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Lindsey Collen's *The Rape of Sita*: Re-writing as Ethics

This article purports to show how *The Rape of Sita* re-writes the Hindu epic, the *Ramayana*, which is recontextualised in contemporary Mauritian time and space in order to make a subversive political comment on Western patriarchal society. Through the posing of ethical questions, language becomes a form of social action, a re-signifying practice, which calls for change by generating another story.

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. Collen is a political and human rights' activist, founder of the left wing party, *Lalit* (which means "struggle" in Creole and "beautiful" in Hindi) and active in the *Muvman Liberasyon Fam* (Women's Liberation Movement). *The Rape of Sita* (1993) is her second novel. It won the 1994 Commonwealth Writers' Prize for the Africa Region and was long-listed for the Orange Prize. When *The Rape of Sita* came out in 1993 it was immediately attacked by a group of fundamentalists and by the State.¹ The first to react was the President of the Hindu Council, then the Prime Minister (Sir Anerood Jugnauth) followed suit, announcing in the National Assembly that the novel was "blasphemous" and "an outrage to public and religious morality" under the criminal code and calling for police action to confiscate the book from the publishers. Collen immediately withdrew the novel from the bookshops. In a hysterical atmosphere, she was threatened with death and public rape. Between December 1993 and January 1994, no less than 51 articles were published in the newspapers. The main objection, from people who had not even read the novel was to the title itself, simply for its linking the Hindu goddess Sita, symbol of chastity and purity, to the word "rape." These articles, mixing politics and religion, focused on the Prime Minister's attitude, on the legal issue of censorship, on social and religious problems such as fundamentalism and women's rights. As Vicram Ramharai notes in his review of the reactions in the press, the novel, more often referred to as the "book," was hardly ever treated as being literature, by articles that say more about their authors than about the novel itself (11, 14). In other words, all these social, religious and political reactions to Collen's novel were "extra-literary."

My approach, as an academic literary critic, of course aims at being "literary." But, even if I adopt the point of view that literature does say something about the world, that it does have use, that there is a link between literature and politics, literature is definitely not politics. This is true even of a writer like Collen, whose *engagé* stories indeed focus around political struggles. Although she admits that she doesn't easily draw the line between "the political and the writing self" and that

¹ See Lindsey Collen's interview in *Triplopia* and Lindley Couronne's Master's dissertation (esp. pp. 16 ff.), for summaries of the political reactions to the novel and subsequent events. Also see Vicram Ramharai's article on the reception of the novel for a clear and thorough review of reactions in the newspapers.

“writing novels can be a political act,” she does make a distinction between political action and writing novels (see her interview in *Triplopia*). Then: What is the difference between politics and literature? There is no shortage of critical texts debating this problem—contemporary critics, having rejected older moral criticism and being highly aware of the dangers of conflating literature and politics, seem to feel that they have to justify their considering literature as social action. Not only do literature and politics function according to different temporalities—the political has a far more immediate and tangible effect, as is illustrated by the immediate social effects of Collen’s novel—, not only does literature hold in abeyance the convictions and certitudes which are so crucial to political functioning (see Gibson 5, 85), but literature indeed exists on a different plane to its object. 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 language [my translation]” (244). 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, introduces “dissent” by challenging established opinions. The act of writing is understood as the disruption of an established order that claims to be total. It works through what Gibson calls “the power to be affected,” whereby sensibility is taken, as in Emmanuel Levinas’s work, to mean “susceptibility or openness to the event” (164).

In this reflexion on the way in which literature can be political action, one may have recognised characteristics of what has been called “the turn to ethics in the 1990s” (Parker 1) in literature and in literary criticism,² whereby “ethics” is taken to mean the search for the “good life,” posing the crucial question “How *ought* a life be lived?” I shall insist here on the double dimension of ethics: both pragmatic and subversive. If the *ought* which lies “at the dead centre of ethics” (Harpham 18) refers to an objective obligation independent of the opinion of the enunciator, the enunciator has to be implied in what he says for his discourse to have an ethical impact—the tone or voice in the text, far from being objective, actually adopts the attitude of what is being said. What is put forward has actually been experienced and calls forth the experience of the reader by the tone, by the way of saying (see Maingueneau 80-83). Therein lies the pragmatic aspect of ethical discourse, making language a form of action. Ethics also has a subversive aspect. Indeed, ethics differs from morality: morality is associated with deontology, with upholding an official system of rules of behaviour, whereas ethics is associated with the undetermined, with questioning; morality is associated with a will to domination, whereas ethics “operates a kind of play within morality, holds it open” (Gibson 15); morality is associated with consensus and closure, whereas ethics introduces dissent and openness. Ethics privileges “the neither/nor, rather than the either/or” (Gibson 44) and is turned to

² See Martha Nussbaum, *Love’s Knowledge*; Geoffrey Galt Harpham, *Getting it Right*; Andrew Gibson, *Postmodernity, Ethics and the Novel* and Jane Adamson, Richard Freadman and David Parker (eds.), *Negotiating Ethics in Literature, Philosophy and Theory*.

the future, calling for change. Alain Badiou's definition of ethics, which involves being faithful to the truth of the "event" which ruptures the established order (38-39) links both the pragmatic and subversive aspects. Thus literature itself becomes a "resignifying practice" (See Butler), with the immediate pragmatic effect of re-describing the world from a different point of view and calling for change. Indeed, in this age when self and representationalism have become problematical terms, ethical criticism seems more suitable than traditional moral criticism: "Literary texts, traditionally viewed as repositories of moral and aesthetic insight or challenge, tend now to be seen as predominantly ideological constructions, or sites of power struggles between social forces of various kinds" (Coady and Miller 201).

I would like to suggest that *The Rape of Sita* is part of this postmodern turn to ethics of the 1990's, which uses language—especially various forms of intertextuality—to pose ethical questions. Indeed, when Collen says, in her interview in *Triplopia*, that she uses literature as a way of "getting out of moral straight-jackets" and of "re-thinking myths that make up our psyches," she is describing a typical aspect of contemporary literature, which Adrienne Rich describes as: "Re-vision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction [...]" (35). I should like to analyse how Collen's re-vision works and what exactly her criticism is aimed at. This I propose to do in three stages, by concentrating first on her re-writing of an episode of the *Ramayana*³ in a present-day Mauritian context, then on how she uses a well-known classic of Anglo-American literature to make a subversive social comment, finally how she calls for a change of mentality through narrative structure and symbolism.

* * *

The presence of the *Ramayana* as hypotext is made explicit through a number of intertextual references,⁴ as Collen re-stages the great epic, mixing myth and fiction. In what Linda Hutcheon calls "inter-art discourse" or "modern parody," the mythological plot and characters are repeated "with critical difference" (2, 7), as they are recontextualised in Mauritian reality, in order to address and involve a popular readership and challenge the dominant order. The differences with the hypotext offer an ideological comment on contemporary practices, thus activating the revolutionary force of parody.

³ The *Ramayana* is a national epic poem of India. Attributed originally to the poet Valmiki, it was written down during the first century A. D., although it is based on oral traditions that go as far back as the sixth century B.C.

⁴ I will follow Gérard Genette in using the term "transtextuality" to refer to all types of relations and echoes between texts, keeping the term "intertextuality" to refer to the actual presence of a text in another (for example in the form of quotation or allusion) and the term "hypertextuality" to refer to the relationship of a given text (the "hypertext") to a previous text (the "hypotext"). The hypertext is grafted onto the hypotext and could not exist without it (see *Palimpsestes* 7-11).

The *Ramayana* is literally “trans-contextualised” (Hutcheon 12) into the 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 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-signify (see esp. 375-6). The story is realistically set in 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 are mixed with fictive characters and events.

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, reincarnation of Vishnu, and who embodies pure, faithful, and submissive womanhood. Many of the novel’s characters are named after those of the *Ramayana*, and the narrative events parallel those of the epic poem. Collen’s Sita becomes a 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, she becomes the instigator of the action. This modern Sita lives with Dharma, who is obviously Rama, and is said to have “*dharma* [sic]” (RS 68), 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, he is from a poor family and is described as “a great leader of the poor, or a prophet of the people” (RS 15). As Sita dreams: “They were [...] all gods and goddesses. Of modern times” (RS 48). 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.

The plot of the *Ramayana* is also re-written. In the Hindu epic, the demon king Ravana abducts Sita and 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 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 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 1982” (RS 52). The rape takes place in an underprivileged suburb of *Sendeni* in the French Department of La Reunion, described as “the colony of colonies” (RS 21), on the eve of the birth of the extreme left wing party *Lalit*. Moreover, the moment when Sita starts “diving into [her] unconscious” (RS 33) to recover the memory of her rape coincides with the day when “the United States armed forces raped Iraq” (RS 183), just before “the bombs go diving down” (RS 33). 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 thing” (RS 149). Instead of being a pure woman unjustly blamed and repudiated by Dharma, Sita becomes a victim of rape as abuse of power.

Thus the central theme of rape is clearly posed—indeed, the author explains in her *Triplopia* interview that she meant to “engage with this rich story about the question of rape somehow being the woman’s crime.” But the re-writing of the *Ramayana* amounts to the re-visioning or, in Butler’s terms, the “restaging” of the question of rape, which is more often regarded as the fault of the woman in patriarchal cultures. The question posed here is akin to 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?” (20). 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” (RS 147). Consciousness leads to the moral responsibility to act and ordinary people are 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. Indeed, the poem placed before the preface 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 Western civilisation of the 1980s in which the story of the *Ramayana* has been re-contextualised is 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 it.” Intertextuality with some of the famous literary texts of Western civilisation, especially T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* (1922), is used to further challenge the established social order. The title and author are alluded to several times. Sita is actually reading the poem when Rowan attacks 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 corner?*[sic]” (RS 141). *The Waste Land* thus becomes a metaphor for patriarchy itself. This famous and complex modernist poem has been variously interpreted, but Collen here chooses to read it as being “associated to the centre of political power,” as “patriarchal in its sense of social order” (*Triplopia*).

The Waste Land is 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 Jessie Weston’s *From Ritual to Romance*, in which she establishes a link between archaic Nature cults and the Christian legends of the Holy Grail.⁵ 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 men (172-3). The infertile wasteland is thus the direct result of rape, which symbolises the separation of man and woman, life being restored when they are finally reunited. Indeed, in Eliot’s poem spiritual dryness is associated with death-in-life in a world dangerous for women, for sex has replaced love (see Cleanth Brooks’ article). In such a world, Sita *does* indeed get raped. 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.

As Collen insists in *Triplopia*, patriarchy is “insidious or “invisible.” Her novel shows how rape “makes the invisible visible,” (*Triplopia*), which is why it is either silenced or attributed to the innocent victim. Further forms of intertextuality with *The Waste Land* highlight this silencing process, making Sita’s forgetting of her rape a metaphor of the secret functioning of patriarchy.

⁵ Basically, the object of the Quest is the restoration to vigour of the Fisher King, whose loss of virility has disastrous effects upon his kingdom, turning it into a waste land, the victim of a prolonged drought (Weston 21-3). 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 resurrection, 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 (Weston 75).

Two lines from Part I of the poem, entitled "The Burial of the Dead" are repeatedly quoted : "That corpse you planted last year in your garden,/ Has it begun to sprout?..." (RS 39). These lines, that Sita was reading when Rowan attacked her, echo in her mind as she tries to remember her rape. Also, the famous opening of the poem, "April is the cruellest month," is recalled by the narrator as he ironically wonders whether Sita could have avoided being raped by acting differently (RS 55). 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 in forgetful snow" (*The Waste Land*, lines 4-5). 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, prefer not admit to guilt. 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. Patriarchy, like all dominant powers, prefers to keep its abuses of power hidden. If ever rape is mentioned, the fault is attributed to the innocent victim, who is punished.

Yet the voice in the text, deeply implied in its own discourse, writes back from the other side introducing dissent into consensus. The word "bury" is appropriated by Sita and recurs as a leitmotif as she dives into her memory to remember the rape buried in her unconscious, thus going against the grain of the normal process of burying. 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 "[b]urying a corpse" (RS 80-81). Conditioned to feel guilty, she is afraid she has killed someone. But, little by little, the memory surfaces and the buried secret is revealed. This consciousness is but a first step leading to the moral responsibility to act: "She lost it. For eight years and nine months? Until the corpse she had buried started to sprout in the garden" (RS 185). Sita has completely appropriated Eliot's words and "sprout" comes to mean concrete action. The story is punctuated by a series of moral dilemmas posed by the narrator. 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 guard?" (RS 141); "The balance of forces were against her in all ways. (In our society, aren't they always, when it comes to women?)" (RS 152). Sita's responsibility extends to us all, as the narrator addresses the reader "what if we were one of those men [rapists]?" (RS 171) and "you don't know anything yourself really, unless you think it over, digest it" (RS 178).

In the absence of God to rescue or to revenge her, 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 change" (RS 194), she decides to be active in the "All Women's Front, and in the movement" (RS 196), 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, actively participating in what she writes, as she has actually experienced what she puts forward. Her article presents rape from the other side, posing again all the narrator's questions about responsibility and blame, showing clearly that "rape is the parody of the man-woman relationship" (RS 180), that "personal disorder [is] knitted firmly into the political" (RS 180), that "rape is to do with 'destroy'" (RS 162) and that it "was not possible in human society until males came to dominate females by force," which is dated as "about ten thousand years ago" (RS 160-1).

* * *

Indeed, the link between literature and politics concerns language. If reality comes to us filtered through words, it can be re-written, in a constant *chassé-croisé* between fiction and reality. Collen's re-writing of Indian myths and of literary classics does not concern only characters, plot and themes. *The Rape of Sita* not only reverses points of view. It actually re-tells a story of rape differently, doing things with words, using writing as a resignifying practice. Writing is action, as the enunciator actually experiences what is said and simultaneously calls for the reader to experience it as well. The chosen narrative technique, based on the oral tradition, which privileges dialogue between narrator and audience, is here significant. The story is framed by a preface, in which the narrator, Iqbal, explains that what follows is the written story of his oral account of the story of the rape of Sita. Several narrative levels are present and the text keeps moving from one to the other. Iqbal's narrative of the story of Sita as previously told to an audience is regularly interrupted by accounts of the story-telling situation itself and by passages in which Iqbal directly addresses the reader to pose moral dilemmas. The choice of this multiple-levelled conversational method in which story and narrating become entangled, is the reverse of rhetoric, which is linked to the will to totalize and master, as it "closes off all possibility of dialogue with the other." On the contrary, the dialogic structure chosen "maintains the ethical relation with the other and the possibility of unsaying what is said" (Gibson 59). Indeed, the oral story-teller has to "re-tell a true story anew each time. And it has to be different each time" (RS 8). Iqbal is both inventive and reliable, explaining that he is only telling stories told to him by others. In addition to moving in and out of Sita's mind, he sometimes hands the narrative voice over to another character, embedding another's oral story into his own narrative. Thus Iqbal incorporates the visions of others into his own to make a new story, calling to the reader to counter-sign in his turn. His "self-subjectification" is a form of "self-subjunctification" — as he 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,” the text he offers to the reader also 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 boundaries” (Regard, “Autobiography as Linguistic Incompetence” 9, 14). The end circles back to the preface as Iqbal offers his story to the reader (*RS* 197).

Iqbal's narrative strategy, which he compares to a “bunch of grapes” (*RS* preface and 197), challenges traditional narrative methods in more ways than one. The form of the novel itself seems to dissolve as the narrative movement forward is also a recoil back into the text, Sita diving into her unconscious to recover the lost moment. Moreover, what Gibson calls an “ethics of dissolution” operates in the novel through “repeated and radical interruption of given horizons” (Gibson 92-3), in a technique of narration inspired from oral report. The constant deviations to the mainstream story of the rape of Sita serve to fill in information on other characters, to pose moral questions and offer philosophical comments about life, or to fill in on historical details. Chapters are replaced by a proliferation of instances of varying length separated by typographical marks. Narrative summary alternates with quoted dialogue and passages in traditional internal monologue or in stream of consciousness, all punctuated by short sentences and groups of words, giving a broken rhythm, both forward moving yet pulled back in time, as different voices and times merge. Italics, which “visually convey the impression that written language is [...] always in the process of becoming other,” are employed to signal to the reader the alien origin of words (here quotations or words in Creole), or to mark Iqbal's numerous narratorial intrusions, producing “the alien spirit in the very act of enunciation” (Regard, “A Philosophy of Magical Rhetoric” 118-119). Thus, Iqbal's narrative stands against a fixed order, and his moral dilemmas gesture towards a new way of being. Indeed, he ends his narrative by calling for change: “Such are the hopes of Iqbal for another story. Another history. In the future” (*RS* 197).

Iqbal is a key character. 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 war” (*Triplopia*). His role is fundamentally one of mediation between different peoples' realities — he says he “used to stand around a lot, [...], just watching and listening” (preface to *RS*). On a still deeper symbolic level, like Tiresias in whom “the two sexes meet” (Eliot's note 218 to the poem), 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, sometimes with slight variations — “who'd rather be” (*RS* 86); “who knew he was” (*RS* 88) “Wished he was” (*RS* 90). The phrase crops up when the events Iqbal 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 woman” (RS 197). This blurring of gender categories seems to be typical of a certain type of contemporary 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 another” (Gibson 42). 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 other” (Ganteau 236-7). Such “a destabilization of gender categories in the framing narrator is inseparable from a destabilization of narrational categories,” which, instead of being hierarchically opposed, are reversed then incorporated one into the other. Such privileging of “the neither/nor, rather than the either/or,” counters the strategy of domination that pits the “I” against the “Other” (Gibson 47, 44, 32), challenges the “logic of binary oppositions [that] is also a logic of subordination and domination” (qtd. in Parker 3), as the “ego is deposed [...] and enters into [...] dialogue” (Gibson 25). 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 equal” (RS 197), she/he seems to echo Levinasian ethics, which “opens a breach in the present and looks towards the future” (Gibson 40).

* * *

Collen’s re-writing of Indian myths in a Mauritian context from the point of view of the underprivileged is also a re-vision of the patriarchal social structures that allow rape as abuse of power to be possible in the first place and a call for a deeper change of mentality. In Judith Butler’s terms, “repetition [is] both the way that trauma is repeated but also the way in which it breaks with the historicity to which it is in thrall” (37). The story of rape becomes here a “reverse citation,” which shows how the act simply makes visible underlying structures of power, how it functions as a metaphor for oppression. Consciousness leads to moral responsibility, which in turn leads to action. But the novel is not simply a political manifesto — it works as an act of language, which generates “another story” (RS 197). 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 expression” (Butler, 36, 28), repetition with a difference can break free from the binary structures of established power and suggest the possibility of reconfiguration and resignification.

The Rape of Sita is an illustration of one of the ways in which contemporary fiction is re-introducing the ethical imperative of realism. By challenging the masculine realm of the symbolic — or psychic laws or imaginary domain — that shape the reality of our lives, it aims at changing the world. As Drucilla Cornell explains in *Beyond Accommodation*, “the challenge to patriarchy [a division into two sexes which culturally privileges the masculine and is inseparable from the

brutal history of imperialism] is a challenge to culture and to what has commonly been thought of as civilisation” (see xv-xxxiii). Cornell’s ethical feminism is different from a feminism that acts on the real world in the aim of achieving equality by either reversing the hierarchy between men and women or by entering male spheres of power; she explains that such a “politics of revenge” would “only reverse the gender hierarchy, not displace it. Such a reversal would not be liberation, but only perpetuation, even if women were to finally be on top” (11) — Collen also explicitly rejects this process: “by the intentional recruitment by the power-that-be of women into the patriarchal structures, women end up being the perpetrators. [...] ‘Like we are finding ourselves inside the Trojan horse that’s finding its way into our own village’ ” (*Triplopia*). Collen’s *The Rape of Sita* seeks “maximum liberty and equality with all others in the moral community of persons,” which starts with a disruption of “the tyranny of established reality” and a re-metaphorization of reality, a re-writing of the fictions “through which we portray ourselves” (Cornell, xxvi, 2-3).

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