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### **Author**

Khamo, Nanar

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**Ananda Devi**

# MISOGYNY AND MANIPULATION IN MAURITIUS

BY NANAR KHAMO

**O**N JANUARY 12TH, 2014, I walked, wide-eyed, through the rather swanky airport in Copenhagen, when it fully hit me that I had travelled some 5500 miles to attend my first conference on French and Francophone Studies. My laptop bag swinging heavily by my side, I felt strangely reassured by the familiar bright logos of luxury brands; I thought for a second that I could be walking through Beverly Hills, if it wasn't for the sudden preponderance of tall, blond peoples. It was only when I stepped out to board my small, alarmingly shaky plane to Aarhus, and as the wind sliced through my flimsy sweater, that I realized that not only did I overestimate my formerly admirable tolerance of 30° F weather but that I was really quite far from the sun-

ny, cheery clime that Los Angeles dares to call winter.

There is something about traveling to foreign lands that has a way of challenging oneself to adapt, learn and reflect. There is also something about traveling to foreign lands during the beginning of a new quarter that has a way of being completely disorienting.

My destination was Aarhus, my purpose to attend a bilingual conference titled “Le monde en français : les littératures francophones dans un espace mondialisé/ The World in French: Francophone Literatures in a Globalized World” at Aarhus University, where international scholars, both professors and graduate students alike, met to discuss issues related to the field. For three days, I learned about topics in various countries

ranging from Libya to Lebanon, Haiti to Algeria. On a university campus not unlike that of UCLA, I encountered the same scholarly procession of listening to presentations, engaging in a question and answer period, as well as having an important keynote speech for each day of the conference. This is, I remember thinking to myself, exactly what I have seen as an attendee at local conferences.

When it was my turn to present in our large seminar room, as the snow began to build outside, I turned our attention away from the wintry landscape to discuss a novel regarding Mauritius, an island-nation located some 700 miles from Madagascar in the Indian Ocean. I had chosen to work on the novel after having read it in a seminar with Françoise Lionnet, Professor

in the Departments of Comparative Literature, French and Franco-phone Studies, and Gender Studies at UCLA, the preceding year, with the fortuitous opportunity of having Ananda Devi, the author herself, teach in the department the following quarter. It was such a treat to have the chance to interact with an author and gain a better understanding of the writing process that goes into composing fiction, particularly as one being rigorously trained in the role of literary critic. She was kind enough to spend an evening having dinner with a group of graduate students in the faculty center, willing to answer any and all questions we asked her. I often think of encountering the soft-spoken Devi, floating down the hallway to her office in Royce Hall, seemingly lost in her thoughts and wearing her characteristic sari, in contrast to the ferocious, often vicious voice of her narrator in *Le sari vert* that has haunted my research, to say nothing of the powerful narrative voices of her other novels.

Devi exercises a different narrative voice throughout *Le sari vert*, as evidenced in the novel's incipit—that is to say, the introductory first page. “I am not the apostle of polite words,” the narrator snarls in the opening lines, continuing to add, “I don't subscribe to these beautiful, empty formulas of which our times are so fond”<sup>1</sup> (translation mine). This commanding masculine voice continues to enumerate a long list of adjectives and nouns

that he claims do not describe him, including: young, rich, beautiful, nice, a woman, black, white, ending with “neither the best, nor the worst,”<sup>2</sup> leaving one to wonder what exactly would constitute the narrator's personality. In the incipit of the novel, the narrator warns the reader about the heavy subject matter at hand, showing a desire to deter some readers, but also attesting to his strong narrative presence—this is not just going to be any story, he implies in his opening lines, but a story about me.

Such a story, it turns out, is one of manipulation and misogyny, where the narrator's disgust for the three women in his life—his deceased wife, his daughter Kitty and his granddaughter Malika—shapes the narrative. Reflections throughout the book on the process of writing serve to establish the narrator as the figure of the Writer creating his own text and treating the women as characters who belong solely to him. Writing, for him, becomes a competition between men and women, as he urges men to fight harder, because, as he explains early on, “man is in the middle of decomposing.”<sup>3</sup> He extends the game even to the reader, speaking to his audience as if it were composed solely of men who need to take heed of his advice.

Yet his digressions on writing also point to a larger issue, which is that of creation. The narrator's disgust with women arises primarily from the ability to create life. In forging a relationship between

writing and creating, the narrator implies that he too wishes to create and despises those with the natural ability to produce life. I argue in my research that his misogyny derives from a desire to be a mother, suggesting that the narrator wishes to use writing to become himself a being of creation, a term that I refer to as “mother-writer” (*mère-écrivain*).

The narrator builds on his relationship with the women in his family through a series of flashbacks interposed with reflections on the present, as he lies on his deathbed, a rotting corpse-to-be with no physical power to exercise his will. The flashbacks continue to build on the trauma and violence endured by the family over the years, moving into a frenzy when it reaches its climactic point in describing the death of the mother and the underlying causes of it. The father had manipulated his daughter into killing her own mother; the horror of matricide resonates until the last line of the text. Yet, the father, too, is in the throes of death. As his narration comes to an end, the novel continues without his narrative voice, as signaled by the sudden use of italics in a following, final section. The continuation of the text without his voice underscores the triumph of the feminine literature that he attempts to erase throughout the story, suggesting the rise of a global, female voice set against the backdrop of the Creole world of Mauritius.

During the question and answer period that followed, it became

1. Ananda Devi, *Le sari vert*, Éditions Gallimard: Paris 2009, p. 9

2. Ananda Devi, *Le sari vert*, p. 9

3. Ananda Devi, *Le sari vert*, p. 9

# Ananda Devi

## Le sari vert



quickly apparent to me that most of the audience members had not read the novel. “I think that I’ll have to pick up one of her books,” a professor from a Canadian university later told me. Following the

conference, I spoke with some fellow graduate students and it was clear that they had not even heard of Ananda Devi. “Those quotes you read from the novel were really quite intense,” a French graduate

student shivered. I too encountered, in the course of the conference, authors and ideas previously unknown to me and I understood, in a concrete way, the importance of conferences and the bridges they build between different institutions of thought and practice.

I have left Denmark, but it has not left me. In the time that has passed since then, I have managed to learn enough Danish to successfully unsubscribe from Copenhagen Airport’s newsletter, although one could also attribute that to my knowledge of the English language. The ideas, movements, and reflections from the conference continue to resonate within me and inspire my own research. One could easily misjudge those of us in the humanities, particularly in literary fields, as bibliophiles lost in dusty tomes, forever oblivious to the changing world that surrounds us. The conference proved to me, in so many ways, the dynamism of literary studies and the importance of having a global exchange of ideas. A Californian in Denmark discussing Mauritian literature? How novel that that is no longer novel.

*Nanar Khamo is a third-year graduate student in the Department of French and Francophone Studies at UCLA. Her research interests include empire, genocide studies and creolization. She received a travel grant from CSW to present her conference paper on “C’est moi, moi seul’: the narrator’s desire to be both mother and writer in Le sari vert.”*