



## THE FEMININ EXPRESSIONS IN THE WORKS OF ANANDA DEVI

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## ABSTRACT

This study investigates the traditional notions of plot and temporality, demonstrating how Devi adds new dimensions to these concepts while constructing spaces for her female narrators and characters. She also employs narrative strategies that allow her marginalized narrators to intervene in dominant structures of narrative construction and create hybrid magical spaces for feminine expression.

**KEYWORDS :** Narratology, Feminism, Folktales, Myths, Andocentric, Reincarnation.

This article proposes a feminist narratological study of texts by Ananda Devi, a contemporary Francophone writer from Mauritius. I examine three principle narrative strategies that allow Devi to challenge the dominant andocentric discourses. These discourses ignore the feminine world of domesticity and impose images of submission on women, thereby curbing feminine expression and quest. Devi employs narrative strategies that allow her marginalized narrators to intervene in dominant structures of narrative construction and create hybrid magical spaces for feminine expression.

Devi subverts the romance plot to bring to the fore alternative models of romance and sexuality that go beyond the binary man-woman opposition. Devi's non-Western techniques as she merges Western reality with the magic of the Orient and allows her characters accessibility to extra-real and magical spaces that become tools for them. In this section I also examine how Hindu myths and folktales intervene in the reality of Devi's novels, influencing her characters and narrators. She also scrutinizes the myths themselves by questioning their representations of women. In this way Devi has effectively used different strategies to create a hybrid space where the West meets the non-West, the feminine meets the andocentric, the real meets the extra-real and the traditional distinctions between these categories are challenged for alternate and new possibilities.

Ananda Devi belongs to the new generation of Mauritian writers. Although she currently lives in Ferney-Voltaire close to Geneva where she works as a translator, her fiction is set in Mauritius, her native island. She has a substantial body of work to her name, including eight novels, a collection of poems, and several collections of short stories. Her first novel, *Rue la Poudrière*, was published in 1989 and her most recent, *Indian Tango*, appeared in 2007. Devi's works are fascinating not only because of her intense, lyrical, and penetrating style of writing, but also because her texts reveal Mauritian diversity and splendor in a manner that is markedly different from her predecessors.

Her novels present the dark reality of the post-colonial city whose infrastructure is on the verge of collapse and whose residents strive to come to terms with their poverty and misery. Her protagonists are not at ease with the torpor and destitution that marks their world and thus seek a way out. Françoise Lionnet notes: "In Devi's work, the city of Port-Louis loses its romantic aura to become a more troubling, problematic, and ambiguously engaging site. For the first time in the literature of Mauritius, the city and its infernal elements are revealed, brought to light" (Postcolonial Representations 52).

Devi's work marks a significant departure from her predecessors as she privileges the principle of universality that allows her to create a notion of identity based on

multiplicity exploding the insularity of Mauritius, and challenging the binary division between centre and margin. She introduces a sense of belonging that is not confined to a single territory, not based on a certain history, nor enclosed in a unitary culture. She celebrates the hybrid fabric of Mauritian society that was long suppressed by her predecessors. Born to Indian parents in Mauritius, Devi has spent her life at the crossroads of various cultures. Since early childhood she was exposed to many diverse languages—Telugu, her mother's native language, Creole, Bhojpuri, English and French. Devi's exposure to different cultures allows her access to many diverse worlds, enabling an intersection of several great cultures such as the Indian and the European in her works. Véronique Bragard observes this multicultural aspect in Devi's writings: "Ananda Devi's work is marked by numerous multicultural elements that illustrate the grand diversity and the convergence of cultures" ("Eaux obscures" 188). Devi herself explains in an interview with Patrick Sultan how her readers often encounter difficulties in pinning down her identity due to the multi-cultural nature of her novels: On ne pouvait ni me définir en tant qu'écrivain indien, ni en tant qu'écrivain créole. Cela m'a posé des difficultés de définition personnelle jusqu'à ce que je me rende compte qu'être mauricien, c'est précisément cela: faire partie de tous ces mondes, et, à travers un processus de synthèse et de syncrétisme, en extraire quelque chose de neuf et d'authentique. (Ruptures).

Through the confluence of different cultures that mark her life and work, Devi thus seeks to surpass differences of culture, class, caste, region or nation. Ananda Devi's novels, such as *Pagli*, *La vie de Joséphin le fou*, *Ève de ses décombres*, *L'Arbre fouet*, and *Rue la Poudrière*, introduce the reader to a mysterious world of despair, destitution, madness, putrefaction, destruction, and violence. All her protagonists, mostly women, are in some way mad, deformed, mute, abnormal, or deviant. They live in complete or partial isolation, recounting tales of pain, suffering, and despair. Pagli's protagonist Daya is mad and ostracized by society. Mouna in *Moi*, *l'interdite* is deformed and dumb. In *Joséphin le fou* the eponymous protagonist is rejected by his prostitute mother. Society's rejection of these protagonists is so extreme that they are no longer perceived as human beings, but rather as shadows.

Devi proposes relationships that challenge heterosexuality as the only possibility and presents other alternatives for women. She uses the concept of reincarnation to present web-like structures in her narrative, allowing her characters a possibility to move freely across time and space. In this way she brings together women from different epochs to voice their common experiences. Devi's non-Western techniques as she merges Western reality with the magic of the Orient and allows her characters accessibility to extra-real and magical spaces.

In this regard I also examine how Hindu myths and folktales intervene in the reality of Devi's novels, influencing her characters and narrators. In the process, however, she also scrutinizes the myths themselves by questioning their representations of women. The extra-real and the magical become tools for the silenced women who can escape reality to access a world where their voices can be heard and understood.

Notable work was done on her by Françoise Lionnet in her article "Evading the Subject: Narration and the City in Ananda Devi's *Rue la Poudrière*" (Postcolonial Representations 1995). Two articles by Véronique Bragard appeared later. These articles discuss the pitiable state of Mauritian women in relation to the island and the past. In the first article Bragard demonstrates how Devi uses the fundamental elements such as water, fire, and earth to unveil not only the feminine suffering but also transgression by female characters. The second focuses on memory and past, as it reveals the significance of the quest for past and also the liberation from it. This piece discusses her novels *Le voile de Draupadi* and *L'arbre fouet* as allegories of memory, and how individual and body memory echo a community and ancestral memory. In addition, a study by Julia Waters "Ton continent est noir: Rethinking Feminist Metaphors in Ananda Devi's *Pagli*" appeared in *Dalhousie French Studies* in 2004. In this article Waters first attempts to read *Pagli* within a Western theoretical frame and then to reconsider this theoretical framework in relation to the non-Western specificities of the novel.

The articles have deftly analyzed major themes in Devi's writings such as insanity, alienation of women in patriarchal society, their resistance and transgression, multilingualism, and the lapse in syntax and punctuation. Devi's narratives resist the traditional notions of love and romance that perpetuated in eighteenth- and nineteenth- century fiction. Devi traces a "likeness" between the two genders, opposing accepted hierarchical and dichotomized notions of sexual identity that allow and reinforce the existence of complex differences between men and women. Devi's texts not only resist plots that are driven by action, adventure, and thrill based on masculine desire, but also attempt to create alternate narratives that represent the feminine world of inaction.

Devi uses the cultural concept of "reincarnation" to disrupt linearity in her novel, *L'arbre fouet*, by inscribing the text in cyclicity and eventually introducing the notion of timelessness as a complete transcendence of temporal linearity. Devi's interpretation of reincarnation as a rebirth that allows female characters a connection with their pasts, providing them an opportunity to complete the deeds left unfinished in their previous lives. In addition, these connections to past lives and to other women allow the development of a deep sense of feminine solidarity in the struggle against their subjugation by the patriarchal order, represented by "*L'arbre fouet*" in the novel.

Devi's use of "reincarnation," a thematic tool to introduce cyclical narratives, we will first examine this Hindu/Buddhist concept. The word "reincarnation" literally means to come again in the flesh. As a doctrine or mystical belief, "reincarnation" is the notion that one's spirit or soul returns to the material world after physical death to be reborn in a new body. This is considered a natural process that integrates all experiences from each previous lifetime. A new personality feature, with the associated character, is developed during each life in the physical world, based upon integrated experience from the past and newly acquired experiences.

As myths and folktales constitute an important part of all ancient civilizations and even today seem to organize and

communicate all ancient wisdom, many magical realists have found these narratives to be useful tools. In Devi's works, too, the reader discerns a juxtaposition of the realistic and the fantastic, bizarre and skilful time shifts, and convoluted narratives and plots through the use of myths and fairy stories. She deftly mixes everyday realities with fantasy drawn from the rich interplay of European and native culture, broadening the reader's sense of the real to include magic, myth, and miracles, and thus enrich her idea of what is "real" by incorporating all dimensions of the imagination, particularly as expressed in magic, myth, and religion.

Although Devi plays with the narrator-character relationship in most of her works by challenging the traditional notions that accord authority to a single narrator who controls the characters, her most recent work, *Indian Tango*, adds a new dimension altogether to this relation. In order to analyze how Devi uses myths to create magical moments in her texts that allow her to alter the present and rewrite the past, it is important to understand the significance of myths and folktales in societies as ancient as the Indian and the Greek. Myth is thus powerful not only because it constitutes the knowledge of the origin but also because it constructs and reinforces the socio-cultural reality of man.

Devi has not limited herself to myths but has also incorporated folktales in her texts. Distinguishing folktales from myths, G.S. Kirk states, "Myth has a serious underlying purpose whereas folktales reflect simple social situations that play in ordinary fears and aspirations and pander to our wish for neat and ingenious solutions" (41). Although folktales may not be as powerful as myths, they do reflect the common human fears and anxieties and play a significant role in the construction and reinforcement of socio-cultural realities. Devi's works, highly influenced by non-Western epics, religion, and spirituality, tend to use magical realist strategies to liberate the muffled feminine voice. As the extra-real merges with the real in her novels, female characters acquire agency that would seem impossible in a strictly realistic scenario. The extra-real not only allows women from different lives and ages to come together but also provides them accessibility to magical hybrid spaces that unite with feminine forces to resist patriarchal hegemony. *Soupir* in the novel by the same title and *Souffleur* in *L'arbre fouet* are feminine spaces where gender stereotypes are challenged, leading to alternate possibilities that explode the binary oppositions revered by Western rationality. The feminine fury carried by wild, cyclonic winds invades the interstices often ignored by realistic representations and makes them the site of action where notions of the feminine and the masculine are redefined. Thus, bringing magic to her realist texts in the form of myths, folktales or ghosts not only allows Devi to articulate feminine concerns as a collective but also permits her to rewrite the ancient texts in ways beneficial to women.

#### CONCLUSION:-

Here I am trying to demonstrate how she skillfully employs different strategies to intervene in the dominant/androcentric narrative and unsettle it from within. The *mélange* of the West and the non-West enables her to play with the representation of reality, fiction, and the imaginary simultaneously. Devi takes her narrators and readers to a zone where reality co-exists with the extra-real, the Western with the non-Western, the feminine with the androcentric, plot with the plotless, narrator with narratee in ways that challenge their distinctions, creating a rich array of possibilities for feminine silence to voice itself.

Bringing together feminist criticism and narratology, this study opens a space that enables us to discuss the place of feminine discourse in the construction of narration using the terminology of narrative theory. This project not only illustrates

how Devi inserts feminine voice and expression in the dominant narrative structure, but also analyzes rhetorical narratology, its relevance and scope in relation to Devi's texts. This study also investigates the traditional notions of plot and temporality, demonstrating how Devi adds new dimensions to these concepts while constructing spaces for her female narrators and characters.

Devi plays with the temporality of her works. Her novels do not adhere to a single story on a linear temporal axis but deal with numerous stories that take the reader to different temporal zones. This study demonstrates that polytemporality allows Devi to bring women from different time periods together to create a feminine solidarity against patriarchy. This chapter also points out issues with the traditional notion of linearity that is problematic for many post-modern and non-Western writers, as it privileges a single narrative authority. For plurivocal texts that valorize multiple narrative voices, one needs to reconfigure the notion of time and narrative. Devi not only to alter the reality of her novels but also to comment on the age-old myths that function as foundations of contemporary reality. In bringing myths to her texts, she attempts to rewrite them in a manner that women are freed from the images of passivity and 196 submission imposed on them through these myths.

This article takes the reader to a world of destitution and despair, but brings her back with hope and an aspiration for change. While Devi's writing may be charged with intense suffering and pain, it always ends up inspiring a certain optimism in its reader.

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