

Sita writes back: Lindsey Collen's *The Rape Of Sita*

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Lindsey Collen was born in South Africa in 1948. Married to a Mauritian, she lives in Mauritius and all her novels are entrenched in Mauritian reality. *The Rape of Sita* (1993),¹ which won the 1994 Commonwealth Writers' Prize for the Africa Region and was long-listed for the Orange Prize², is her second novel³. *The Rape of Sita* re-visits the age-old Hindu sacred epic, the *Ramayana* and associates it predominantly to the famous modernist classic of Anglo-American literature, T.S. Eliot's *The Wasteland*, which is thus also re-visited.

As such, it partakes in a literary practice that has become one of characteristic features of contemporary literature, defined, among others, by Adrienne Rich in 1979 as, "re-vision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction"⁴, by Gérard Genette in 1982 as, "hypertextuality" whereby a text (the "hypertext") is grafted onto a previous text (the "hypotext") and could not exist without it⁵, by Linda Hutcheon in 1985 as "modern parody" or "repetition with critical distance"⁶, by Christian Moraru in

¹ All references are to Lindsey Collen's *The Rape of Sita* (1993), London, Bloomsbury Publishing plc, 2001.

² The Commonwealth Writers' Prize is divided, in a first stage, between four regions: (i) Africa, (ii) the Caribbean and Canada, (iii) Eurasia (Europe and Asia) and (iv) South-East Asia and the South Pacific. The final winner is selected from the four winners.

³ Collen has also written: *There is a Tide* (1991), *Misyon Garson* (1996)—a novel written in Mauritian Creole, *Getting Rid of It* (1997), *Mutiny* (2001), *Boy* (2004)—an English adaptation of *Misyon Garson*, which won the 2005 Commonwealth Writers' Prize for the Africa Region. Her last novel, *The Malaria Man and Her Neighbours*, was published in 2006.

⁴ Adrienne Rich, *On Secrets, Lies and Silence*, London and New-York, Norton, 1979, p. 35.

⁵ Gérard Genette, *Palimpsestes*, Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1982, p. 7-11.

⁶ Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody*, London, Routledge, 1985, p. 7.

2001 as, “*extensive [sic] rewrites*⁷”, by Jean-Paul Engélibert and Yen-Mai Tran-Gervat in 2008 as “la littérature dépliée⁸”, or by Claude Maisonnat, Josiane Paccaud-Huguet and Annie Ramel in 2009 as, “[t]he widespread contemporary practice of reprising literary works of the past⁹”. Moreover, this practice seems to be linked to what has been called “the turn to ethics [of literature] in the 1990s¹⁰”, or “le tournant éthique dans la théorie littéraire¹¹” since the 1980s.

There is thus widespread agreement among critics that re-writing is indeed one of the defining features of contemporary literature. In the continuity of narratological and structural approaches, I shall here address Collen’s novel as oscillating between imitation and creation, thus questioning the subjectivity and the originality of the author. As the novel displaces the literary act in time and space and queries historical, geographical, cultural and aesthetic boundaries between works, it introduces a questioning on the opaque areas that lie between texts and determines new relationships between them, in order to re-appropriate the world and tell oneself differently. Thus, far from being an intertextual game cut off from the extratextual world, transtextuality merges with historicity to rethink the world. If we admit with Paul Ricoeur (in this age of heightened consciousness that all reality comes to us filtered through language and that language is linked to power) that literature exists somewhere in between pure form and pure content, in a sort of “quasi-world”, and that *mimesis* is *muthos*¹², the text imitating the meaning we impose on brute facts, literature can become a re-signifying practice, as it re-writes the ideologies, the unconscious “imaginary structures¹³” that are transmitted by texts, and that “interpellate¹⁴” or condition us. If literary texts contain some form of cultural encoding, the ideology they propound can be re-worked by re-writing them, amounting to some form of “cultural recycling¹⁵”. If the world is language, it can be re-written. If the world is myth, it can be de-mythologised and re-mythologised. Indeed, Collen herself says in *Triplopia* that she uses literature to

⁷ Christian Moraru, *Rewriting. Postmodern Narrative and Cultural Critique in the Age of Cloning*, New-York, University of New-York Press, 2001, p. xii.

⁸ Jean-Paul Engélibert et Yen-Mai Tran-Gervat (Eds.), *La littérature dépliée*, Rennes, Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2008.

⁹ Claude Maisonnat, Josiane Paccaud-Huguet et Annie Ramael (eds.), *Rewriting/Reprising in Literature: The Paradoxes of Intertextuality*, Cambridge, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009, p. vii.

¹⁰ Jane Adamson, Richard Freadman and David Parker (eds.), *Renegotiating Ethics in Literature, Philosophy, and Theory*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 1.

¹¹ Lisbeth Korthals-Altes, « Le tournant éthique dans la théorie littéraire : impasse ou ouverture ? », *Etudes littéraires*, vol. 31, n°3 (été 1999), p. 39-56.

¹² Paul Ricoeur, *Temps et récit I. L'intrigue et le récit historique*, Paris, Seuil, coll. “Essais”, 1983, p. 71-72, 93-94.

¹³ Louis Althusser, *Ecrits sur la psychoanalyse*, Paris, Stock/IMEC, 1993, p. 45.

¹⁴ Louis Althusser, « Idéologie et appareils idéologiques d’Etat » (1969), in *La pensée*, vol. 151 (Juin 1970) p. 3-38.

¹⁵ Christian Moraru, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

“re-think the myths that make up our psyches” in order to “bring a new way of looking at past things” or “a pretty radical shift in thinking¹⁶”.

I would like to focus here on Collen’s text as a repetition of trauma that becomes a creative invention, as the textual voice undermines the hypotext and transforms it, in order to tell an old story anew. The relation between the hypertext and its hypotext becomes metaphorical—every thing has been said, yet can be retold in a new way. To do so, I shall first show how *The Rape of Sita* associates the age-old Hindu epic, the *Ramayana* and T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, in a re-writing process that aims at demythologising patriarchy. Then, I shall pose the question of the textual voice, first as a laying-bare of the predatory vacuity on which patriarchy is founded, and, finally, as a re-appropriation of dominant discourse from another (feminine) point of view by an ever-writing textual voice.

Re-Writing as Demythologisation of The Master Discourse

Collen sets her story in the context of patriarchal discourse that perpetuates the myth of women as guilty for having been raped. As Chris Weedon explains: “[p]atriarchy implies a fundamental organization of power on the basis of sex, an organization which, from a poststructuralist perspective, is not natural or inevitable, but socially produced¹⁷”. Thus Collen links the *Ramayana* and *The Waste Land* to map the dominant contemporary discourse, with the aim of exposing and challenging its underlying assumptions.

The presence of the *Ramayana* as hypotext is made explicit through a number of intertextual references, as Collen re-stages the great epic, mixing myth and fiction. The most obvious intertextual reference to the Hindu epic is, of course, the title itself, which includes the name of Sita—the goddess heroine of the *Ramayana*, who is married to Prince Rama. The goddess, who embodies pure faithful and submissive womanhood, is blamed and punished for a rape that did not even take place. Many of the novel’s characters are named after those of the *Ramayana*, and the narrative events parallel those of the epic poem.

But the age-old Hindu epic is literally “de-contextualised” and “trans-contextualised¹⁸” into Mauritian society of the 1980s and 1990s, as Collen mixes her fictional re-writing of myth with geographical and historical fact, thereby further strengthening the readers’ identification with the characters. As Jacques Derrida explains in his article, “Signature événement contexte,” the written word is

¹⁶ Lindsey Collen, “Spotlight: Lindsey Collen”, in *Triplopia*, vol. IV, issue 2, Time Online Poetry Magazine, U.S.A., <http://www.triplopia.org>, p. 4.

¹⁷ Chris Weedon, *Feminism, Theory and the Politics of Difference*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1999, p. 127.

¹⁸ Linda Hutcheon, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

never fully determined by context—being infinitely “reiterable”, it can be removed from its original subject and context of utterance and as it is repeated in a different context it can be made to re-signify¹⁹. As Engélibert notes, re-writing always implies some sort of transformation of an enunciation, brought about by historical conditions that make the same text signify differently the second time²⁰.

The story, removed from its original context, is realistically set in twentieth-century Mauritian space by two major devices. The geographical map of Mauritius is the setting for the story, as the characters travel between recognisable villages and towns of the island and historical places are mentioned, with a visit to the neighbouring Reunion and mention of the Seychelles and of Rodrigues. The local colour given by place names is highlighted by the use, always in italics, of Mauritian Creole, the language of the people and symbolical of Mauritian identity and independence. Furthermore, the background to the novel is real Mauritian political history. Dates are actually mentioned, as are historical characters and political events, but true historical people and facts are mixed with fictive characters and events.

As they are recontextualised in Mauritian reality, activating what Linda Hutcheon calls “inter-art discourse” or “modern parody”, the mythological characters and plot are repeated “with critical difference”²¹, in order to address and involve a popular readership and challenge the dominant order. Thus, Collen’s Sita becomes an active fearless sexually liberated woman, a left-wing political activist and militant feminist. She descends from a rebellious matriarchy going back to the first Dutch colonisers of Mauritius and belongs to a long line of political action, her father being one of the founders of the Labour Party in 1936. Far from being passive and submissive like the goddess she is named after, she becomes the instigator of the action. This modern Sita lives with Dharma, who is obviously Rama, and is said to have “*dharma* [sic]²²”, which in Hinduism means the path of righteousness, moral law or what is right, leading one to a state of oneness with cosmic law. But, instead of being a king and a god as in the Hindu epic, he is from a poor family and is described as “a great leader of the poor, or a prophet of the people²³”. As Sita dreams: “They were [...] all gods and goddesses. Of modern times²⁴”. Collen’s text is thus doubly written from the “other side”: the point of view shifts from the male to the female and the voice of the rebellious labour force replaces that of the dominant official voice, all the characters being reincarnated as left-wing political activists.

As the Ramayana is unfolded into a new time and space, the point of view changes and the same events acquire a different meaning. In the Hindu epic, the

¹⁹ Jacques Derrida, « Signature événement contexte », *Marges*, Paris, Minuit, 1972, p. 375-376.

²⁰ Jean-Paul Engélibert and Yen-Mai Tran-Gervat (Eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 9.

²¹ Linda Hutcheon, *op. cit.*, p. 2 et 7.

²² Lindsey Collen, *The Rape of Sita* (1993), London, Bloomsbury Publishing plc, 2001, p. 68.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

demon king Ravana, who is the very incarnation of evil and a compulsive rapist, tries in vain to seduce her, but as her husband doubts her innocence, she is made to pay for a rape, which has never been committed. The modern Sita is separated from Dharma because she herself decides to go to a conference on Women's Liberation in the Seychelles. On the way back she has to stop over for a night in Reunion, where she is actually raped by an old friend of theirs, Rowan Tarquin, whose name is a mixture of Lucrece's rapist, Tarquin, and of the mythological demon king Ravana or Rawan. Sita gets back to Mauritius in time for the Labour celebrations of 1st May 1982 and buries the rape in her subconscious for eight years and nine months, until 16th January 1991, when she starts trying to remember the "missing night, [...] the night of 30th April 1982²⁵". The rape takes place in an underprivileged suburb of *Sendeni* in the French Department of La Reunion, described as "the colony of colonies²⁶", on the eve of the birth of the extreme left wing party *Lalit*. Moreover, the moment when Sita starts "diving into [her] unconscious²⁷" to recover the memory of her rape coincides with the day when "the United States armed forces raped Iraq²⁸", just before "the bombs go diving down²⁹". Thus, the literal rape of Sita becomes a metaphor for all forms of exploitation, intolerance and oppression, both public and private, for all forms of abuse of power. Indeed, as she is being raped in *Sendeni*, Sita reflects that colonisation and rape are: "the same thing³⁰". Instead of being a pure woman unjustly blamed and repudiated by Dharma, Sita becomes a sexually liberated woman, victim of rape as abuse of power.

The Mauritian cultural context of the 1980s in which the story of the *Ramayana* has been re-contextualised, is indeed a patriarchal world. As Collen explains in *Triplopia*, it is the "patriarchal structure" itself with its rigid hierarchy that makes abuse of power possible: "what allows abuses like rape to exist at all [...] is something that is soaked in the whole fabric of society, and that when you add up all the insidious and often invisible aspects of patriarchy, then you end up with a balance of forces between man and woman, which allows a man, if he wants to, to violate a woman, and to know that he can get away with it³¹". Intertextuality with some of the famous literary texts of Western civilisation, especially with T.S. Eliot's Modernist *The Waste Land* (1922), is used to deconstruct the established social order. The title and author of the poem are referred to several times. Sita is actually reading the poem when Rowan rapes her, leading the narrator to pose the question: "should a woman always be vigilant. Always be, as it were, peeping over the top of T.S. Eliot's poems in order to make sure no harm is coming around the

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 183.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 149.

³¹ Lindsey Collen, "Spotlight: Lindsey Collen", *op. cit.*, p. 5.

corner?³²”. *The Waste Land* thus becomes a metaphor for patriarchy itself. This famous and complex modernist poem has been variously interpreted, but Collen says in her interview for *Triplopia* that she here chooses to read it as being “associated to the centre of political power,” as “patriarchal in its sense of social order”.

The Waste Land is thus used to throw light on the ideological background in which Sita lives. The intertextual references to the poem have to be set in an interpretation of their previous literary context to grasp the meaning they are given here. The wasteland of Eliot’s poem is modern European culture, which has come too far from its spiritual roots. Eliot has pointed out in the notes to the poem that the symbolism is taken from Miss Jessie Weston’s *From Ritual to Romance*, in which she establishes a link between archaic Nature cults and the Christian legends of the Holy Grail³³. Weston reveals that the origin of the Fisher King’s problems—or the secret of the Grail—is collective rape carried out by the king and his men³⁴. The infertile wasteland is thus the direct result of rape, which symbolises the separation of man and woman, and life is restored when they are finally reunited. Indeed, in Eliot’s poem spiritual dryness is associated with death-in-life in a world in which sex has replaced love (see Brooks). Thus Eliot’s poem functions here to signal that sex devoid of love is linked to spiritual dryness in a patriarchal modern world, in which the dominant system is upheld by a fundamental rigid, sterile and hierarchical binary vision, of which one of the most basic and obvious manifestations is the hierarchy of power between man and woman.

The fictional transposition of the age-old Indian myth to a contemporary historical context, and its subsequent fictional re-writing commented upon by intertextuality with *The Waste Land*, thus amounts to the restaging of the central theme of rape, which is more often regarded as the fault of the woman in patriarchal cultures. The patriarchal discourse is demythologised—the mythology that women are guilty for having been raped is shown to be a lie used to uphold the system. In such a world, Collen’s Sita *does* indeed get raped. Rape becomes a political act—a strategy to maintain the *status quo* that that holds men as the dominant aggressors and women as the passive victims. As Catherine Belsey

³² Lindsey Collen, *The Rape of Sita, op. cit.*, p. 141.

³³ Basically, the object of the Quest is the restoration to vigour of the Fisher King, whose loss of virility by maiming or sickness has disastrous effects upon his kingdom, turning it into a waste land, the victim of a prolonged drought (Jessie Weston, *From Ritual to Romance*, U.S.A., Anchor Books/Cambridge University Press, 1957, p. 21-23). This intimate relation between the vitality of a king or god and the well-being of natural and human life is to be found in diverse Nature Cults, all aimed at the affirmation of life, an effigy of the dead god being buried or thrown into water in Autumn to sprout anew in the Spring, ceremonial death being followed by resuscitation, in a never-ending cycle. In both cases, life comes from water and the finally reunited lance (or spear or knife) and cup are sex symbols (*Ibid.*, p. 75).

³⁴ Jessie Weston, *From Ritual to Romance* (1920), U.S.A., Anchor Books/Cambridge University Press, 1957, p. 172-173.

writes, ideology “obscures the real conditions of existence by presenting partial truths. It is a set of omissions or gaps...³⁵”.

A Hole Transmitted By A Void

The aporia or “hole” in the master discourse handed down over the ages—the secret violence of patriarchy that needs to oppress women in order to survive—is brought to light or deconstructed, as the novel seizes on the absence present in the hypotexts and works on it. Indeed the story is triggered by a metaphorical gap that has to be filled in, that of the lost memory of the rape that took place on the night of 30th April 1982 in Reunion and that Sita has repressed in her subconscious for eight years and nine months.

After a series of unexplained exaggerated emotional reactions when faced with violence, Sita begins to realize that something is wrong. Dharma accuses her: “Isn’t there something missing? [...] Don’t you avoid something? Evade something? [...] Haven’t you lost something. [...] Buried in the recesses of your memory³⁶. When she realises that “at least twelve hours were missing from her memory. Clean missing. 30th April 1982³⁷”, Sita is tormented by haunting repetitions of variations on the word “hole”: “great big black hole”, “nothing”, “the nothingness”, the “blank”, “the hours missing”, the “corpse”, “[t]he lost day”, “the presence of an absence³⁸”. This gap or “hole” in Sita’s consciousness is that of the “sudden traumatic intrusion of the shapeless and nameless, which tears the fabric open³⁹”, *i.e.* the rape that functions as a metaphor for the secret violence that patriarchy prefers to keep hidden.

Intertextuality with *The Waste Land* highlights Collen’s claim that patriarchy is “insidious” or “invisible” (*Triplopia*). As Sita starts diving in her memory for the lost day, she is also haunted by the word “bury” and two lines from Part I of *The Waste Land*, entitled “The Burial of the Dead” crop up in her mind: “That corpse you planted last year in your garden,/ Has it begun to sprout?...⁴⁰”. The corpse planted in the garden has been interpreted as the attempt to bury a memory, but it also refers to the buried god of the old fertility rites. Man prefers not to let the corpse sprout, not to let the god live again. People prefer to forget, prefer not to know the truth or the secret of the Grail, prefer to remain in a world devoid of spirituality, and not to admit guilt. Furthermore, the famous opening of *The Waste Land*, “April is the cruellest month”, was quoted by the wise man, Ton Tipyer, as

³⁵ Catherine Belsey, “Constructing the Subject/Deconstructing the Text”, in *Feminism Criticism and Social Change: Sex, Class and Race in Literature and Culture*, J. Newton and D. Rosenfelt (eds.), New-York, Methuen, 1985, p. 46.

³⁶ Lindsey Collen, *The Rape of Sita*, *op. cit.*, p. 30 et 32.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 30-33.

³⁹ Claude Maisonnat, Josiane Paccaud-Huguet et Annie Ramael (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. xii.

⁴⁰ Lindsey Collen, *The Rape of Sita*, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

he warned Sita about going via Reunion⁴¹. In order to understand the meaning these lines acquire here, one has to set them in their original context and to offer an interpretation. April is cruel because it reveals what was hidden: “Winter kept us warm, covering/The earth with forgetful snow⁴²”. April 1982 indeed revealed the abuse of power that Patriarchy, like all dominant powers, prefers to keep hidden—if ever rape is mentioned, the fault is attributed to the innocent victim, who is punished.

This “hole” in the master discourse is itself transmitted through another type of void. Illustrating Roland Barthes affirmation that, “[t]he intertextual in which every text is held, it itself being the text-between of another text, is not to be confused with the origin of the text⁴³”, Collen highlights the “shadowy, unsubstantial nature of enunciation which is founded on an outrageous void⁴⁴” by her choice of intertexts, of narrator and of narrative technique.

The preface to the novel, written by the narrator named “Iqbal the Umpire”, tells us that the story of Sita “is a very old one” taken up by “Valmiki”:

Sita, Dharma and Rowan Tarquin, for example, are obviously made up. [...] But they were made up a long time ago by better writers than me [...] their story is a very old one, [...] when Valmiki wrote it in sloka metres in the [...] Ramayana, he was only retelling [...] what Narad had told him before⁴⁵.

Indeed, the section of the *Ramayana* known as “Uttara Kanau” and attributed to the poet Valmiki was written in the first century BC and was based on oral traditions that go back at least as far as the sixth century BC. The *Ramayana* clearly calls into question the notion of origins, as it was transmitted by several narrators before being fixed by writing, then translated, rewritten and reinterpreted by many poets and writers, resulting in countless versions of the same story. Similarly, in *The Waste Land*, the narrator, Tiresias, is not unified authorial consciousness. Eliot says of him in his notes to the poem: “although a mere spectator and not indeed a ‘character’”, [Tiresias] yet the most important personage in the poem, uniting all the rest⁴⁶”. In his poem, Eliot fuses characters into each other to give a sense of the oneness of all experience and the unity of all periods; he merges Christian symbolism, fertility rites and Eastern religions to call for spiritual renewal; and he ends on Sanskrit words which call for surrender to something outside the self⁴⁷.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

⁴² T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land and Other Poems* (1922), London, Faber and Faber, 1991, p. 23 (lignes 4 et 5).

⁴³ Cité dans Claude Maisonnat, Josiane Paccaud-Huguet et Annie Ramael (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. viii.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. ix.

⁴⁵ Lindsey Collen, *The Rape of Sita*, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

⁴⁶ T.S. Eliot, *op. cit.*, p. 44-45 (note 218).

⁴⁷ Voir Cleanth Brooks, “*The Waste Land: Critique of the Myth*”, in *A Collection of Critical Essays on The Waste Land*, Jay Martin (ed.), New-Jersey, Prentice Hall Inc., 1968, p. 59-86.

Like Tiresias, Collen's narrator Iqbal plays a key symbolical role. Indeed, nicknamed "Iqbal the Umpire" by Dharma, he is both absent and present. In Collen's own terms, "he is the most 'insider' person in the novel, and yet an 'outsider' to the central myth. He is also an outsider to the sex war⁴⁸". His role is fundamentally one of mediation between different peoples' realities—he says he "used to stand around a lot, [...], just watching and listening⁴⁹".

As Collen explains in *Triplopia*, her narrative technique is not only based on the *Ramayana* but also on African traditions: "The tradition in which Iqbal is telling this story is the one I relate more to African traditions, both as I know them from my childhood in South Africa, and also as they live on in Mauritius". Indeed, the novel respects certain universal conventions of oral story telling⁵⁰. Iqbal's story is introduced by a characteristic opening formula: "'Sirandann?'" I sing out. [...] 'Sanpek!' comes the reponse⁵¹". These ritual words, which open a session of oral story telling in Mauritius, are the equivalent of the West-Indian "Crik, Crak". This opening formula is immediately followed by another: "Once upon a time there was a woman called Sita⁵²". Such opening formulas announce the removal into another time and space, into an old story; they proclaim that this is a story passed on by others; they make sure that the audience is receptive, preparing the way for a dialogue between the story-teller and his audience.

Several narrative levels are present and the text keeps moving from one to the other, metalepses regularly intruding into the story of Sita⁵³. Iqbal's narrative of the story of Sita as told to an audience is regularly interrupted by accounts of the story-telling situation itself, as Iqbal, the story-teller, typically enters into dialogue with his audience, who keeps interrupting and asking questions: "There is no limit to the interruptions allowed to my story. This is normal. It's a story. You have your rights. So now you want to know [...]⁵⁴". Furthermore, Iqbal regularly explains to his audience that he is only telling stories told to him by others, situating himself in a chain of stories—for example: "But it isn't my story. It's the story told to me by Jojo⁵⁵". Or: "So Sita told me⁵⁶". In addition to moving in and out of Sita's mind, he

⁴⁸ Lindsey Collen, "Spotlight: Lindsey Collen", *ibid.*, p. 5.

⁴⁹ Lindsey Collen, *The Rape of Sita*, *op. cit.*, Preface.

⁵⁰ I have taken my definition of oral story-telling essentially from Nicole Belmont's *Poétique du conte. Essai sur le conte de tradition orale*, Paris, Gallimard, 1999.

⁵¹ Lindsey Collen, *The Rape of Sita*, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ In *Figures III* (see 225 ff.) translated by J.E. Lewin as *Narrative Discourse* (see Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, trans. Jane E. Lewin, New-York, Cornell University Press, 1983, 212 ff.), Genette makes the distinction between story and discourse, between the contents of a story and the actual telling of the story (the enunciation or narration): "any event a narrative recounts is at a diegetic level immediately higher than the level at which the narrating act producing this narrative is placed" (p. 228). A metalepsis is "the transition from one narrative level to the other, " for example the intrusion of the narrator into his diegetic universe (p. 234-5).

⁵⁴ Lindsey Collen, *The Rape of Sita*, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

sometimes hands the narrative voice over to another character, embedding another's oral story into his own narrative (for example, Jojo's story of Dharma⁵⁷).

Iqbal's digressive narrative strategy, which he compares to a "bunch of grapes⁵⁸", thus challenges traditional narrative methods and corresponds to what Gibson calls the "anti-novel", a form particularly suited to ethical questioning: "An ethics of the novel which emphasises multiplicity and the movement of the dissolution of cognitive horizons will tend logically to give a significant place to works in which the form of the novel itself seems to dissolve: anti-novels⁵⁹". There is here no real source of authority, no real author, no creator, no fixed origin, only a chain of memories: "Plus que des créateurs, les conteurs sont des passeurs de contes"; "le conte ne connaît point de père⁶⁰". There are no fixed answers, there is only an on-going chain of questions and the characters are caught up in a succession of events that they do not master.

Thus, the aporia (the hidden violent functioning) that is revealed to lie at the very heart of the master patriarchal discourse handed down through the years, is itself passed down over the ages through the central vacuity of enunciation (an absence of "origins" or of a unique authorial consciousness) that is highlighted by Collen's narrative technique based on the oral tradition,

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Nevertheless, the novel is structured around Sita's recovery of the memory of her rape as narrated by Iqbal. By making the invisible visible, the novel becomes a reverse citation. The process of trying to remember what has been repressed is metaphorized by Sita's repeatedly diving into water: "Sita dived. Sita dived down under water⁶¹". The trauma repeated by Sita is retold by Iqbal, in an iterative performativity that destabilises and re-orders the "ideology-laden [...] mental landscape⁶²" transmitted by the hypotext. The question posed here is akin to Judith Butler's: "Is there a repetition that might disjoin the speech act from its supporting conventions such that its repetition confounds rather than consolidates its injurious efficacy?⁶³".

The enunciator himself/herself actually experiences what is said. Aristotle explains that in classical rhetoric the tone of what is said is as important as the

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 71-75.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, Preface and p. 197.

⁵⁹ Andrew Gibson, *Postmodernity, Ethics and the Novel*, London, Routledge, 1999, p. 91.

⁶⁰ Nicole Belmont, *Poétique du conte. Essai sur le conte de tradition orale*, Paris, Gallimard, 1999, p. 14.

⁶¹ Lindsey Collen, *The Rape of Sita*, *op. cit.*, p. 30 and 32.

⁶² Christian Moraru, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

⁶³ Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech. A Politics of the Performative*, London, Routledge, 1997, p. 20.

content of the speech. If an orator wants to be persuasive, he must adopt the attitude and tone of what he is saying⁶⁴. The *ethos* of a text belongs to the voice of the narrator. But, instead of being considered as a real person, as an essential human subject, source and origin of discourse, the narrator is a textual effect, what Dominique Maingueneau calls the "Locuteur-L"⁶⁵. The "Locuteur-L" is the one who actually adopts the tone and attitude of what he is saying, who actually feels what he says. For example, he is the one who says "phew!" in sign of actually felt relief, rather than the one who speaks about himself by saying "I feel relieved" (and who may be lying). In *The Rape of Sita*, both Iqbal and Sita have a very strong *ethos*.

Deeply implied in her own discourse, Sita writes back from the other side, introducing dissent into consensus. What Gibson names an "ethics of dissolution" operates in the novel through "repeated and radical interruption of given horizons"⁶⁶. The form of the novel itself seems to dissolve as, "both text and reading are ceaselessly troubled by an irreducible alterity, an orientation away from the past and unity of being to the future and the multiplicity of becoming that nonetheless repeats a past in a certain way"⁶⁷. The narrative movement forward is also recoil back into the text, as Sita repeatedly dives into her unconscious to recover the lost moment. She is haunted by the word "bury" as she repeatedly tries to "dive" into her memory, as she goes against the grain of the normal process of burying in order to fill in the hole. Consensus is disturbed as she symbolically reverses the traditional order of things and tries to reveal what is hidden. She hesitates between the metaphorical and literal senses of the term, respectively "to cover something up, to hide something, to forget something, to put something out of sight or mind" and "Burying a corpse"⁶⁸. Conditioned to feel guilty, she is afraid she has killed someone. But little by little the memory surfaces, and the buried secret is brought to light, as Sita repeats the trauma: "She lost it. For eight years and nine months? Until the corpse she had buried started to sprout in the garden"⁶⁹.

This consciousness is but a first step leading to the moral responsibility to act: Sita has completely appropriated Eliot's words and "sprout" comes to mean concrete action. By situating this recovery of memory in a tradition of political struggle against oppression, the novel insists on the need for concrete action, for political action, in a world from which the gods are absent to protect and defend the innocent woman, as Sita remarks: "No Hanuman and his army to the rescue. No Mother Mary. No miracles"⁷⁰. In the absence of God to rescue or to revenge

⁶⁴ See Aristotle, *Rhetoric II*, Cambridge and London, Harvard University Press, William Heinemann Ltd., 1926. 1377b.

⁶⁵ Dominique Maingueneau, *Eléments de linguistique pour le texte littéraire* (1986), Paris, Dunod, 1993, p. 80-81.

⁶⁶ Andrew Gibson, *op. cit.*, p. 92-93.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

⁶⁸ Lindsey Collen, *The Rape of Sita*, *op. cit.*, p. 80-81.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 185.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 147.

her⁷¹, Sita considers killing Rowan, but she finally kills neither Rowan nor herself. By consciously and actively choosing to counter taboos, not to act as a victim and not to respond to violence by violence, she breaks free from previous texts and stories about rape and counters patriarchy's spiralling violence. Wondering, "How to add a drop of water to the dam, filling up for change⁷²", she decides to be active in the "All Women's Front, and in the movement⁷³", and to write an article on the history of rape, thus setting the rape she has actually experienced in a long line of similar instances. The article, entitled "Who was raped before?" mixes both fictive and historical rapes. As Sita re-invents true stories, she "counter-interpellates" the reader, actively participating in what she puts forward, since she is herself a political activist, belonging to a long line of rebel women and thus adopting the attitude she calls for. Her article presents rape from the other side, posing again all the narrator's questions about responsibility and blame⁷⁴, showing clearly that "rape is the parody of the man-woman relationship," that "personal disorder [is] knitted firmly into political⁷⁵", that "rape is to do with 'destroy'⁷⁶" and that "Rape was not possible in human society until males came to dominate females by force," which is dated as "about ten thousand years ago⁷⁷". She becomes all the women she quotes, as she addresses "Mowski" ("*moi aussi*" or "me too"): "Oh, Mowski, Mowski, you are Everywoman⁷⁸".

Reinforcing the idea that "the shifter 'I' refers to no fixed signified, which is another way of saying that in order to gain a symbolic place we must give up the dream of an ideally unified being⁷⁹", Sita hands over her story to Iqbal, who then passes it on to the reader. The latter is constantly reminded that people should be able to stop and pose the question as to what to do in a given concrete situation, rather than simply unquestioningly remaining in a moral straitjacket. The poem that introduces the novel poses ethical questions and calls for action, directly appealing to the reader's sense of responsibility: "You oh human / [...] Are poised in eternal dilemma / What action for you / [...] Would be right? / What action for you / Would be wrong, / [...] Will this act / Make history progress / Or allow us / To slip back / Into the mud of the past?" The story itself is punctuated by a series of moral dilemmas posed by Iqbal the narrator to the spectator/reader, who is free to interpret and to pose questions, thus playing an active role. The irony of wondering whether Sita can be in any way to blame lies in the illogical cause to effect relations between banal everyday actions based on trust and respect and violation. As the narrator comments: "*Should a woman ever [...] be off her*

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 187-190.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 194.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 196.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 188.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 180.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 162.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 160-161.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 194.

⁷⁹ Claude Maisonnat, Josiane Paccaud-Huguet et Annie Ramael (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. ix.

guard?⁸⁰”; “*The balance of forces were against her in all ways. (In our society, aren't they always, when it comes to women?)*⁸¹”. Sita’s responsibility extends to us all, as the narrator addresses the reader, “*what if we were one of those men [rapists]?*⁸²” and “*you don't know anything yourself really, unless you think it over, digest it*⁸³”.

Writing, like telling, is action. The performativity (the words produce an effect, accomplish what they say) of the text is enhanced by the *ethos* of the text, which is particularly obvious in an oral story, whereby the enunciator calls for the reader to experience what is said. As Iqbal explains to the reader: “For every one story-teller, as you and I know him, there are two trainees. One has to remember the story as it was, or as it is. And the other who has to re-tell it anew, and never the same. I am the second kind⁸⁴”. Thus, in Althusserian terms, Iqbal is not only “interpellated”, or assigned a role—he can also “counter-interpellate.⁸⁵” As a subject who is “constituted by the language” he speaks, language is also the “condition of possibility for him as a speaking subject⁸⁶”. He “counter-signs,” adding to his ongoing subjection a “self-subjectification,” which is a form of “self-subjunctification⁸⁷”. Iqbal illustrates that to listen/read is to take place—not to subject oneself or the other to forceful allotment but to produce oneself or the other through replacement. He calls to the reader to be active, to counter-sign in his turn, as he hands over his story at the end of the novel. The text he finally offers to the reader becomes an “unpredictable and virtual meeting point between the reading ‘I’ and the read ‘you’, the meeting point of an ‘us’ [...] brought about by [...] a sudden, unexpected flow of boundaries⁸⁸”.

The oral tale usually has a social and cultural function, being a way of transmitting values or of challenging accepted values. *The Rape of Sita* thus re-writes the story of rape differently, unearthing patriarchy’s secret functioning and

⁸⁰ Lindsey Collen, *The Rape of Sita*, *op. cit.*, p. 141.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 152.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 171.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 178.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁸⁵ In his famous essay, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” Althusser provides an example of a scene of interpellation: as the policeman hails the passer-by with “hey you there,” the one who recognises himself turns around, thereby acquiring a certain identity. The address thus brings the subject into being.

⁸⁶ Judith Butler, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

⁸⁷ As Frédéric Regard explains in “Autobiography as Linguistic Incompetence: Notes on Derrida’s Reading of Joyce and Cixous,” (revised version of a lecture originally given in French on the occasion of an international conference on Derrida organised during the Spring of 2003 at the university of Paris VII by Thomas Dutoit, Textual Practice 19.2 (June 2005) Jacques Derrida, speaking of Hélène Cixous in a conference at Cerisy, sketches his own line of approach. Derrida uses the French word “puisse”, the subjunctive of the verb “pouvoir”, to signify the magic of wishful thinking that he calls the “might of the may,” which is brought about when one interprets a text. The subject is thus “subjunctified” at the same time as he is “subjected.”

⁸⁸ Frédéric Regard, *op. cit.*, 2005, p. 14.

calling for change. Iqbal's moral dilemmas gesture towards a new way of being, as his narrative stands against a fixed order in order to reenergize other ways of being, other styles of being. All Iqbal's narratorial intrusions are thoroughly italicized. As Frédéric Regard explains in his article on Winterson entitled "A Philosophy of Magical Rhetoric":

The italics simultaneously frame the character and forbid the reader to grasp his full existence. [...] a typeface of the sloping kind, the italics visually convey the impression that written language is [...] always in the process of becoming other. [...] The italics are eternally leaning towards an unknown future and, at the same time, towards an unknown past; [...] The italics magically produce the alien spirit in the very act of enunciation⁸⁹.

Indeed, Iqbal ends his narrative by calling for change: "Such are the hopes of Iqbal for another story. Another history. In the future⁹⁰".

This change is symbolised by Iqbal's androgyny. Like Tiresias in whom "the two sexes meet⁹¹", Iqbal is both man and woman. The phrase, always in italics, "*Iqbal was a man who thought he was a woman*" is a leitmotiv in the text being repeated no less than twenty-two times, with three slight variations—"who'd rather be⁹²"; "who knew he was⁹³"; "*Wished he was*⁹⁴". Iqbal tells the reader that his phrase, taken from the Beatles' song "Get back"—"*Jojo was a man who thought he was a woman*"—keeps running around inside his head⁹⁵. It crops up when the events he narrates either make him feel ashamed of being a man or make him feel admiration for women. At the end of his narrative he stops singing it, explaining: "Progress has [...] been made. I am a man now. And I am a woman⁹⁶". This blurring of gender categories seems to be typical of a certain type of postmodern fiction, in which, "gender is increasingly emerging, [...] as an activity, a performance, a becoming, or a site where identities may intersect, proliferate and undo one another⁹⁷". The ethical emphasis on respectful non-violent encounter with alterity, which is central to Levinas's thought, "finds its most potent illustration in the figure of the androgyne that refuses closure and in doing so vindicates the taking into account of the other⁹⁸". Such "a destabilization of gender categories in the framing narrator is inseparable from a destabilization of

⁸⁹ Frédéric Regard, "A Philosophy of Magical Rhetoric. Notes on Jeanette Winterson's *Dancing Lesson*", *Etudes Britanniques Contemporaines* 25 (December 2003), p. 118-119.

⁹⁰ Lindsey Collen, *The Rape of Sita*, *op. cit.*, p. 197.

⁹¹ Eliot's note 218 to the poem.

⁹² Lindsey Collen, *The Rape of Sita*, *op. cit.*, p. 86.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 197.

⁹⁷ Andrew Gibson, *op. cit.*, p. 42.

⁹⁸ Jean-Michel Ganteau, "Fantastic but Truthful: The Ethics of Romance", *The Cambridge Quarterly* 32.3 (2003), p. 236-237.

narrational categories⁹⁹”, which, instead of being hierarchically opposed, are reversed then incorporated one into the other. Such privileging of “the neither/nor, rather than the either/or¹⁰⁰”, counters the strategy of domination that pits the “I” against the “Other¹⁰¹”, challenges the “logic of binary oppositions [that] is also a logic of subordination and domination¹⁰²”, as the “ego is deposed [...] and enters into [...] dialogue¹⁰³”. When Iqbal, through sensibility as openness to others, reaches the conclusion, “We will all be man and we will all be woman. [...] And then we will be free. [...] And then we will become equal¹⁰⁴”, she/he seems to echo Levinasian ethics, which “opens a breach in the present and looks towards the future¹⁰⁵”.

Collen’s re-writing, while presenting a heightened awareness of the fact the source of a text is not an ideally unified consciousness and that God is indeed dead, does nevertheless try to both accept and fill in this textual void: the hypertext writes back to an ideology transmitted by the hypotexts, presenting a new point of view and calling for ethical change. As Sita compulsively repeats her trauma, she both rips up the texts that made it possible and stitches them up in new colours. A new subject of enunciation is thus produced, one that “does not in any way precede the emergence of the text”, but “proceeds from the text while simultaneously being the agent of its causation”. This “textual voice”, located within language, is a “writing voice¹⁰⁶” that re-appropriates an old story from a new point of view and that wields the needle that is “reprising” the old texts, re-fashioning them into new configurations.

Thus Collen’s re-writing of *The Ramayana* and of *The Waste Land* in a twentieth-century Mauritian context from the point of view of the underprivileged amounts to a demythologisation of the patriarchal social structures that allow rape as abuse of power to be possible in the first place, in order to call for a deeper change of mentality. In Judith Butler’s terms, if rape is the “encoded memory of a trauma [...] that lives in language and is carried by language” and “if the subject who speaks is also constituted by the language that she or he speaks, then language is the condition of possibility for the speaking subject, and not merely its instrument of expression¹⁰⁷”, repetition with a difference can break free from the

⁹⁹ Andrew Gibson, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

¹⁰² David Parker, “Introduction: the turn to ethics in the 1990s”, in Jane Adamson, Richard Freadman and David Parker (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 3.

¹⁰³ Andrew Gibson, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

¹⁰⁴ Lindsey Collen, *The Rape of Sita*, *op. cit.*, p. 197.

¹⁰⁵ Andrew Gibson, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

¹⁰⁶ Claude Maisonnat, Josiane Paccaud-Huguet et Annie Ramael (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. xxiii.

¹⁰⁷ Judith Butler, *op. cit.*, p. 36 and 28.

structures of established power and suggest the possibility of reconfiguration and resignification. The “symptomatic compulsive repetition of trauma” becomes “part of a creative invention” that produces “a new subject of enunciation whose voice scandalously undermines the supposed Ur-text¹⁰⁸”. Collen thus “arranges and compiles [already spoken] utterances into a multi-dimensional space, in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash¹⁰⁹”. Her updated Sita, as subject of enunciation, writes back to patriarchy’s “original cacophony” from a feminine point of view. However, she does not say “I”, but gains a symbolic place by giving up agency as she hands over her new story to Iqbal the narrator, who, in turn, passes over the new and on-going story to the reader. Collen’s re-writing, then, shows a need to tell oneself differently and to (re)appropriate the world.

The re-writing process in *The Rape of Sita* is closely linked to political reflexion, which is typical of Collen, who herself is a political and human rights’ activist, founder of an extreme left wing party, and her *engagé* stories focus around political struggles. Although she admits that she does not easily draw the line between “the political and the writing self” and that “writing novels can be a political act,” she does make a distinction in her interview in *Triplopia* between political action and writing novels. Literature indeed exists on a different plane to its object. In an essay entitled “*L’Inadmissible*”, as well as in *Le Partage du sensible*, Jacques Rancière situates literature somewhere in between pure form and pure content. For Rancière, literature, like democracy—and contrarily to what he calls “fiction,” which confirms and reassures—, introduces “dissent” by challenging established opinions. The political is a disruption or reconfiguration of the order of what is visible or perceptible. Like politics, the act of writing is understood as the disruption of an established order that claims to be total. Literature breaks up consensus by “making an effect in reality,” by “reconfiguring sensibility¹¹⁰”. As Jean-Jacques Lecercle points out in *L’Emprise des signes*, the link between literature and politics concerns neither the author’s political action, nor the text’s reflection of reality, but “it is deeper and concerns language¹¹¹”.

¹⁰⁸ Claude Maisonnat, Josiane Paccaud-Huguet et Annie Ramael (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. xiii-xix.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. viii.

¹¹⁰ Jacques Rancière, *Le partage du sensible*, Paris, La Fabrique, 2000, p. 62.

¹¹¹ Jean-Jacques Lecercle and Ronald Shusterman, *L’emprise des signes*, Paris, Editions du Seuil, 2002, p. 244, my translation.