

## **Transcultural Tempests: Dev Virahsawmy's *Toufann*, A Mauritian Fantasy**

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### ABSTRACT:

*Even though Shakespearean adaptations and rewritings initially emerged in a post-colonial context under conditions of asymmetrical power relations that were operative under colonialism (the “writing back rewrite”), today, a different kind of cultural synergy characterises the “individual rewrites” of Shakespeare emerging from postcolonial spaces. In the latter, specific national, local, regional or indigenous contexts help to redefine and create new dimensions in which to understand the Shakespearean play in another light. This is gradually being acknowledged in debates on “postcolonial Shakespeares”, wherein we have witnessed a paradigm shift from the literary practice of “writing back” and “rewriting,” which aims at correcting colonial misrepresentations, towards a more differentiated, multifaceted and necessarily complex approach of transcultural adaptation.*

*This essay makes the argument above by way of a close reading of Dev Virahsawmy's Toufann, A Mauritian Fantasy (1999), an English translation of a play originally written in Mauritian Creole that is an adaption of Shakespeare's The Tempest, King Lear, Hamlet and Othello.*

*Keywords: Transcultural, Shakespeare adaptations, linguistic, postcolonial*

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Even though Shakespearean adaptations and re-writings initially emerged in a post-colonial context under conditions of asymmetrical power relations that were operative under colonialism, contemporary adaptations of Shakespeare in a postcolonial context have moved beyond the post-colonial literary strategy of “writing back” (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin) to the colonial centre. Today, a different kind of cultural synergy characterises the “individual rewrites” of Shakespeare emerging from postcolonial spaces. These transcultural adaptations rework the most famous and familiar of Shakespearean plotlines and characters in line with, and in response to, their own local settings. In this way, many of these adaptations tackle and foreground the central issues of race and ethnicity, class and caste, colonial history, gender and language, that are at the forefront of postcolonial critical approaches to Shakespeare’s plays. This is gradually being acknowledged in debates on “postcolonial Shakespeares”, wherein we have witnessed a paradigm shift from the literary practice

of “writing back” and “rewriting,” which aims at re-dressing colonial misrepresentations, towards a more differentiated, multifaceted and necessarily complex approach of transcultural adaptation. I argue that adaptations of Shakespeare in a postcolonial context broadly fall into one or more of the following four (though by no means exhaustive) categories.

First, the “true to source-” or “affirmation rewrite” that rewrites, adapts, or produces a Shakespearean play in the original and attempts to recreate the period of the original in its specific scenography and perform the play according to presumed “Shakespearean” acting conventions. This first approach was frequently adopted as part of the British “civilising mission,” and is characterized by a certain degree of reverence for the Bard. It shows an affirmation of the effectiveness of the British Empire’s English education system, and is the product of English-educated colonial subjects that inherently glorifies Shakespeare, the English language, and British culture.

Second, the “writing back rewrite” that adapts or produces a Shakespearean play in the original, but performs it in a national, regional or local setting and thus attempts a more ‘native’ interpretation of the text. This approach might be political or radical, in that it produces forms of resistance against the Western source text and its hegemonic implications. Correspondingly, Shakespeare is, albeit in-

advertently, initially regarded as the pre-eminent icon of English cultural superiority and European civilisation. In this approach, an analysis of power relations and of the inherent dominant discourse is enacted. The authority of the Shakespearean source text is subsequently subverted via hybridity, strategic transformation or syncretism.

Third, the “individual rewrite” that adapts or produces a Shakespearean play in the specific national, regional, local or indigenous adaptation and translation, often editing or adapting the text to reflect a particular socio-political, cultural and historical matrix that would allow the elements of the play (theme, plot, characters) to resonate in its specific transcultural context. This approach is the one that is most prevalent today, especially in more recent Shakespearean adaptations. It can also be described as an individual and transformative approach to Shakespeare that does not necessarily need to be anti-colonial, and it can be with or without reverence for Shakespeare. The Shakespearean texts in this approach are frequently used as a vehicle for the writer’s own creativity that results in an intercultural or transcultural viewpoint. Consequently, this approach is less concerned with “writing back” to the former Empire than with using the Empire’s cultural material to the advantage of the writer’s own literary/dramatic tradition. Such rewrites can effectively be read as transcultural hybrid works.

Fourth and finally, the “mutilation rewrite” that rewrites, adapts, or produces a Shakespearean play in a de-glamourising version, often for the purposes of mainstream or middlebrow entertainment as opposed to high culture.

In the frame of Shakespeare in colonial/postcolonial contexts, Ania Loomba (168) argues that there has been a “mobility over centuries of a certain European vocabulary of cultural difference.” To elucidate her point, she writes:

Of course, *Othello* and *Oroonoko* register a very different sense of “otherness.” But certain conceptual similarities between the two texts help locate those differences in history. Exoticism marks Behn’s novella but is also germane to *Othello*: Othello’s conflicted presence in Venice includes, crucially, the glamour that attaches to the exotic, as it does the horror attendant upon the “turban’d Turk.” Both versions of black men are placed within the discourse of European civility, and both are unyoked from that by violence. (Loomba 168)

The three Shakespearean characters Caliban, Othello and Shylock are, however, depicted as representatives of “otherness” in completely different ways. Othello’s “linguistic abilities are also part of his particular foreignness, of the seductive charm of another kind of non Europeanness than Caliban’s” (Loomba 175). Accordingly, Shakespeare’s own era was, according to Loomba, profoundly

shaped by the recognition of different national and racial identities. Thus, as Loomba (171) claims, *The Tempest* “participates in and mediates between several different discourses of travel and otherness” thus showing its grounding in both the Atlantic and the Mediterranean discourse, by using the vocabularies of “difference” in both discourses interchangeably. However, Shakespeare’s *Tempest* – one of the plays that has been used most frequently in transcultural interpretations and postcolonial rewritings – cannot be claimed as a purely Western text any longer after all the reappraisals of Prospero’s role from that of a benevolent patriarch to an oppressive colonialist (Singh 5). As stated by Jyotsna Singh (5-6), “[t]hese critical revisions followed the decolonisation movements in the former colonies of Africa, the Caribbean, and Latin America, which imaginatively claimed Caliban as their ancestor while politically they claimed their lands.” This idea of criss-crossing of literature, or in other words intertextuality, is identified by Loomba as a form of “contact zone” which is also responsible for the creation of new literary genres (*Postcolonial* 70).

Thus, this essay sets out to examine the reciprocal process of exchange and the dialogic mode (Bakhtin) that characterises recent Shakespearean adaptations in postcolonial literatures in English. In other words, “rewritings” of Shakespeare in a postcolonial context are not mere interpretations, translations or adaptations, but, as Loomba implies,

original artistic works that reference, converse and engage with Shakespeare's plays. It is also important to ask what happens to texts/authors that/who are caught between different and even contradictory literary and cultural influences. Shifting from a mode of "writing back to the colonial centre" to a transcultural approach is thus not necessarily one without its own conflicts at hand.

This is illustrated in Dev Virahsawmy's transformative adaptation of Shakespeare, *Toufann, A Mauritian Fantasy* (1991)<sup>1</sup>, a modern three-act comedy within which the playwright turns the master-slave dialectic on its head in order to illustrate "the abundant potential of the stage to achieve different meanings or readings according to the context in which [the] play is staged" (Banham, Mooneeram, and Plastow 292). The cultural and linguistic contexts of the play should thus be considered in greater detail, not least because Virahsawmy himself has written extensively on the linguistic history of Mauritius<sup>2</sup>. Virahsawmy is also a passionate campaigner for the establishment of Mauritian Creole (his preferred term is "Mori-sien") as the national language of Mauritius which, according to him, should become the language of literature, culture and government, as well as daily life. From 1966 to 1987, he was actively involved in Mauritian politics, being one of the founders of the *Mouvement Militant Mauricien*. *Li*, Virahsawmy's first play in Mauritian Creole, was written in 1972 when he was imprisoned for political activity

and struggling with censorship. *Li* is a play that articulates protest and does it, significantly, not only via its content but also its choice of language (Mauritian Creole). Since then, he has concentrated on writing in Mauritian Creole and published the Shakespearean adaptations *Zeneral Makbef* (an adaptation of *Macbeth*, 1981), *Trazedji Makbess* (a translation of *Macbeth*, 1997), *Enn Ta Senn Dan Vid* (a translation of *Much Ado About Nothing*, 1995), *Zil Sezar* (a translation of *Julius Caesar*, 1987) and *Toufann* (an adaptation of *The Tempest*, *Hamlet*, *King Lear* and *Othello*, 1991). His Creole play, *Sir Toby*, was written in response to Border Crossings' production of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* in Mauritius.

Virahsawmy's writing of translations and adaptations of Shakespeare puts him alongside a range of other writers from the African continent who have found in Shakespeare a vehicle to represent and redress postcolonial concerns and issues. Translating and rewriting Shakespeare's plays in Africa has thus increasingly become a means of broaching local political issues. Perhaps the most distinguished writer is the late President Julius Nyerere of Tanzania with his two Kiswahili versions of *Julius Caesar* (*Julius Caezar*, 1963 and *Juliasi Kaizari*, 1969) and *Mabepari was Venisi* (*The Merchant of Venice*, 1969). Nyerere seems to have undertaken his translations primarily as a celebration of the richness and beauty of the Kiswahili language. Thus, his initial motivations for adapting/appro-

priating Shakespeare were nationalist: “[...] as a way of disarming detractors of kiswahili who said it could not be the vehicle of science and high culture, and who were opposed to its adoption as a national language [...] thus assisting the meteoric rise of literature in kiswahili to its status as a national literature today” (Klein 217).

Apart from Nyerere, there are other writers who translate and adapt Shakespeare, such as Tsegaye Gebre-Medhin in Ethiopia, the Congolese Sony Labou Tansi, Wale Ogunyemi in Nigeria, or Thomas Decker in Sierra Leone<sup>3</sup>. There is a commercial version of *Macbeth*, *Umabatha*, the *Zulu Macbeth*, from South Africa (1970) which was also staged at Shakespeare’s Globe, London, as part of the Celebrate South Africa Festival in April 2001. In many cases the motivation for these explorations of Shakespeare in an African context were not only to enjoy the supposedly universal themes of the plays, but also to entertain their audiences with their clever and witty language, storytelling, complex riddles and proverbs. As Martin Banham and Jane Plastow summarize:

In Africa, theatre matters. African theatre is entertainment, but it can also be aesthetically, politically, socially and spiritually committed, and often it is all these things simultaneously. Moreover, much modern African theatre refuses to be compartmentalized into a particular form of presentation. Instead it draws on

indigenous performance traditions including dance, music, storytelling and mime, and combines them with ideas of drama drawn from experiences of Western colonialism, to create theatre forms which are syncretic and inclusive in both form and content. (vii)

With his plays in Mauritian Creole, Virahsawmy has shown that language as a site for cultural expression and cultural identity is able to trouble the political and cultural establishment by the subversive presence of a popular tongue that the political establishment cannot control. When Shakespeare is translated from English to Creole, the audience also changes from an elite minority to a general majority as Creole is the lingua franca of Mauritius and a vehicle for the continuation of the oral tradition among its people.

In *Toufann, A Mauritian Fantasy*, Prospero, the powerful philosopher king, spends his time writing and carrying out research in his laboratory. He leaves his brother Yago, the Prime Minister, with the responsibility of running the country's affairs. Prospero relates to his daughter Kordelia how Yago got into power, which resembles the rise of tyrannical governments in certain African states and beyond:

hard-working, intelligent...too intelligent. Cunning. Little by little, he managed to get absolute power for himself. Without me even noticing, he gets rid of ministers one after the

other – putting in his men everywhere, police, army, the law...everywhere you go, nothing but his men. And so, bit by bit, he got all the power. It's meant to be basic to any democracy that you separate the executive from the legislature! Not him.... (220)

Yago, who is obsessed with power, joins forces with the country's oldest enemies, King Lir and his brother, Prince Edmon, to overthrow his brother through a military coup. In the confrontation Prospero's wife is killed and Kordelia, their new-born baby, is spared. Prospero and Kordelia get into a "nutshell of a boat" (219) and set sail in uncharted waters. They finally land on an island and Prospero, the computer genius, turns it "into a little paradise" (221). Coconuts are filled with whisky and the island is flowering with "weed" (hashish). The only inhabitants of the island are Kalibann and his mother Bangoya, a black slave who was abandoned by a white pirate after he had fathered Kalibann, who later becomes Prospero's scientific assistant. Like in *The Tempest*, Kalibann was the owner of the island before Prospero arrived.

Time passes and Prospero and his daughter Kordelia have now lived on the island for twenty years. Through patience and much research, Prospero has developed his science in order to exert total control over people and nature. Prospero is thus able to create a typhoon ("Toufann") to capture the ship that is carrying those who had toppled him

from his Throne. The typhoon/ “Toufann” thus becomes “the instrument of [his] revenge” (221). More so than in *The Tempest*, the notion of sinning, repentance and revenge are frequently expressed by various characters. The binary of paradise and hell is also mentioned more than once, highlighting general human desires and fears. The passengers cannot make any sense of the mysterious cyclone, which appears to have flown their ship across the island and landed it on a mini-lake with mountains all around. Thus in *Toufann*, the powerful have to capitulate not only in the face of nature but also to the influence of science and technology.

Prince Ferdjnan, son of King Lir who had deposed Prospero, is among the victims of the shipwreck, and while exploring the island, he is hypnotised by Aryel, a robot whose creator is no other than Prospero. Aryel, “a blonde giant with blue eyes” (219, original italics), is a child of Prospero’s science, a creature of his vast, scientific Frankenstein-like competence. Hence, Aryel does what Prospero orders him to do according to his abilities as a ‘magical’ robot: “Captain, if something’s difficult I do it instantly. Things that are impossible take me a little longer” (219). Aryel takes Prince Ferdjnan to Prospero and Kordelia. Prospero’s plan is taking shape: he has decided that his daughter Kordelia would sooner or later marry Prince Ferdjnan to re-conquer/recover his lost kingdom. However, the crucial part of Prospero’s plan falls apart when his daughter Kordelia reveals that she wants to

marry Kalibann, and not the Prince. “He doesn’t have royal blood,” Prospero objects. “He has human blood.” “That’s enough for me,” Kordelia replies (251). Prospero thus surrenders control. He throws the Red Key, and with it, his magical powers, into the sea.

As critics have observed, the red key that Prospero throws into the sea is symbolic as it was the emblem of the Labour Party headed by Navin Ramgoolam, who led Mauritius to Independence (Zabus). A Mauritian audience would thus recognise Virahsawmy’s political allusion and identify Prospero at that moment in the play as Ramgoolam. In *Toufann*, Prospero is depicted as an absolute ruler who often refers to himself as being Godlike, especially in relation to his servant/robot Aryel: “I am his God – I created him. He is the child of my power, my science, my technology: the creature of my competence. [...] And, whenever I wanted, I could make thousands more just like him” (221). When Kordelia says to her father: “You behave as if you wanted to take the place of God” (219), Prospero answers: “Well, daughter, you’re very close [...] Today, I am the one who controls Toufann, I control the tempest, I am the one who decides, I am the one who controls everything [...] I’m completely in control” (219, 221). As a “scientific genius,” Prospero thus “has a lot of power – over nature and over people” (227). Nevertheless, it is Ferdjinan who advises him to be more compassionate, pointing out that his arrogance will not lead to

a happy end. According to Ferdjinan, Prospero's need for revenge does not "give him the right to play with people's lives. He has no right to play at God, using his power for revenge. If only he could learn a bit of compassion, that might change it all" (248).

*Toufann* has been translated into English by Nisha and Michael Walling. Originally, the play's title is "Ennfanteziantrwaak," which translates literally into "a fantasy in three acts." Michael and Nisha Walling's translation of the title into the "a Mauritian Fantasy" makes it helpful for an English audience to be able to locate the socio-political and cultural setting of the adaptation at once. Nevertheless, the English translation of *Toufann* is partly problematic as the most obvious signifier of Mauritian identity – its language, Mauritian Creole – is lost almost entirely. In their attempt to make the play accessible to an English audience, Nisha and Michael Walling have translated almost all of it into English, keeping Mauritian Creole only for the 'lesser' characters of Dammarro and Kaspalto. Some passages that feature these two characters are left deliberately untranslated, especially the scene in which Kaspalto and Dammarro, disguised as Yago and Edmon, reappear on stage singing in Creole (231).

*Toufann* is thus an "individual rewrite" and transformation of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, *King Lear*, *Hamlet* and *Othello* – in the context of

transcultural and multilingual Mauritius. More specifically, Virahsawmy goes beyond the straightforward approach to translation as in his other Shakespearean adaptations such as *Zil Sezar* (*Julius Caesar*) or *Trazedji Makbess* (*Macbeth*). Rather, he uses Shakespeare's themes, his language and his characters as a trigger for social commentary and critical reflection on the political, cultural and economic realities of Mauritian everyday life, as well as universal concerns that affect communities around the globe in postcolonial societies and beyond. Collectively, his adaptations articulate the problems of aging and parenting, but also explore the human attributes of self-knowledge and self-deception, as well as the relationship between the individual and society, idealism and materialism, wealth and poverty, law and arbitrariness in Mauritian society and elsewhere.

This form of social commentary in the plays is also infused with a playful sense of humour. Just as the characters in Shakespeare's drama often play and jest with language, so do the characters in Toufann. For instance, when Poloniouss says: "I was using metaphor, Your Majesty," Edmon replies without knowing the term: "I don't care what you were using metal for – I want a better speech at the Royal Wedding! [...]" (241). In another sequence, Edmon and Yago discuss how they can take over the control of the country:

EDMON: Prime Minister Yago, to inaugurate my

reign, we need to establish a policy of universal order.

YAGO: Certainly, Your Majesty. However, in order to permit a policy of universal order, there must first be universal chaos. The question therefore arises: how do we begin to create chaos?

EDMON: Perhaps with a policy of fun. There is a general excess of seriousness amongst my subjects. A lack of frivolity. I don't have a court jester. Imagine – what sort of a jester monarchy is this? I want a jester. And dancing – I want all the sailors to dance. A policy of universal mirth. My eternal reign should go down in history as the Golden Age of clowning. (240)

The excerpt above pokes fun at, and makes light of, the administrative bureaucracy of political decisions and their implementation. This is heightened in the appropriation of the phrase “the Golden Age of clowning,” which debases and ridicules Elizabeth's I reign and her rule over the commonwealth as an unserious and incompetently clownish one.

*Toufann* is thus chiefly based on Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, though characters from other Shakespearean tragedies are introduced such as Korde-lia, King Lir and Edmon (Cordelia, King Lear and Edmond from *King Lear*), Yago (Iago from *Othello*), and Poloniouss (Polonius from *Hamlet*) who are ascribed new character traits and, at times, different physical appearance. These ‘altered’ Shake-

spearean characters are self-reflexive, even meta-reflexive about their roles in the play. Yago, for instance, complains about his own character composition:

I've just about had enough of this. [...] Oh yes – let's all blame Yago. Ever since that little runt Shakespeare used me to stir things up between Othello and his wife, everyone thinks I'm to blame for everything that goes wrong anywhere in the whole world [...] If only you literary critics would realise that I'm not at all bad!" (242-243).

As mentioned, Virahsawmy's play was originally written for a "local" Mauritian audience. In their translation of *Toufann*, Nisha and Michael Walling point out that, in one scene, King Lir is intertextually alluding to a specific political speech, in which Harish Boodhoo, the leader of the Parti Socialiste Mauricien (PSM), a splinter group of the 1979 ruling Mauritian Labour Party (MLP), "likened various ethnic groups in Mauritius to monkeys defending their mountains from one another, which is not made obvious in the translation itself" (Walling and Walling quot. in Banham, Gibbs, and Ofsisan 254). Moreover, Virahsawmy makes many linguistic jokes and puns in Mauritian Creole that are simply untranslatable for a reader from the "West." Mauritians, on the other hand, will immediately understand the satirical references to the scandals of government ministers, among other

things. Virahsawmy also ridicules politicians who use their imagination as does Poloniouss, which the character of King Lir criticizes as follows: “You’re always using your imagination. It’s not a good idea for a politician” (222).

Other, more direct political allusions abound in *Toufann*. Depicting the 1990s as a time of political uncertainty in Mauritius, Virahsawmy “exploits social structures and historical realities that successfully connect with the audience’s experience and cause them to engage with the play” (Banham, Mooneeram, and Plastow 290). Under the constitution adopted in 1968, Mauritius was a constitutional monarchy with the British monarch as head of state. Towards the end of the play, Ferdjjan tells Prospero that “the world changes all the time. That’s what you have to understand, Prospero. Perhaps your logic had some sort of value once. But the wind has changed. We don’t believe in anyone’s privileges any more” (250). As his speech conveys, Ferdjjan represents the most realistic character in the play who is well-educated in power-politics. In 1991, the year when *Toufann* was written, a constitutional amendment was passed in Mauritius, providing for a republican form of government, with a president that was to replace the British monarch, Queen Elizabeth II, as Head of State. The amendment went into effect in 1992. In *Toufann*, Virahsawmy expresses the ambivalent attitudes that many Mauritian citizens had towards this political change as, on the one hand, people wanted to

welcome democratic developments in the country, yet, on the other hand, they were critical and wary of the government.

The one Shakespearean character whom Virahsawmy almost totally transforms in *Toufann* is Caliban. While he is described in Shakespeare's dramatis personae as "a savage and deformed slave," Virahsawmy portrays his Kalibann in the stage directions as follows: "He is a young man, around 25, of mixed race. He is good looking, intelligent and hardworking" (219). Whereas in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, Caliban's "otherness" and inferiority, as well as his naiveté, are highlighted (1.2.359-363), in *Toufann* Kalibann is no longer a slave but Prospero's assistant and technician. As Kordelia says of him admiringly, "He's my father's assistant. He knows all the secrets. Like the passages where the cameras can't spy on us. He's even disconnected the dungeon surveillance camera for a bit..." (226). Moreover, the most crucial scene in *The Tempest* between Caliban, Prospero and Miranda where Caliban famously tells Prospero, "You taught me language; and my profit o't / Is, I know how to curse" (1.2.364-365), is completely missing in Virahsawmy's *Toufann*. When Prospero intends to give Kalibann his freedom, the latter does not react to these intentions with gratitude or emotion at all. Only when Prospero asks once again, "Are you glad that I'm giving you your freedom?" (233) does Kalibann react: "But I am already free, Mr. Prospero. [...] You never stood in my way" (233).

As Walling argues, Virahsawmy's Kalibann does not understand the concept of freedom because he feels free within the social structure as it is set up; his knowledge is limited, although his intelligence isn't" (Walling quot. in Wilkinson 121). Kalibann, who is called "batar" by Prospero (the Mauritian Creole term for 'bastard,' 'person of mixed race,' and an illegitimate person) is also an embodiment of the cultural hybridity of Mauritian society. Critics have noted how his hybridity symbolically "defies the boundaries that colonial communities create between what is included and what is excluded" and "overthrow[s] the slave-master relationship that has, in various ways and under different forms, been part of the history of Mauritius" (Mooneeram 19-20). In the work, therefore, Virahsawmy does not highlight the idea of the formerly colonised who will always feel inferior to the coloniser. Rather he focuses on Kalibann as the paradigm of métissage: He represents the common man who, on the one hand, is the result of the country's colonial legacy and, on the other hand, represents the future leader of the state. Whether he will become an autocrat is open to discussion and interpretation at the end of the play. When Kordelia and Kalibann's reign begins, Prospero warns them not to make the same mistakes that he has (252). Virahsawmy's version of *The Tempest* thus stays relatively faithful to Shakespeare's original but, in other respects, loosely adapts both text and context in order to comment on Mauritian society and the country's political history.

Virahsawmy's adaptation of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* also changes it from a tragicomedy to a comedy, a deliberate decision on the playwright's part since the genre of tragedy is not common in Mauritian theatrical culture (Virahsawmy quot. in Wilkinson 112). The characters in the play frequently refer on a meta level to their situation as being in a play written and directed by a playwright. In one scene, for instance, Prospero says to Kordelia, "You will understand. When it's finished. When the final curtain falls. Oh – it's too soon to explain now. It's like a play. I've written it, and now I'm directing it scene by scene. All the actors have to do is perform the way I want them to" (229). After King Lir has abdicated, Edmon becomes King at one stage and Polonious says to him, "Majesty – they're writing the script now. Best to play your part in the comedy" (240). Yago also voices at one point: "Whatever your viewpoint, this whole thing is turning into a farce. Can't you see that it's all somebody else's play?" (243). At the end of the play Aryel says to Kaspalto and Dammarro: "Don't worry. I'll talk to the boss I'll get him to write a new story. [...] Cast off, then!" (253). All these comments indicate that Virahsawmy is using his characters frequently to consciously comment on their role as characters within the play, or that the whole situation, as highlighted by Aryel, is simply "a phase to be passed through. We all have to emerge from it, and return to reality" (238). *Toufann* also inverts Prospero's rule as "lord" of the New World (5.1.162), and as puppet master and

manipulator of all the other characters. In *Toufann*, Kordelia's remarks cast a doubt over her father's powers: Whether he really has full control over the typhoon and whether he truly has scientific knowledge or is simply overestimating his powers is ambivalent.

In order to show the difference to Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and to make the play correspond to a Mauritian historical and cultural context, Virahsawmy inserts and introduces elements of Mauritian culture, language and places as well as political events that are known and important to Mauritians. There are numerous remarks in the play concerning people's rights, dignity and claims to power and knowledge. These comments are not specifically made against England or France as the former colonial powers but rather as a critique of the corruption and fraud, as well as forms of supremacy, fascism, dictatorship and despotism, that have plagued and continue to afflict various countries on the African continent today. The figure of autocracy or monarchy in *Toufann* is, naturally, Prospero. He reiterates throughout the play that he has absolute power and that "[i]t's better to have one central intelligence which controls everything" (232), as "the central brain is indestructible" (232). He thus alludes to the idea that knowledge is held by the economically and politically powerful. Aryel, echoing Prospero's thoughts in conversation with Ferdjnan, says, "Plans are made by the knowledgeable and the strong. The others just

have to go along with it" (236). Edmon and Yago's greed for power becomes evident in the scene in which King Lir abdicates (234). According to Yago, "[i]t doesn't matter if the country is nothing but a prison, hospital, asylum and cemetery. Power is all that counts!" (235). Hence, many of the characters in the play are variously obsessed with power and how to gain access to it.

Another, more humane, form of power and rule can be observed in the character of King Lir who, at one point, states: "we think that because we are strong or powerful we can do as we please" (239). He is the only character who gestures at power's corrupting force if abused. At an earlier appearance in the play, he exclaims: "Power tends to corrupt, therefore give power to the people. Organise an election" (234). He directly mentions democracy as a crucial part of a fair and just life. Like King Lear in Shakespeare's play, King Lir in *Toufann* learns the hard way how to be humane and recognises his mistakes which he reveals in conversation with Poloniouss: "We went along with Edmon and Yago in deposing Prospero. Poor man: heaven knows where he is now. [...] All day I've been thinking of Prospero and his child. [...] I've lost it all. My son, my kingdom, everything"; "[...] I'm a monster, Poloniouss" (239; 240). Poloniouss answers: "No, Majesty. You're a human being; and like all human beings, you make mistakes. The sign of a good man is that he recognises the mistakes he's made" (240). In this sequence, Virahsawmy

clearly draws on Aristotle's notion of "hamartia" (tragic flaw) and "anagnorisis" (recognition).

The character's comments on power and democracy grow more and more numerous and intense towards the end of the play. The climax comes in the scene where Ferdjinan pleads with Aryel for change and freedom, summing up what is needed to be done in order to topple the oppressive regime:

FERDJINAN: Your're paralysed because of what your conscience is doing to your soul. You're finding it impossible to act because the mistakes of the past are getting in the way of today's reasoning. But you have to understand that things have changed.

ARYEL: Ferdjinan.

FERDJINAN: Aryel, you're the one who made me see clearly. Prospero may have made you, but he hasn't been able to stop you having feelings. He can threaten you as much as he wants: today you are free. You're free because you have dared. We have to dare. (248)

Ferdjinan's last words, "We have to dare," allude to Virahsawmy's own convictions in his political campaigning for Mauritian Creole as the lingua franca in Mauritius. As the first writer to write an entire play in Mauritian Creole, his pioneering work in fighting for the establishment of Creole as a language of literature and daily use has been noted by critics.

Challenging the dominant perception of Creole as the language of slaves who tried to imitate their French masters, Virahsawmy supports the use of Creole as a means of claiming a native Mauritian identity that does not deny the political reality of the country's legacy of colonialism. Rather, in line with Édouard Glissant's notion of linguistic hybridity and a "poetics of relation[ality]", Virahsawmy acknowledges how Mauritian Creole has emerged out of French, English and indigenous languages. In an interview, Virahsawmy has expressed that Creole is the expression of the Mauritian people, speaking positively of its hybridity and métissage, "its vitality and capacity to adapt" and hence marker of "a supra-ethnic identity in a plural society" (*Le Week End*). Ferdjnan's "We have to dare" (248) expresses these ideas succinctly. When Kordelia says to Prospero, "What reality is left? [...] Dreams have to become realities, and realities dreams. [...] There's a new form of reality struggling to be born. You've got to accept it, Father" (251); this "new form of reality" of which she speaks is the Mauritian experience of cultural and linguistic métissage that Virahsawmy articulates throughout his play.

Although many of the allusions in *Toufann* are culturally and politically specific, and carry most resonance with a local Mauritian audience/reader, Virahsawmy nevertheless sees a merging of local concerns in the play with more universal issues that are fundamental to the situation of postco-

lonial societies. (Virahsawmy quot. in Wilkinson 114). Despite this, Virahsawmy's work is not well-known outside Mauritius; his readership remains largely within his own country. Nonetheless, Virahsawmy has been successful in using the theatre as a vehicle for communal regeneration and cultural awareness. In *Toufann*, Mauritian Creole becomes a creative language that transculturally bridges different historical languages. As Roshni Mooneeram summarizes,

“Toufann” is a Hindustani and Bhojpuri word for cyclone, a familiar natural occurrence in Mauritius. [...] Not only is Mauritian Bhojpuri increasingly influenced by the Creole language, but it also feeds back into Creole which has appropriated several of its lexical items. The word “Toufann” becoming itself text – manifold, diffuse – the title starts an intertextual argument that situates the play within a specific history and society. (18)

Importantly, Virahsawmy does not exclude the colonial circumstances under which Shakespeare's *The Tempest* was introduced to Mauritians by the British – which was mainly to educate the upper class and elite, or those who already knew or had been taught English. *Toufann* in the Mauritian Creole version thus breaks the boundaries between the well-off and educated Mauritians and those less educated who are capable of understanding Creole only. Virahsawmy thus deliberately uses Creole to spread awareness of Shakespeare and his works

but not the imperialist ideologies that had primarily been transported with Shakespeare during the period of British colonisation in Mauritius. Therefore, instead of focusing on a single model, “*Toufann* adopts a broader heteroglossic strategy, transposing across one or several systems of signs, creatively adapting from more than one tradition, more than one type of text” (Mooneeram 18). This transcultural mode of writing thus adopts, adapts and translates Shakespeare into Mauritian Creole in order to, first, demonstrate how “high culture” (Shakespearean drama) can be rendered in a supposedly ‘low’ or ‘inferior’ linguistic system, and, second, to articulate a new political agenda of cultural and linguistic métissage. When asked why he originally decided to translate/adapt Shakespeare, Virahsawmy answers:

I have translated different works into Mauritian Creole for several reasons. To show that Mauritian Creole is capable of expressing “great thoughts.” To build bridges between cultures. To indicate that the establishment of Mauritian Creole as national language does not mean cultural autarky. (Virahsawmy quot. in Wilkinson 111)

Virahsawmy’s *Toufann* is thus less a “writing back rewrite” of Shakespeare than a transcultural “individual rewrite.” This does not mean that political issues are not addressed at all in the play, or that because it is a comedy, it does not offer a serious

critique of Mauritian society. On the contrary, the political content and references in the play are particularly resonant within a contemporary Mauritian context and are expressed in the various viewpoints of the characters. Interestingly, the translation of the comedy back into an English version, which grants a “Western” audience access to the play, reverses the process that many African writers and translators of Shakespeare during the 1960s, such as Thomas Decker or Julius Nyerere, were engaged in. In *Toufann*, Virahsawmy thus addresses the plurality and hybridity of Mauritian society which is a result of complex histories of colonisation and de-colonial efforts to critique and redress these histories of epistemic violence, elision, suppression and marginalisation. Virahsawmy’s transcultural mode of Shakespearean adaptation in Mauritian Creole thus allows the formerly colonised to speak a new language characterised by métissage, one with which he becomes the coloniser’s rival in literary sophistication. The play demonstrates how, in spite, or perhaps because, of the contemporary era of globalisation, with English as the dominant medium of communication and lingua franca, languages such as Mauritian Creole play an ever more vital role in the formation of a distinct linguistic, cultural and historical awareness in postcolonial societies around the globe.

*Toufann*, Dev Virahsawmy’s adaptation of Shakespeare thus illustrates, as Kwok-kan Tam, Andrew

Parkin and Terry Siu-han Yip summarize, how Shakespeare's plays provide many postcolonial writers with "valuable opportunities to exercise their imagination in the transcultural contexts of experimenting with a Western form that can be adapted for local appreciation, which at the same time will add a new dimension to the world reception of Shakespeare" (Tam, Parkin, and Siu-han Yip, ix). Moreover, as a transcultural Shakespeare adaptation, *Toufann* is formally characterised by linguistic and cultural hybridity as well as syncretism. As a revision of four popular plays written by the icon of the British literary canon, it represents a counter-narrative that seeks to redress and re-configure historical and contemporary power structures and imbalances.

From the first appearance of Shakespeare's plays on stage, there have evidently been countless adaptations of his works. However, postcolonial and transcultural rewrites remain a distinct sub-category of adaptations because they offer a means to formerly subjugated, colonised and marginalised voices and cultures to rework and re-inscribe the dominant narratives of Western modernity (especially with respect to the binary concepts of colonised/coloniser, margin/centre, servant/master, them/us) as well as critically interrogate the concepts of class/caste, gender and race. It is this process, and not merely product, of transcultural adaptation, that involves the interaction and conflict of socio-cultural, political and historical forc-

es with “relations of continuity, discontinuity and hybridization” (Walter 27) that gives rise to the “literary surplus” value and the criss-crossing, that is the intertextual references and incorporation of different texts in Shakespeare adaptations in and from a postcolonial context which lead to the creation of new literary genres. *Toufann* definitely is a comedy which falls into this category by hybridizing Shakespeare’s dramatis personae in order to produce a counter-discourse (Gilbert and Tompkins 33) – to Western conceptions of “otherness,” but also to dominant discourses around contemporary Mauritian socio-cultural and political issues.

## Notes

1. *Toufann*, or *A Mauritian Fantasy* was published in an English translation by Michael and Nisha Walling in Banham, Gibbs, and Osofisan (217-254). *Toufann* was performed by Border Crossings, an international company that works in theatre and creates dynamic performances by fusing many forms of world theatre, dance and music. The company perceives itself as “work[ing] across the borders between cultures and art forms, and between nations and peoples, and has gained a wide audience in many places, such as the UK, Brazil, Egypt France, Hungary, India, Mauritius, Zimbabwe and the Seychelles” (*Border Crossings* 2002). *Toufann*, or *A Mauritian Fantasy*, along with others based on Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, was also the subject of a conference at London University’s Birkbeck College in December 1999.

2. His dissertation, “Towards a Revaluation of Mauritian Creole”, focuses on a theme that subsequently influenced all his ensuing work.

3. For a brief discussion of Decker’s translation of *Julius Caesar* and *As You Like It* (*Udat Di Kiap Fit*) into Krio, see Banham and Jones 121-136. For a discussion of examples of staging Shakespeare in Ghana, Malawi and Eritrea see Gibbs and Matzke (15-34).

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