‘Strange bedfellows’? Mauritian writers and Shakespeare

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Available online: 18 Jul 2008
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Introduction

Shakespeare fascinates Mauritian writers. To date, nineteen works have appeared in English or Kreol, 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 Z/7Sezar [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. 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. 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?’ 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, inspired by the bard in one way or another by posing the challenge of translating the play and published his reworking in 1982. 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 Trazedjy Makbess. But the work that has received the most attention, after his enormously successful and prize-winning play U/L [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’. Far less perceptively, but perhaps just as influentially, Eldred Jones sees The Tempest as a preview to colonial rule. Whether one accepts these readings or not, 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. And, as Chantal Zabus and others have shown, writers of the Anglophone and Francophone world have written back. 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 Lerwa Lir (King Lear); Antonio is Yago (Iago); Polonious is Polonius; and Miranda becomes Kordelia (Cordelia). Through his Yago and Kalibann, Virahsawmy avenges a whole history of representation. 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 (ll.v), 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.’ 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 (I.i)

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. This concern with reproduction is evident in Virahsawmy’s Toufann also. In Act II, scene iv, the cybernetic Aryel (Ariel) says to an impotent Ferdjinan (Ferdinand), ‘Mo pa kapav reprodwir...’, ‘I can’t reproduce’. Ferdjinan 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’.

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. 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’. Given Virahsawmy’s abiding concern with language, 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.

Soupgons, 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. Soupgons, 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’. The revisitation of Macbeth is no figment. Did Hamlet not ask what revisitation may mean, that makes night hideous and horribly shakes our dispositions?

Colleen

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. 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.

Colleen’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. 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’.

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:

"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:

"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. 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'. 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):

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:

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:

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. Mauritius has no such narrative, though at a conference on coastal fortifications the journalist Ivan Martial did insist that the island's francophonie was threatened by invading Englishes and – but he did not name it – Kreol. 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. 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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Genre</th>
<th>Publisher (Mauritian unless indicated)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dev Virahsawmy</td>
<td>'Odisi Lerwa Obert'</td>
<td>1986</td>
<td>Poem</td>
<td>Bukii Banani</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sedley Assonne</td>
<td>‘Otelu, maure ou vif’</td>
<td>1994</td>
<td>Poem</td>
<td>La Sentinelle Ltd [L’Express newspaper]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lindsey Collen</td>
<td>There Is A Tide</td>
<td>1990</td>
<td>Novel</td>
<td>Ledikasyon Pu Travayer — self published</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Rape of Sita</td>
<td>1993</td>
<td>Novel</td>
<td>Ledikasyon Pu Travayer — self published</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Getting Rid Of It</td>
<td>1997</td>
<td>Novel</td>
<td>Granta, London, UK</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Richard Etienne</td>
<td>Otelo an Kreol</td>
<td>1991</td>
<td>Translation</td>
<td>Ledikasyon Pu Travayer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yacoob Ghanty</td>
<td>Macbeth Revisited</td>
<td>1995</td>
<td>Play</td>
<td>— self published</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vidya Golam</td>
<td>Lonorab Yago</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>Long poem</td>
<td>Ledikasyon Pu Travayer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B D Seebaluck</td>
<td>Dear Shakespeare 1</td>
<td>1989</td>
<td>Essays</td>
<td>Sai— Books — self published</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dear Shakespeare 2</td>
<td>1995</td>
<td>Es'ys</td>
<td>elf published</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dev Virahsawmy</td>
<td>Zeneral Makbef</td>
<td>1981</td>
<td>Play</td>
<td>— self published</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>'Odisi Lerwa Obert'</td>
<td>1986</td>
<td>Poem</td>
<td>Bukli [sic] Banani — self published</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Zil Sezar</td>
<td>1991</td>
<td>Play</td>
<td>[in press]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Toufann</td>
<td>1994</td>
<td>Translation*</td>
<td>Bouki Banan — self published</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Enn to senn dan vid</td>
<td>1995</td>
<td>Play</td>
<td>Ledikasyon Pu Travayer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hamlet 2</td>
<td>1995</td>
<td>Translation*</td>
<td>L'Express newspaper</td>
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<td>Dokter Hamlet</td>
<td>1997</td>
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<td>Trazedji Makbess</td>
<td>1997</td>
<td>Translation*</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Sir Toby</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>Play</td>
<td>Ledikasyon Pu Travayer</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

[* Virahsawmy describes his translations as Translation/Adaptations]

Figure 2

Dramatis Personae

in Yacoob Ghanty’s

Macbeth Revisited

Duncan, Prime Minister
Malcolm, His Confidants
Donalbain
Lenox, A Hindu Notable, close to Duncan
Macbeth, Special Adviser to the Prime Minister
Banquo, A Cabinet Minister
Macduff, Leader of the Opposition
Rosse, A Businessman
Angus, An Official of the World Bank
Menteth, A Muslim Political Agent
Cathness, A Creole Political Agent
Fleance, A Senior Police Officer
Siward, U S Embassy Diplomat
Seyton, A Confidant of Macbeth
Security Men
Intelligence Agents
Bodyguards of Macbeth
Cabinet Ministers

Associates of Macduff
First Guard
Second Guard
An Old Man
A Priest
A Populist Politician
Dame Bellano, Macbeth’s Mistress
Lady Macduff
Gentlewoman, attending Dame Bellano
First Witch, A Christian Journalist
First Witch, A Muslim Journalist
First Witch, A Freelancer
Hecate, A Hindu Journalist

The Ghost of Macbeth’s Wife
The Ghost of Banquo, and
Other Apparitions
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 ll.i.

Notes
1 I use ‘Kreol’ to denote the language Mauritian Creole. Some
writers, including Dev Virahsawmy, use ‘Morisien’, literally
‘Mauritanian’. See note 21 below.
2 Mauritius Voices, New Writing in English, ed R Butlin, Newcastle,
Flambard Press, 1997
and M Schmidt, Manchester, Carcanet, 1997, p 81; Romeo and
Juliet III.i
4 Marlene Nourbese Philip, Her Silence Softly Breaks,
Charlottestown, Canada, Ragweed Press, 1989; Romeo and
Juliet II.i
5 L’Express, 2 August 1982; cf V Ramharai, La littérature
mauricienne d’expression créole. Essai d’analyse socio-
culturelle, Port Louis, Editions Les Mascalregnes, 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 Porcupic, 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 Crowley, ed J F Adi Ajaye and J D Y Peel,
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
9 See C Zabus, ‘A Calibanic tempest in Anglophone and
Francophone new world writing’, Canadian Literature CIV, Spring
1985, p 69
10 C Zabus, op cit Cf The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice
in Post-Colonial Literatures, ed B Ashcroft, G Griffiths and H
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
13 Cf V Golam, Loronar Yago [The Honourable Iago], Port Louis,
Lediakasyon Pu Travayer, 1998
14 R McDonald, ‘Reading The Tempest’, Shakespeare Survey XLIII,
1991, pp 17, 26
15 D Virahsawmy, Toufann, Mauritius, Bouklé Banané, 1991
16 B Jeyifo, ‘Sojinka at 50’, West Africa, August 27, 1984, pp 1730,
1731, cited in The Penguin New Writing in Sri Lanka, ed
17 A Barton, ‘Shakespeare and the Limits of Language’,
Shakespeare Survey XXIV, 1971, p 19
18 Toufann, I.i
19 For a recent publication outlining his views on Morisien (Kreol),
see D Virahsawmy, Tetsaman enn Metchiss, Rose Hill, Boukili
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 Jgoo, ‘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 LXII, Summer 1998,
pp 690-91.
25 M N Philip, op cit
26 L J 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
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.