

## An Island Paradise Turned Hell in the Indian Ocean: Mayotte in Nathacha Appanah's *Tropique de la violence*

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In literatures the world over, the island tends to represent either a utopian or dystopian space that enables us to alter geocentric perspectives and envision the world differently. Thus, the island of Sri Lanka was seen as a representation of paradise on earth (cf. *Anil's Ghost* by Michael Ondaatje) or at least of an alternative world (cf. *Island* by Aldous Huxley), while J.G. Ballard's novels use continental as well as oceanic islands as "ecocidal" spaces (Rozelle 61). In much Western imagination, the island has also functioned as a metaphor for eternal childhood (as in the case of J.M. Barrie's *Neverland*). This essay relies on the postcolonial paradigm of the Indian Ocean Rim to study Nathacha Appanah's polyphonic narrative, *Tropique de la violence* (Gallimard, 2016) in which the French island of Mayotte lying in the Mozambique channel of the Indian Ocean becomes the theatre for staging the violence unleashed by the combined forces of man and nature in the contemporary world. Although the author points out that she did not set out to write a political novel, she admits that "Mayotte is a concentrate of our contemporary issues. It is the textbook case of displacement of populations, ecological problems, problems of identity. Whatever is at the heart of our present world is today concentrated in this small piece of land" (Lepidi and Marivat).<sup>1</sup> As Silvia U. Baage has pointed out, this French territory (101st administrative Department of France) remains a gateway to Europe, albeit a peripheral and insular one, and Appanah's novel raises fundamental questions regarding the very integrity of France as a nation and the canonicity of its literature(s).

Since the publication of Bernadin de Saint-Pierre's *Paul et Virginie* (1788), the Indian Ocean islands have become a familiar *topos* in French literature. Initially, these islands were looked upon as exotic lands or idealized as lost paradises. The real or fictional travel accounts written later focused on the economic interests of the Island colonies or the evangelization of their peoples. Colonial exhibitions organized in France yielded a fantasized image of the Indian Ocean islands and reinforced the discourse on the hierarchy of races. In the 1960s, Camille de Rauville conceptualized the idea of "Indianoceanism" in order to posit a global humanist culture. In later decades, the idea of "créolité" (or "creolity"), a term coined by Jean Albany from Réunion (Bourse), emerged, seeking to

preserve the internal diversity of cultures. Another concept that emerged in the discourse was Mauritian Khal Torabully's "coolitude" (2002) which harks back to the history of migration of "coolies" across the Indian Ocean just as Négritude writes back to the history of the French Caribbean. Appropriating the French language and mixing it with the local languages, Francophone writers from the Indian Ocean Islands have contributed to the creolization of French writing and by doing so, have opened it up to the world. In 2007, forty-four writers signed the Manifesto for a World Literature in the French language, among whom were such luminaries of French Indian Ocean Studies as Ananda Devi and Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio.

Le Clézio's Indian Ocean novels "paint a world that is a multiplicity of words" whose unity consists in the "sharing out and the mutual exposure in this world of all its worlds" and as such they are "world-forming," according to Françoise Lionnet who has based her observation on Jean-Luc Nancy's reflections on globalization (World Literature, 288). Nathacha Appanah belongs to this new generation of writers who "rewrite world history from below" (loc.cit) in French and use the Indian Ocean as a method to do so. Born in Mauritius in 1975, Appanah came to France in 1998 to study journalism. While working as a freelance journalist in Lyon, she published her first novel *Les Rochers de Poudre d'Or* (Gallimard, 2003) about indentured labourers from India who replaced the African slaves in the sugarcane plantations in Mauritius. Her second novel *Blue Bay Palace* (Gallimard, 2004) depicts a Mauritian island which is picture perfect on the surface but fraught with class and caste tensions deep down. After moving to Paris in 2014, Appanah published her third novel *La noce d'Anna* (Gallimard, 2015) in which a mother remembers herself as a young woman on the day of her daughter's wedding and wonders about the meaning of intergenerational change. Her fourth novel *Le Dernier Frère* (Editions de l'Olivier, 2007) was translated into sixteen languages. It deals with the friendship between Raj, a nine-year old Mauritian boy, and David, a ten-year old from the Atlantic who comes to visit the island. The violence of Raj's childhood finds an echo in the story of the deportation of Jews to Mauritius in 1940. Between 2008 and 2010, Appanah lived in Mayotte. Her fifth novel *En attendant demain* (Gallimard, 2015) etches the tragic story of a talented couple whose hopes are dashed. *Tropique de la violence*, her sixth novel set in Mayotte, won fourteen awards.

While talking about her latest novel, *Le ciel par-dessus le toit* (*The Sky above the Roof*, a title borrowed from Paul Verlaine), Appanah provides a rare personal insight into the common strand that runs through her work. She remarks that she was "very much preoccupied with the way in which we inhabit the world" and that her work "always revolved around a woman who is prevented from loving or is unable to really give love" (Gesbert). In *Tropique de la violence*, on which this essay focuses, a

migrant mother gives up her child for adoption. Thus orphaned, the child has to desperately struggle to figure out his place in the world. Appanah's narrative is therefore crisscrossed by some fundamentally political questions: *what* is France and what does it mean to be French in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? By extension, her novel tries to address other contemporary and pressing issues: what is a nation and what is the meaning of nationality when a nation is confronted with the challenge of migration? What does France do when its duties towards its citizens conflict with its moral responsibility towards human beings in general? Drawing on economic, sociological, and postcolonial theories of migration, my essay will scrutinize the motivations of the move to the tropics by metropolitan dwellers and the pressures of migration in Mayotte in order to interpret the politicization of the migratory phenomenon, examine the negligence of peripheral Island territories by mainland France as a case of democratic dysfunction, and finally explore the putting to test of the sense of humanity and human rights on the European continent by the author through the realistic representation of the humanitarian crisis in the Indian Ocean territory. The essay will also refer to novels by Michael Ondaatje and Samantha Weinberg to provide a comparative perspective on fictional representations of violence in the Indian Ocean territories.

The protagonist of *Tropique de la violence* is Mo, a diminutive for Moïse (Moses, but characters in the book misinterpret it as harking back to another prophet, Mohammed), the son of a teenage and migrant mother adopted by Marie, a French nurse. In spite of the immaculate conception by Marie on a day of diluvian rains, Moïse (Mo) is born an Anti-Christ, a devil incarnate with green eyes and he commits murder at age sixteen. Bruce the boss of the criminal gang, Olivier the policeman, and Stephane the humanitarian worker are other characters around whom the narrative is woven. Each of them speaks in the first person to propel the story forward. Marie speaks throughout the novel from a spectral point of view: she says, at one point, drawing all the narrative threads together, "From where I speak, lies and pretence are not of any use" (11). Another absent presence in the novel is Mo's migrant African mother who abandons him in the care of a French woman. Bruce, the seventeen year old victorious king of the slum becomes a victim of violence at the end and is reduced to a mere voice. As Baage points out, the polyphonic structure of the novel in which twenty-three monologues are woven into a narrative allows Appanah to alternate between the voices of the rich and the poor, the young and the old, foreigners and natives, men and women, civil servants and voluntary workers, in a way that decentres the authority of any one voice at the same time as deploying polyphony for truly subversive ends (4).

## Tropic, Tropicality, Violence

Mayotte, lying between Madagascar and Mozambique, is geographically close to Africa. Tropicality, especially on the African continent, is synonymous in much Orientalist imagination with overpopulation, poverty, natural disaster, conflict, and disease. As Léo Courbot has argued, “the tropics have always been tropes and consequently the term ‘tropicality’ can be considered a metaphor of metaphors which places tropes and tropics in a situation of proximity” (85-86). Born in Mauritius, Appanah is not an outsider to the African connections of the Indian Ocean. However, she was not prepared for what she experienced in Mayotte where she went to live briefly with her husband and daughter. Her purpose in writing this novel is to expose the reverse side of tropicality and denounce the hypocrisy of modern civilization founded on the twin pillars of slavery and colonialism. The fact that in the French territory of Mayotte, the French are called *muzungu* (foreigner) by the Mahoraise people is a painful reminder of the fact that the Republican discourse of integration has not erased the memory of colonialism and that colour-blindness is more wishful thinking than an established reality. Like Camus’s Meursault, Appanah’s protagonist Mo commits murder after losing his mother. Meursault will figure out that meaninglessness is the meaning of life. His imprisonment is but a metaphoric representation of the human condition on earth, i.e. life is a prison for any human being born only to die. Mo will be perceived as a “buffoon/mad man” by the children in Mayotte because they see him as a black boy who deludes himself into thinking he is white, whereas whiteness for Mo does not represent skin colour but a way of life, a mix of material security, affection, home, education, culture, freedom, and above all, hope. He too will be put in prison, but the possibility of justice – punitive or reparative – will be denied to him. His singular destiny, thus, interrogates the limits of human rights and humanitarian compassion in today’s world.

*The World Report on Violence and Death* published by the World Health Organization in 2002 defines violence as “the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation” (Kurg). In Appanah’s novel, violence makes its appearance in its very title. Violence in all its forms – visual (shocking images), verbal (in the form of abuse, swearwords, mockery), physical (aggression), sexual (rape), moral (harassment), psychological (intimidation, coercion), criminal (murder), symbolic (power struggles), epistemic (erasure of local forms of knowledge), and in the form of harm to the environment – pervades the novel. Perhaps the most unbearable scene of violence depicted in the novel is the description of the gang rape of Mo by children of his age (154-55). In the neighbouring French

department of Réunion, writer Jean-François Samlong, who published a novel entitled *L'Arbre de violence* (1994), has attributed “the omnipresent, hateful and surreptitious violence” in the Indian Ocean islands to “the economy founded on slavery and racism in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century” (Séranot).

In his historical introduction to his book on postcolonialism, Robert Young has specified the rather perverse nature of postcolonial violence, recalling Fanon’s views:

Colonial violence was carried out in the name of ‘pacification’; postcolonial violence is carried out in the name of ‘degradation’, degrading the postcolonial subject back to subaltern status. [...] It is by becoming a subject of violence that the dehumanized colonized subject becomes a subject for the first time; violence functions as a kind of psychotherapy of the oppressed. Violence offers a primary form of agency through which the subject moves from non-being to being, from being an object to a subject. (293-95)

The evolution of the street-smart anti-hero Bruce in Appanah’s novel illustrates his refusal to don subaltern identity and his adamant quest for agency as compensation for the unemployment and poverty that form his horizon of expectation. Appanah deliberately constructs his character as an antinomy of the noble savage, i.e., a wolf incarnate (Lionnet, “Littérature-monde” 119-138). His original name is Ismael Said. Ismael, like Moses, is the name of a prophet in Islam (a son nearly sacrificed by his father Abraham). He is a descendant of slaves and is not ashamed to assert it (72). Though he has a French passport, he is torn between a French school which he attends in the morning and where the teachers refrain from corporeal punishment and the *madrassa* to which he goes in the evening and where he receives beatings if he makes a mistake. Initially he hopes for a mainstream life in an office like a white man. What alienates him from society is his eviction from middle school for being an underperformer. The humiliation of this rejection traumatizes him and he takes it out on his understudies. After dropping out of school, he spirals into all known social vices – stealing, drinking, drug trafficking, whoring, fighting as if to seek vengeance on both the headmaster who wanted to send him to a school for the impaired and his father who punished him for stealing money from his sister. It is when he sees a Batman movie projected by an NGO that he changes his name to Bruce after Bruce Wayne. This chosen name allows him to rebrand his identity and gives him the self-confidence to be the boss of the underworld, Gaza, Mayotte’s notorious slum. Such manmade violence is matched by nature’s anger in the novel. Tropical rain pours on the island with such a violent force that it provokes a landslide and a torrent of mud that reduces everything in its path to detritus (108-109).<sup>2</sup> The anger of the earth exemplified in the torrent of mud is allegorically paralleled in the menstrual blood flowing between the thighs of the unhappy woman Marie who is not able to conceive. In this sense, the novel is replete with violent imagery whose

normalization on the island is seen as a historical legacy of French colonization.

### Politicization of Migration

“Migration is a banal phenomenon,” François Heran has observed in order to take the heat out of the current political debate about migration in France and generally in Europe (Confavreux interview). The question of migration divides France as well as Europe. In the name of preserving cultural identity and national security, right-wing parties are pressing for the closing of frontiers and a strict control of migratory flows. Racism has raised its ugly head again. In such a light, one must ask whether fiction can play any interventionist or meliorist role. The discourse of the policeman in the seminal and poetic passage from Appanah’s novel addresses this issue directly:

After all, it is perhaps just an old story, heard over a thousand times, a thousand times mulled over. The story of a shining land which everyone wants to reach. There are some words to designate it: Eldorado, mirage, paradise, dreamland, utopia, Lampedusa. It is the story of boats called kwassas kwassas, elsewhere known as barks or canoes or ships, which have existed from time immemorial to make men cross oceans voluntarily or against their will. It is the story of the human beings on these boats who have been called by various names from time immemorial: slaves, indentured labourers, the plague-stricken, convicts, repatriates, Jews, boat people, refugees, undocumented workers, illegal aliens (56).

The recourse to the migrant’s eye and the shifting narrative focalization functions in terms of advocacy and championing, offering a migrant-centred perspective of world history. It recalls that the history of humanity is a history of migrations in evolutionary time, an aspect of her narrative that ties Appanah to such writers as Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, Michael Ondaatje, David Dabydeen, among others. The repetition of the word “story” in this passage recreates the waves of the ocean as well as those of migration, making a migrant out of the reader who is carried from the past and landed upon the present. On the one hand, there is a general faith in the goodness of the planet that has the capacity to offer safety and sustenance. The different names of such an ideal land enumerated by Appanah indicate that this other place is sometimes real, sometimes imagined, or a superimposition of the imagined on the real and that it is an eternal, universal, and human tendency to aspire to this ideal space. On the other hand, however, the gradual metamorphosis of the status of people who migrate (from slaves to illegal aliens) tells a different story, that of a growing politicization of migration by a culture built on discrimination and rejection. The history of class struggle, as Marx and Engels famously characterized all human history to be, has meant that religious, racial, social, political and economic oppression and persecution

by humans upon other humans also casts a long shadow upon universal ideals of brotherhood and common peace. This passage alerts us to this fundamental clash of human destinies over time and space, and by focusing upon Mayotte, Appanah draws attention to its impossibly fragile and precious collectivity facing threats that are at once historical, environmental, social, and existential. The ocean, be it the Atlantic, or the Indian Ocean or the Pacific, serves as a vehicle to convey the migrants to the other side. The fragile *kwassas kwassas* symbolize the vulnerability of men who have become playthings of destiny in the vast space of the ocean, as Simona Jisa concludes in her analysis of inclusion and exclusion in the novel (127). Though the migratory phenomenon concerns all continents, Appanah's particular emphasis on the categories of subalterns who are displaced shows the domination, exploitation and rejection of difference (racial, ethnic, religious, social, cultural, ethical, bodily) that have been underpinning the movements of populations since the 16<sup>th</sup> century. If sedentary residents are the warp, migrants are the weft of the very fabric of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The national, regional, and global instruments for protecting human rights do not guarantee universal or unconditional freedom of movement of persons. Even climate refugees find it hard to seek asylum. Lack of space and infrastructure, scarce economic resources, societal unpreparedness and fear of terrorism are the main reasons for rich countries in the North not to welcome migrants from poor or war-ridden countries in the South or Middle East. After the Jewish holocaust, the only valid reason for admitting people remains protection from persecution. But the dynamism of international capital (Sen 1994) is such that temporary or permanent migration for work, tourism, study or business is an ongoing phenomenon. Recent scholarship tends to see "all manifestations of (internal and international) migration as a function of capabilities and aspirations to migrate" (Haas 2011:8). Appanah's novel suggests that even in postcolonial times, it is easier for a white man or woman, indeed even illegal goods like drugs and arms to cross frontiers than for a black man or woman to do the same. The question of agency is what distinguishes metropolitan and subaltern mobilities.

The novel deals with the issue of migration by reversing the perspectives and showing first of all why Europeans move to the tropics in the postcolonial age. Appanah constructs a subtle parallel between Marie's sexual attraction for a native of Mayotte and the attraction that discontented urban residents of temperate zones feel for the warm and green tropics. Marie meets Chamsidine in France at age 26 and gets married to him at 27. She follows him to his island at 28 because she is pulled by the beauty of the fertile tropical island. Her desire for the land is comparable to that of a newborn's for her mother's breast: "I have such a desire for this country, a desire to take everything, to swallow everything, sip after sip of the sea, mouthful after mouthful of the sky" (16). Once in

Mayotte, she thinks about having a child and dreams about the Mahorais ceremony that will bless the infant of mixed blood she wants to have. But this postcolonial Mother Mary is not a blessed one because her pregnancy terminates abruptly in abortion. Her infertility makes her husband seek another partner. Marie's sexual rivalry with the Comorian woman (19) for the body of her man recalls the rivalry between the native and the migrant for the possession of land, connecting, in Appanah's able allegorical hands, the drama of migration to the larger, more primeval patterns of the survival of the species.

When Marie meets the clandestine woman who comes to Mayotte with her child, she is only too happy to adopt the child that his mother is willing to abandon. For Marie, adoption amounts to a birth in the new mother's heart. The crossing of seas and continents and the long wait (27) make this birth more meaningful than the simple fact of carrying the baby in the womb. Social anthropologists distinguish between labour and adoptive migration despite the fact that they are both transnational phenomena. As Jassaca Leinaweaver remarks, "typically and ironically adopted children are welcomed into receiving countries – their immigration facilitated – while labour migrants from the same nation are viewed with suspicion or worse" (2). Appanah's novel invites us to read migration as an act of adoption. To be efficient, adoption necessitates a two-way adaptability. There is an implied analogy in the novel between Marie's attitude and that of the migrants who construct a patient and willing relationship with the receiving country. While they think that their bond is more respectful because it is not based on the accident of birth, western countries that receive migrants look upon them not as adopted citizens but as foreign bodies which drain their resources and energy.

Appanah sets up a contrast between Marie's guaranteed freedom of movement and the forced migration of Mo's mother who arrives in Mayotte as an illegal alien ("clandestine"). Marie is able to give the child a legal status by negotiating her divorce with Chamsidine in exchange for the recognition of the child as his own. The exchange of the child shows the meeting of metropolitan demand and peripheral supply, an ironic sign of North-South complementarity. In this process, not only are the existence and parental rights of the biological father of Mo forgotten and flouted, but also the laws and regulations of France quietly circumvented. The libidinal economy of individuals is thus shown to supersede the political economy of the nation, rendering the very idea of body politics ridiculous and useless.

Marie's smooth operation of cheating contrasts with the long, difficult, and uncertain trajectory of the people waiting to get their status recognized as immigrants or asylum-seekers. When Marie returns home from her night duty in the hospital, she sees refugees making a queue in front of the closed gates of the prefecture which will open the next morning:



It is still time to hope get a token to see an officer, and finally, explain one's case, one's life, the why and wherefores, file one's application for the residence permit, ask for a receipt, enquire about a residence card, hope for a renewal, someone to listen to, a reprieve, a sesame (15).

Unlike Marie, these desperate migrants have to legitimize their desire to live and put up with complex and time-consuming administrative procedures.

In contrast to these people who are merely struggling to revive and resume the interrupted narrative of their lives is the NGO worker Stéphane, who is another notably displaced person in the novel. His character recalls the often problematic missionary figure of colonial times; yet, his compassion for Mo relieves the latter's pain, at least momentarily. It is he who takes Mo to the Bandrakouni beach, the place of Mo's metaphorical birth, the *terra firma* where his mother had landed after a perilous voyage on the sea. Stéphane's humanity is a welcome relief in the harsh world of the slum. But he himself is very critical about what motivates young people in France to leave the country and involve in NGO activity. Heat in the literal as well as metaphorical sense of the term is what attracts young metropolitans to dystopian places as if the safety and regularity of their urban existence had created a spiritual void that needed to be filled by negative experiences in a different place:

Mayotte was France and nobody was interested in going there. The others wanted to go to Haiti, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Madagascar, Ethiopia. They wanted to see true misery, misery entrenched like a bad root, countries where things were hot, places where storms alternate with wars, where earthquakes come after droughts. The *nec plus ultra*, which looks impressive on CVs, was Gaza, the true Gaza in Palestine and it was reserved for the most experienced. (117)

With the help of some local representatives, Stéphane's mission aimed to construct a home for the youth where they could listen to music, watch movies, and play games. Given the widespread poverty and violence on the island, the stopgap "shelter" is a weak response to the magnitude of social problems besetting Mayotte. Furthermore, the fact that the humanitarian worker sticks with the expatriate crowd is proof of the existence of an invisible racial and social frontier in Mayotte:

Grilling chicken on the beach, dancing in nightclubs, having a quick one night's stand, taking bath at midnight, waking up at noon to the sound of the muezzin's prayers, plunging into the most beautiful lagoon in the world, enjoying the maximum, knowing that this is only a passage in our careers. (121)

This brief description of the pastime of metropolitan dwellers in Mayotte gives us a glimpse into the sense of alienation provoked by the aseptized world of rich and developed countries and the anomie of city life that make its men and women seek reprieve in so-called island paradises. Both the youth who move away from metropolitan cities and those who are

struck in underdeveloped areas seem equally lost however, a paradox not lost upon the reader of Appanah's novel.

Mo is an emblematic figure of the unaccompanied minor migrant caught in the cross-currents of individual psychology and national politics. As a child and an adopted one at that, Mo incarnates the possibility of straddling two countries and cultures, and crossing over. In the novel, this is symbolized by his shuttling forth between Petite Terre where his mother Marie had bought a house, and the slum Gaza. The *incipit* to Appanah's novel is a quote from Henri Bosco's *L'enfant et la rivière*: "There I asked. Yes, Gatzö replied to me. 'There lies a beautiful country.'" Abandoned by his biological mother and orphaned of his adoptive mother, Mo is faced with loneliness and obliged to leave the innocence of his childhood behind and step into the infernal world of delinquency.

When she is a child, Marie does not bear her own mother listening to singer Barbara day in and day out. Nevertheless, she takes a record of Barbara's "Black Eagle" during her exile in Mayotte and makes Mo listen to it. The metaphor "country of the past" represented the innocence of childhood before incest for Barbara. For Mo, the song evokes the comfort and safety of an evening at home with his adoptive mother. However, the untold violence in the song prepares the reader for trouble in Mo's paradise. Bosco's novel and Barbara's song are part of the intangible cultural heritage that Marie bequeaths to her son, the green-eyed Mo who suffers from heterochromia. According to Mahorais beliefs, he is a *djinn* (devil) because of the colour of his eyes. We could see Mo's heterochromia as a visible sign of the migrant's difference or otherness and also as what Salman Rushdie has called the culturally hybrid stereoscopic vision of the immigrant (19). The Biblical story of Satan condemned to wandering by God as retold by Daniel Defoe in his *History of the Devil* is quoted by Rushdie in the epigraph to his novel *The Satanic Verses*. The migrant is thus seen as a cursed person by the rooted native and as an unwanted guest by the government.

### Negligence of Peripheral Territories by Mainland France and Democratic Dysfunction

The popular and commonplace representation of France as a hexagon geographically positions France in Europe. French overseas territories are scattered not only geographically but also in the imagination of the French people. Institutionally speaking, Mayotte has been an unstable territory – a sultanate become a protectorate first, then a French overseas territory (1958), a territory detached from other Comoro Islands afterwards (1976), and a departmental authority (2001), and finally, a local authority with a unique status (2010). Mainstream French media talks about France's overseas territories or departments when there are riots for independence

or strikes against the economic policies, or natural catastrophes. The Manifesto for products of high necessity published in Guyana in 2009 attracted some attention. Politicians remember overseas territories on the eve of elections. In *Tropique de la violence*, we see this form of institutionalized forgetting illustrated when politicians come and make many promises (to bring internet, identity papers, security, improved standard of living, etc.) that they do not fulfill after elections are over. They do not want their expensive suits to be soiled by the mud in the slum. One of the questionable strategies they adopt is to work with local chiefs like Bruce and supply products to satisfy basic needs -food, energy, medicine, indeed even drinks and drugs- to keep the people temporarily happy, capture their votes, and forget them once the elections are over. Appanah's novel underscores the territorial inequalities and hypocrisies within the French nation-state, drawing attention to its marginalized spaces and to the paradoxes they represent to France's sense of itself.

Slums are outward signs of migratory pressure on urban space in the developing world as well as remnants of the erstwhile edges of empire in which poor labourers were crammed. The existence of slums in a French territory points to the neglect of authorities to provide proper housing for the population. Unlike R.L. Stevenson's adventurous Jim who comes across "buccaneers and buried gold" in *Treasure Island*, it is this hell of a place that Mo finds in Mayotte. Appanah's choice of the name Gaza to designate the slum may seem provocative. It was a name tagged by one of the residents. Visitors see it as a good joke. The author uses the time-tested argument of Shakespeare: what is in a name? Mo, when he enters the slum, asks himself if it were named after Tahiti or Washington or California, it would have made any difference (78). The slum has the characteristic stench of any slum. It speaks the language of the slum given by American rappers: nigga, fuck, ghetto (81).

Gaza is a slum, a ghetto, a waste dump, a sinkhole, a favela, it is an immense open-air camp of illegal aliens, it is an enormous smoking litter bin that can be seen from afar. Gaza is a violent no man's land where gangs of children with chemical drugs make the law. Gaza is Cape Town, it is Calcutta, it is Rio. Gaza is Mayotte, Gaza is France (54).

This particular passage in which the slum becomes metonymic of the island as well as the mainland transforms the novel from mere fiction into a fable, as Marcandier points out. In fact, the Biblical names of the characters give the novel an allegorical dimension, one by which Appanah underscores the apocalyptic spirit that pervades the book.

The slum is an interstitial space that reveals the weakness of the gridded-and-locked urban space and the depleted rural space. Unlike some fictional works and movies that ventured into poverty porn, Appanah's novel depicts the smell, the squalor and the dirt for the benefit of those who refuse to look at them as if their deliberate disregard would deny the

reality of the slum's existence. The author seems to warn us that unless something is done, the risk of the no-man's land enlarging, encroaching, indeed overflowing is great. The negligence and indifference of the authorities are manifest in another crucial sector – health. The boats come with people in the terminal stages of illness both physical and mental. This shows that preventive medicine does not exist. There are not enough facilities to cater to the many emergencies. Some of them are just discharged without any alternative solution. Corruption makes matters worse. The former soldier Dédé is addicted to drinks. By plying him with what he needs, Bruce is able to manipulate him into healing the people wounded by arms in the slum without the case being reported to police (106).

The Republic conceives of infrastructure for about 200,000 people while in reality 400,000 people live in the Island. The island has the most beautiful emerald-coloured lagoon in the world, but the lagoon is also the burial ground for hundreds of migrants who died during the crossing. Balancing the deaths in the lagoon are births on the island. Marie observes that the maternity ward of Mayotte is the biggest in France. She is puzzled as to what will happen to all the children who are born there. She suspects that migrant women from Comoro islands get pregnant in Mayotte only to avail of the right of the soil for their children and regularize their status thereby.<sup>3</sup> As for the police man Olivier and the fireman, they are overwhelmed by the children of Gaza when they take Mo to the court. Appanah etches a surrealistic scene where

[t]he mangrove forest seems to move, tremble and lunge forward. From green-leafed mangrove plants and entangled branches in this sand-land-sea emerge tens of children. They don't run, they don't rush, they seem to be in slow motion (180).

The chorus of children who call out Mo's name beating the ground with their sticks and dancing with their machetes present something akin to the performance of a spectacular opera. Indeed, as lines blur between the real and the unreal, the resistance of the children of Gaza emerges as a declaration of war against the Republic.

### Challenges to Democracy and Human Rights: Humanitarian Reason in Crisis

One of the central challenges posed by the phenomenon of migration and its management by national bodies is to the very idea of a nation-state, as it is caught between the political duty to ensure the well-being of its national community and the ethical responsibility to humanity in general. Individuals and states swing between hospitality and hostility, solidarity and self-interest. The novel transposes this tension by showing how marriage ends in divorce and how the love for a place turns to hatred in

Marie's life. Borrowing Judith Butler's idea of a precarious life (Butler xiv), one could argue that the absolute human right to life has been unfortunately relativized in the context of migration. Only the death by drowning in 2015 of an innocent child called Aylan Kurdi in the Mediterranean could stir the hardened hearts of Europeans. As Olivier the policeman remarks,

I told myself that somebody, somewhere would remember this French Island and say that here too children die in the beaches ...However, nothing ever changes here and I have sometimes the impression that I live in a parallel dimension where what happens here does not ever cross the ocean or reach anybody... Lives on this land are as much worthy as lives on other lands, aren't they? (56)

The brutalization of the lives of children, whose corpses Olivier often fishes out of canals and the lagoon, is in studied contrast to their innocent play on the streets. Appanah captures powerfully that sense of the ominous which marks the life of a child in violence-torn Mayotte and which horrifies the reader as well.

In the novel, Appanah makes a distinction between open and carceral spaces. Mo is constrained by Bruce and feels like a captive in the *banga* in Gaza. One of the reasons for Mo shooting Bruce is to free himself from Bruce's clutches. When Mo is sent to prison, the one thing that he yearns for is liberty, that idea of the French revolution that had become one of the three founding principles of the Republic. However, liberty is not a given, but a matter of conquest in his case. At the end of the book, when Mo dives into the ocean, like so many children of Gaza in Mayotte do, the reader does not know whether he will come up alive or find a watery grave, a final release to his tortured body. His last words are: "I plunge into the Bay of Mamoudzou, I divide the ocean with my supple body, my living body, and I don't come up" (183). The ocean becomes his beautiful country, the very same ocean that brought him and his mother to a new land and its trials. Returning to the ocean is like returning to the safety of his mother's womb, repudiating his birth and a destiny that he did not want.

The novel illustrates vividly the failure of state mechanisms to address the magnitude of Mayotte's violence and social problems. The NGO workers try to fill the gap between the administrative institutions and the population as best as they can but the local population is suspicious of them and accuses them of pedophilia. Their encounter with violence puts them off from attempting ambitious projects of social reform. The first murder by firearm in the island occurs because Stéphane is given a revolver to protect himself and Mo makes use of it. The world of parallel beliefs in *djinns* and ghosts and the ceremonies to appease them creates a chasm in Mayotte between the rational and the irrational, the magic of poetry and the blackness of witchcraft. The existence of *madrassas* alongside public schools poses the question of secular

education as the backbone of French democracy. The French Republic has not yet found a solution to balance its principle of secularism with the fundamental human right of freedom of conscience. The France that the novel conjures up is a France in which deprivation prevails over liberty, discrimination over equality, and isolation over fraternity.

The humanitarian worker Stéphane is appalled by the sights he sees such as a child whining like a small dog and his remark, “But we are in France here nevertheless” (118) underscores his unease at witnessing the territorial inequality. It is he who reveals disturbing facts about Mayotte. Half of Mayotte’s population is constituted by illegal aliens. Some more live in the woods in primitive conditions. Time and again, the novel stages a confusion between human beings and animals. Mo’s pet, the dog Bosco, is almost his alter ego. The fact that he shares his food with his dog is something that antagonizes Bruce. The fact that Bruce had murdered his dog enrages Mo. In the fatal *Mourenge* where Mo confronts Bruce, he feels the dog has entered into him. With his newfound canine strength, Mo shoots Bruce who had mutilated and raped him. The loss of humanity due to poverty is earlier described by Mo who observes that the island had transformed “men into dogs” (36). It is not only men who are transformed into monsters, but also the very landscape because the Kaweni hill where the slum is situated is described by Bruce as an octopus.

Bruce warns that if the French government does not do anything, the Mahorais people will take matters into their hands to get rid of the illegal aliens (145-46). This conjures up a vision of civil war as the impending apocalypse to the modern nation-state. All the courage that Stéphane could muster allows him to reassure himself that such violence “will never happen in a French department” (146) but it is a hope that much of the novel fails to share. The government's inaction and the social dissatisfaction it breeds finds a powerful embodiment in the novel in a character called Kaphet alias Mr T, who questions the sovereignty of France and even flies a separatist flag. The sustained failure on the part of the French authorities to fulfill the legitimate expectation of the local population and to act to alleviate their lot are indications of their unwillingness to handle the migratory problems head-on, using Mayotte instead as a safety valve to protect metropolitan interests. The image that the children of Gaza have of the French mainland is that *their* “waste bins are overflowing” (47).

## Conclusion

Sporadic or prolonged violence in Indian Ocean islands opens our eyes to the fact that we need to find new frameworks for peace in the region. These islands have at the same time become the privileged sites to highlight Europe’s double standards as to people’s legitimate expectations

of what a nation-state is and to bring Europe's postwar humanitarian rhetoric into crisis at the crossroads of economy and ecology, ethnicity and religion. Michael Ondaatje dealt with violence in Sri Lanka – that of the Marxist Janata Vimukti Peramuna rebels, the oppressive state, the Tamil separatists during the civil war – in *Anil's Ghost* (2000) and denounced the long-distance gaze of experts and expatriates on human rights violations. Samatha Weinberg, an English writer, focused on the French mercenary Bob Denard who was involved in the overthrow of two presidents of Comoro islands, three among four of which (Grande Comore, Mohéli, and Anjouan) had declared their independence from France since 1975. Her title *Last of the Pirates: The Search for Bob Denard* and her special attention to the ylang-ylang flowers may be redolent of the exotic clichés of islands as dens of outlaws or paradisaal abodes. But her investigation led her to study the impact of mercenary rule on the Comoro islands which made her travel along the Indian Ocean rim – Comoros, Seychelles and South Africa—to take stock of the postcolonial game of power in the multipolar new world order.

It is Le Clézio who connects the dots, when he affirms:

Responsibility is not a vague philosophical notion. It is a reality. Because the situations that these dispossessed people flee, it is the rich nations that set them up. By the violent conquest of colonies, then after independence by sustaining tyrannies, and finally in contemporary times by fomenting all-out wars in which the lives of some are not worthy of anything while those of others are precious treasures. (France Inter)

The depiction of injured and dead bodies of children in Appanah's novel highlights the violence they are subjected to in Mayotte, which is but a refraction of the sacrificial violence inscribed in the Republic born out of a bloody revolution despite its Enlightenment roots. In order to protect its national borders, France closes its eyes, as it were, on the sacrifice of its children. The silent and unnamed little girl to whom Marie has the habit of giving alms on her way to work (14) embodies this ineradicable guilt. By making the minor migrant a central figure of her novel, by putting a face and a name behind the statistics, Appanah etches the terrifying contours of a ruthless postnational society in the making even as humanitarian reason goes through a crisis in France (Fassin in *Libération*). Appanah's novel draws attention to the limits of the postcolonial imaginary in mainland France as its peripheries battle environmental vagaries and political apathy in a heightened way in the new century.

The minuscule Island of Mayotte forms part of what Lionnet calls "the confetti of the Empire" (World Literature, 288). The bare lives and the miserable living conditions of the black migrants or the dead bodies of the neglected children that float in the water do not seem to matter much to the metropolitan authorities who have other agendas and priorities.<sup>4</sup> Just as the Indian Ocean is an arena where current "global power dynamics is being revealed" (Kaplan 16), Appanah's Indian Ocean Island novel<sup>5</sup> is a

postcolonial text that opens our eyes to the fact that the systemic violence that has infected this forgotten territory is not alien to the insidious violence that is permeating our orderly world. Such a perception requires the very values of the literary establishment to be reimagined vis-à-vis the urgency of our times.

## Notes

1. The translations from French into English of all the passages quoted, either from the novels or from any other source, in this article, unless otherwise specified, are mine. The pages indicated refer to the pages of the original book or article in French.

2. Mayotte being a volcanic island, it is prone to seismic activity. The Institute of Earth Physics of Paris (IPGB) has recently concluded that due to underwater magma movement, a new volcano has come up sinking the island by 13 centimeters and pushing it eastward by about 10 centimeters.

3. Though Appanah does not mention it, there is a cynical project in France to declare the Mamoudzou Maternity ward as an extra-territorial facility to prevent illegal immigrants from claiming nationality rights. The ideological implications of restraining the right of the soil as eligibility for citizenship rights in a part of the French territory obviously go against France's commitment to equality.

4. In his speech delivered in Mayotte on 22 October 2019, the French President Emmanuel Macron has, however, come up with a discourse that seems to address almost all the issues discussed in the novel: "Mayotte is France. Maore Faranza. Mayotte is France because you wanted it. ... France is first of all security ... France is health ... France is education and the youth. ... With the National Agency for Urban Renovation, we are going to revive operations here in Mayotte to renew housing thanks to the Convergence plan. ... And then there are the infrastructures."

5. I would like to specially thank Anupama Mohan for making space in the issue for a francophone author.

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