon his children. 'Was such conduct the hallmark of a good family?' thought Rafik.

Beelal had died nineteen lonely years after the unilateral feud began. As promised, Yacoob did not attend the funeral, but neither did he let the matter die with his brother: he persisted in ignoring and excluding Beelal's two boys, Tariq and Basit. This was especially cruel on Yacoob's own daughter, Leila, as she had from childhood nurtured a secret love for her cousin Tariq. The day after she turned eighteen, Leila eloped with Tariq to Britain. Four years later, their meagre resources depleted, they returned to an arrogant, ailing, but now repentant Yacoob, with two lovely children in tow.

Beelal's other son, Basit, now a parent too, had mourned his father in silence, moved to a small apartment in Curepipe, and fended for himself in a rented shop that formed part of a *waqf* Trust property.

Rafik's thoughts, his anger undiminished, returned to his father's preposterous evaluation of the boy's pedigree.

'Yes, yes, cousin,' Rafik's father said, realising his error. 'And his brother-in-law is married to the niece of the late Yusuf Khulwari.'

Satisfied, Rafik's father looked to his son for corroboration – corroboration of the boy's *khaandaan*, that he was from a good family. For Rafik, Yusuf Khulwari did constitute a worthwhile reference. He had always had a soft spot for this man, whom most people had mistaken for a snob, and for his daughter, Bilqees.

Rafik's mind drifted back to the war years when his family had had to leave Port Louis for the relative calm and safety of Beau-Bassin. Time had stood still then. He and his friends had spent much of it riding their bicycles past the grounds of Bilqees's enormous house on the off-chance that they might catch a glimpse of her. He wondered if the sight of his sister Razia spurred neighbourhood boys to similar ruses.

'He's a good lad from a good family, that's all I'm saying,' Rafik's father emphasised, looking now at Razia. But that was not all he was saying.

'What the hell is that supposed to mean?' said Rafik in a low, urgent tone, almost in desperation.

'Don't swear at your father!' his mother said.

'I'm not swearing. I'm asking a simple question. Good family, my foot! That's what you said about Hameed Balbodan and look where that led: with some German woman now. I wonder if he beats her too... Where's the good family now? What about bloody *khaandaan*?'

'He did not beat anyone,' Rafik's mother said firmly, her eyes pleading for a rapid conclusion to this conversation and this affair.

'Everyone knows he beat his wife, Ma. Hell, even Papa knew but did nothing about it. "I don't break families," he said, "I make them." How come so-called principles always get in the way of compassion?'

Although the sensation in the back of his neck was still palpable, Rafik felt calmer. Maybe it was the effect of his own words, or of the tea that Razia had wordlessly brought him, or the thoughts of Bilqees. He looked at Razia.

'Just because one person does something stupid doesn't change the fact that the person is from a good family,' persisted Rafik's father.

There was truth to that remark. One of the things that exasperated Rafik was that, although his and his father's views did not always concord, the older man always evinced wisdom.

Rafik's thoughts turned to the guavas outside. The backdrop sun was fading. The guavas looked yellow again, at least for now. By the time he got back from the mosque, the fruits would be indistinguishable from the leaves. Razia would have set the table as she had done for years.

Why did Razia not say anything, not protest? Rafik knew that this boy, like the two previous ones, did not enchant her in the least. She could not bear their almost obligatory ostentation.

Rafik returned from the sunset prayer, whistling quietly. His more orthodox friends would have found the behaviour heretical, in spite of the fact that it was the melody of a famous *qawwali* chanted at the shrine of Salim Chisti – or perhaps because of it.

When he got home, Rafik went straight to the dinner table. The family sat down to a hushed meal, each person rehearsing the earlier conversation. Dessert would flow effortlessly into evening prayers and bedtime.

They were still savouring the fish curry when they heard the front gate scrape open. Someone walked up the cobblestone path. Razia was the first to recognise the stranger and smiled. Serene though it was, her smile belied her emotions. It had been five years since she had seen Zubayr and he still had the same effect on her.

'Salam-walaykum, Auntie,' he said, addressing Razia's mother, 'you're looking great.'

Still the charmer, thought Razia. Her mother answered the greeting but did not know quite what to say next.

'When did you get back, Zoob?' asked Rafik, as he bear-hugged his childhood friend.

'Zubayr, not Zoob!' exclaimed Razia. She had never approved of the nickname.

'Just this minute. My luggage is in the taxi outside.'

'But what about university,' queried Rafik's father, 'are you done?' University was for Rafik's father and his generation something you finished, like a meal or a painting or a book, not a process.

Zubayr sat down, took a sip of grape juice from Rafik's glass, and explained that he was now doing a PhD and that he had reached the proposal stage. The word 'proposal' had an inexplicable effect, for Zubayr at any rate, on the family members. Razia dropped the AMC pot she was carrying to the kitchen, her mother gulped, and her father fumbled with his tobacco pouch. Only Rafik was silent. Zubayr looked at him questioningly.

'They're trying to marry off Razia, Zoob,' Rafik explained. 'To a decent boy from a good family, *khaandaan* and all.'

'Rafik!' shouted Rafik's mother, 'really!'

Zubayr looked at Razia. She said nothing and did nothing. The *brède* that has spilled out of the pot was still on the floor. He then

looked at each family member in turn, not displaying any particular emotion.

'That's a problem, Auntie,' said Zubayr, 'a big problem.'

'Why?' wondered Rafik aloud, before his mother could react.

'Well, because I'm, well... interested,' he replied.

'You're what?' Razia said, her voice shrill.

'I'm interested, well, in marrying you.' Zubayr was in absolute earnest.

'But you never told me. You haven't even written to me in six years.'

'Five years -'

'Five years, then,' interrupted Razia.

'Five years, three months, and three days,' continued Zubayr.

Razia's mother felt as if her feet were cemented to the floor. She had always liked Zubayr's manner and demeanour but this was too much. Again, she could find nothing to say. She would not have been able to get a word in edgeways anyway as the conversation between her daughter and Zubayr harboured no interruption. Five years' worth of emotions and expectations were being exchanged in the language of gentle accusation and recrimination.

Rafik's father looked at Razia's eyes. They were like her grandmother's and they were filling with tears he recognised. In the merest moment he had processed everything: Zubayr, Razia, marriage, England, explanations to the parents of the most recent prospect, pacification of his wife, justifications to his own brothers, everything.

He packed some tobacco into his pipe, lit it after a few tries and then, puffing tranquilly, looked at his son. Their eyes met. This was the second time tonight that Rafik's father had looked to him for corroboration. Rafik guessed his unspoken thoughts: preparations for the *nakki*, the betrothal and eventual marriage would begin in the morning.