The Invisible Twin: Visibility and Identity in Marie-Thérèse Humbert’s À l’autre bout de moi

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The chapter analyses the notion of the twin couple in Marie-Thérèse Humbert’s À l’autre bout de moi. It argues that the novelist adds an important female perspective to the literary tradition of contemporary Mauritius. Cox uses this seminal novel set in the 1950s to foreground how the author weaves together insularity and multiculturalism through the narrative of two Creole sisters in the island nation by focusing on the notions of visibility and identity.

Key words: identity, visibility, insularity, multiculturalism, feminism, colonial and post-colonial

Introduction

Insularity has been an important theme in Mauritian literature since the beginning of the 20th Century. A fascinating multicultural enclave, the island of Mauritius’ natural and imposing boundaries reinforce its social order unchallenged by the outside world. This sense of solitude in the works of Mauritius’ first authors – Loys Masson, Édouard Maunick, Malcolm de Chazal and Léoville L’Homme– has attracted considerable interest in France where they have been recognized as part of the canon. More recent authors such as Ananda Devi, Sheenaz Patel, Nattacha Appanah and Khal Torabully continue to enrich the creative effervescence of Mauritius. Even J. M. G. Le Clézio contributed to this body of work from time to time through imaginary returns to the island of his ancestors in works such as Le Chercheur d’or, Voyage à Rodrigue and La Quarantaine. Thanks perhaps to the poetic connection to surrealists secured permanently by de Chazal, the Mauritian literary tradition has its own unique take on writing, poetics and identity, but also on the post-colonial experience. Attentive to their complex society founded on the métissage and ethnic self-segregation, Mauritian writers continue to ponder questions of the transcultural process, and deriving from négritude, find

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1 This chapter is a revised version of ‘La jumelle ambiguë: crispation identitaire dans À l’autre bout de moi de Marie-Thérèse Humbert’ published in Études Francophones 17 (2002): 73-87.
new ways of identifying and legitimizing hybrid identities, such as Tora-bully’s ‘coolitude.’

Thus, the schizophrenic tendencies of Mauritian society emerge as another important theme of the local literature, contingent on its multilayered isolation and to its history. After the English took Mauritius from France in 1810, the French were allowed to stay, speak their language and keep their homes. Mauritius, called *Isle de France* under French rule, preserved French as its common language. The English later abolished slavery in 1835, which led to an influx of cheap labourers from India and China. The resulting social order in its post-colonial context is similar to that of many Caribbean islands where the white slave-owners dominated and have remained as the social elite, while the Blacks continue to occupy the lower economic layer and in between are people with multiple possible identities, depending on the colour of one’s skin from *métissage*. However, with large Indian and Chinese populations, Mauritius has more diversity than most West Indian islands. Socially, more diversity also means more competition for space and work. The geographic isolation and remote location of Mauritius (900 km off the eastern coast of Madagascar) with respect to the former colonial powers contribute to its microcosmic character, perceived from the outside as being something between an outpost of unattended orphans to a powerful human experiment on the potential of multiculturalism and *métissage*.

Breaking new ground for women’s writing in Mauritius, Marie-Thérèse Humbert brings a woman’s perspective to the discussion on the insular and schizophrenic nature of this island, particularly in terms of the social tension between the different ethnic communities. Born in 1940 into the Franco-Mauritian community of Quatre Bornes, Humbert’s family moved to France in 1968, the year of the island’s independence from the United Kingdom. Although her family is French, this ‘return’ represented an exile for young Marie-Thérèse who had left home (Quatre Bornes) to study at both Cambridge University and at the Université de la Sorbonne. Never to return to Mauritius, Humbert started her career as a writer with a unique perspective into the post-colonial experience comparable to that of Marguerite Duras, thus strongly infused by nostalgia for the lost land of her childhood. On the other hand, however, Humbert removes herself personally from the narrative and criticizes the White Creoles as a bigoted social elite, but also exposes the reluctance of the other communities toward relationships across racial lines in spite of the changing times.

In this first novel, Humbert reveals the narrative as the inner monologue of Anne, one of two teenage twin sisters from the island of Mauritius, which begins in Paris in ‘the present time.’ Anne Morin lives there in what seems to be self imposed quasi-isolation and then travels back in time via her