

## A Mauritian (Postcolonial) Perspective of William Faulkner

Angela Ramsoondur-Mungur

University of Mauritius

**Abstract.** Postcolonialism is a concern for all who share the pain and legacy of hegemony in various facets. The aim of this paper is to look at the American South and, in the first place, re-define a space that is not usually perceived as 'postcolonial' and, in the second place, provide comments from my Mauritian (postcolonial) perspective. As Ania Loomba (1998) writes, "it has been suggested that it is more helpful to think more flexibly [of postcolonialism as the contestation of colonial domination and the legacies of colonialism."<sup>1</sup> In fact I wish to discuss here the legacies of a form of colonization in the American South juxtaposed with the Mauritian experience. American writer William Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha novels like *The Sound and the Fury*, *Absalom, Absalom* and *Sanctuary* are here used to investigate the experience of the characters through postcolonial discourse. The discussion focuses on the forces of history, memory and patriarchal structures that define Southerners and are reminiscent of the Mauritian identity-formation. The place of white women within this space is also examined. Common denominators bind Mauritius and the American South.

**Keywords:** Faulkner, South, postcolonial, Mauritius, identity, hegemony, memory, obsession.

### 1. Introduction

William Faulkner and the American South (the Deep South) have fascinated me since my undergraduate years. As a Mauritian, I have felt very sensitive to Faulkner's fiction, his use of the apocryphal South into Yoknapatawpha and the rifting racial relations that wave through the characters, their past and their present. The South is looked upon as a microcosm of American space but the dynamics of race relations resonate in the Mauritian space as well. In Mauritius, we have a double French and British colonial legacy. In addition, the multicultural aspect of our island gives us a strong awareness to our negotiation of race, ethnicity, and culture. In addition, the American space is postcolonial from my perspective in the sense that it embodies the contradiction of a people that can be both colonised and colonizer (the whites Northerners versus the white Southerners and the white Southerners versus the black Southerners). In addition, this Southern space is in itself a micro-nation within the macro-nation through its trial of the American Civil War, the only war between Americans on the American soil. After the war, the Northerners attempted to dominate the cultural and economic space of the American South to make it become another North. Cultural marginalisation, economic deprivation, identity crisis can be found in the many post-bellum concerns of William Faulkner's fiction but these echo also in the Mauritian psyche. The focus therefore will be on the postcolonial spots that emerge from Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), and *Sanctuary* (1931) from my postcolonial Mauritian perspective.

### 2. History

In Faulkner's novels, history is deconstructed, reshaped and then remoulded to the Southerners who therefore inherit a mutilated and alien version of their identity. This is voiced out through re-memorisation and myth-making of family histories of the Compsons in *The Sound and the Fury* and the Sutpens in *Absalom, Absalom!*. History is narrated in the oral traditions mode. Similarly, stories of love and of betrayal

---

<sup>1</sup> Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 12.

sang by old women in Indo-Mauritian weddings and the Sega songs (the folklore traditional song and dance in Mauritius) transmit the stories of past Mauritius. Southerners pass on stories of the antebellum South to keep alive their glorious South. To understand the origin of Sutpen's empire leads to understanding the origin of the glorious past of the South. Hence history becomes an obsession for even Quentin Compson in *The Sound and the Fury*. History of the family, the community and the South is a web in which Quentin Compson is trapped. Mauritians as well are obsessed with the history of their ancestors, how they embarked, what their work conditions were and how they strived to make their identity throughout decades. Even now heritage sites like Le Morne and Aapravasi Ghat are important memory sites that Mauritians are proud of and cannot bypass because they remind us of the pre-independent Mauritius.

The ensnaring magnetism of history thus takes away the freedom of the individuals. Thomas Sutpen, in *Absalom, Absalom*, though a white, is caged in his past and remembers too well this childhood instance where the black servant asks him to go to the back door because he is a poor white. This has re-designed his beliefs about his position as white in the South. Even in Mauritius, the contacts we have with others constantly re-define our place in the Mauritian space; for example, when an Indo-Mauritian is in contact with a Euro-Mauritian, negotiation of identities and of power labels each individual. In the same way, the Southern ideology of racial and class structure has colonised Sutpen's mind and taken his 'freedom' to be a white and poor. He is enthralled by the web of Southern ideology. Likewise, many Mauritians remain anchored by their colonial past and find difficulty to renegotiate afresh their identity in the postcolonial space; they remain framed by their traditions and customs that give them a sense of identity connected to their ancestral roots. Quentin Compson, as white and of aristocrat origins, believes his duty is to upkeep the family honour because of their frozen history usurped by the Northerners who came to reconstruct the war-scarred South. In both *The Sound and the Fury* and *Absalom, Absalom!* Quentin is conscious that the Old South has been lost forever and believes that only contribution he can make to his destiny and that of his society is through the maintenance of the Old Southern values. In the same vein, Mauritians attempt to preserve the past through the maintenance of traditional ethnic customs and traditions. Therefore the celebration of ethnic festivals in Mauritius or other customs shape Mauritians' desire to make everyone remember their past ancestral connection. As Albert Memmi (1957) writes, "[The colonised] has forgotten how to participate actively in history and no longer asks to do so. No matter how briefly colonization may have lasted, all memory of freedom seems distant."<sup>2</sup> Quentin's relation with his family in *The Sound and the Fury* is itself problematised because he stubbornly lives in the past. Hence obsession with history acts like a colonizer. Whether in the American South or Mauritius, we are obsessed with the past. History becomes a hegemonic factor in the identification of the 'I'.

The South of Quentin Compson and Thomas Sutpen is a calcified space where internal dynamics cannot allow for new configuration of identity, which explains the conflict of generations in *The Sound and the Fury*. Whether it be Quentin or Sutpen, they are trapped in the Southern ideology of race and class which is in itself made of historical forces. Similarly, in Mauritius, we are all trapped in our common history which is itself threaded by the different darns of colonisation, of slavery, of immigration of indentured labourers and Chinese workers and of the European, Asian and African cultures. But the postcard feeling we have when we listen to our grandparents talking about trains, about how their own grandparents worked and lived and thrived to give a education to their Mauritian-born children is easily correlated with Quentin's nostalgic and utopian feeling about the Old South, the South before the Civil War ravaged and re-defined power relations between the whites and blacks. However the antebellum South cannot return back, just like our pre-independent Mauritius, when people were still poor but simple and every community maintained a hierarchy through their codes and traditions. It remains only in the collective memory. Hence Faulkner depicts a twentieth-century young Southern white man, obsessed with his sister Caddy in *The Sound and the Fury*, correlating Quentin's fixation on a raped history of the South with the desire to keep his sister a virgin. But Caddy, similarly to Mauritians who need to delineate their identity and belonging (due to our multiethnic and multicultural state) feels distaste for anyone who attempts to control her. She becomes the slippery object that Quentin cannot hold because she needs to label her identity in the new South, the postbellum South

---

<sup>2</sup> Albert Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized*. Editions Buchet/Chastel Corrêa, 1957. Translated by Howard Greenfeld (New York: The Orion Press, 1990) 158.

facing the twentieth-century. In the same way, Mauritians attempt to deal with slippery spaces when they are challenged to identify themselves within a specific historical socio-cultural matrix.

Compson's suicide in *The Sound and the Fury* is the death of those individuals that cannot deal with the clash of the Old South values and the new values promoted by the Northerners, and also the advent of the twentieth-century. The suicide of Quentin Compson is explained by his extreme desire to capture the past and that explains why he is alienated from his new South. As R. Radhakrishnan (2003) writes, "...to be postcolonial is to live in a state of alienation, alienation from one's true being, history, and heritage."<sup>3</sup> In *The Sound and the Fury*, not only is Quentin Compson lost but also Caddy and Miss Quentin (his niece, daughter of Caddy). William Faulkner proves that for any postcolonial object and subject, what has been lost can never be gained. The Civil War has created a wound and a scar that white Southerners cannot oversee. Hence the obsession with the past and the nostalgia define the characters that have to face the new century with a new vision.

In *Absalom, Absalom!* Thomas Sutpen's 'empire' is erected by his slaves and re-creates a space where he becomes the originator of a white aristocratic family, where he subjects his slaves and all black individuals a reminder of his position to show the Jefferson community that he is not this 'poor white,' but white and rich. Hence he attempts to be a new coloniser, a new centre. Quentin Compson looks for the story of Sutpen's empire in an attempt to recapture the past which proves his nostalgia for the class structure, and for everything associated with the Old South. Hence, through oral tradition, through remembering the past glory of the antebellum South, Quentin and Shreve, together with Rosa Coldfield and Jason Compson, reweave the story of Sutpen and twist it, adding a mythic value to Sutpen's tragedy in *Absalom, Absalom!*. Likewise, some Sega songs from Mauritius playfully mention stories of suffering and domination which resonate into our collective consciousness. The past stories gain a mythic quality because we inherently know that nothing will be the same again.

Charles Baker (2000) writes, "Postcolonial people lose their traditions and heritage...Postcolonial literature has the main determinant of reclaiming the past."<sup>4</sup> William Faulkner visibly does repossess the past but his position is from inside the margin (the South) juggling on the definition of the margin and the centre. In *The Sound and the Fury*, Faulkner points that Quentin is also a marginal due to his ancestors' 'sin' of slavery. His suffering is interlocked with his purgation. His suffering comes with remembering (in both *Absalom, Absalom!* and *The Sound and the Fury*) the past grandeur of the South. However, this grandeur rests on a sin: slavery. Similarly in Mauritius, the grandeur of whites living today in luxury and promoting business nationally and internationally rests on the work, sweat and blood of slaves and indentured labourers. Whether it be Quentin Compson, or Thomas Sutpen or any Euro-Mauritian, the glorious past remains a fossil (dead but visible, untouchable, without flesh and animation). Suffering comes from the act of remembering.

### 3. The White Women's Place in the South

The women in Faulkner's novels are even more trapped because of their position as women and also because the obsession with history defines their identity and their destiny. Faulkner's foregrounded female characters are the white women. Temple Drake in *Sanctuary* and Caddy Compson in *The Sound and the Fury*, two Southern white women, are like rubbles left from the Southern aristocratic space. They are burdened by the immobilizing double discourse of acting 'white' and acting as 'good' women. They have ambivalent position of being white, Southern, and women. Indo-Mauritian women are alike webbed in the patriarchal expectations as acting Indian (of Hindu or Muslim faiths) though many transgress these cultural barriers. As Gyan Prakash writes that postcolonialism represents "a new beginning, one in which certain modes of domination may persist and acquire new forms of sustainance."<sup>5</sup> Caddy and Temple both attempt to liberate themselves from the burden of the Old South nostalgia propagated by men in their family. They want to annihilate the myth of the Southern Belle and promulgate the notion that the white Southern woman

---

<sup>3</sup> R. Radhakrishnan, "Postcoloniality and the Boundaries of Identity," in *Identities: Race, Class, Gender, and Nationality*, eds. Linda Martin Alcoff and Eduardo Mendieta (Malden, MA, USA & Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 318.

<sup>4</sup> Charles Baker, *William Faulkner's Postcolonial South* (New York: Peter Lang Inc., 2000), 55.

<sup>5</sup> As quoted in Adebayo Williams, "The postcolonial flâneur and other fellow-travellers: Conceits for a narrative of redemption." *Third World Quarterly* (January 1997). State Alumni, ELibrary. 7 June 2006. <<https://alumni.state.gov>>

cannot remain the antebellum woman. As the Old South died, the Southern Belle died as well like the Dodo died when Mauritius lost its virginal state. Caddy Compson and Temple Drake, two white women, though privileged in the South, feel the need to define their new identity, snatching away the expectations of the patriarchal South. The South thus becomes a kind of colonizing manacle, a center from which they want to escape. They feel oppressed by the history and codes of the South White. Similarly in Mauritius, women are trapped by their cultural framework. Since the island is multicultural, some women have to abide by the traditions and customs of their ancestors while others rebel.

Caddy is strategically put at the core of the male discourse in *The Sound and the Fury* to show that “the presence of some women implies the absence of many others.”<sup>6</sup> Caddy, the white flower of the Compson, the dream of the Southern Belle, seems to be also the target of the blame of her brothers Quentin, Jason and Benjy. Caddy shows that in the twentieth-century South, a new entity, that what has been lost cannot be retrieved again. The culture of the Old South cannot be recuperated after the Civil War. The only method for Caddy to construct a new Southern identity in the new postcolonial South is to sever everything related to the Old South’s culture. However, her understanding of the present and that of the Quentin’s clash: she is progressive and views her adaptation to the new South with the celebration of her sexuality and liberty. Quentin acts as the coloniser, the new patron of the Southern values, but cannot accept the loss of the hegemony he had over Caddy. Quentin is de facto a vehicle of Old South values and an emblematic centre for the subject Caddy. Caddy however resists to the cultural values that Quentin wants to disseminate. Hence the white woman is kept in custody because she is trapped within the Southern traditions, social customs and historical forces. Mauritian women alike are confined within patriarchal expectations that are even more complicated in Mauritius because we deal with ethnic cultural expectations as well as expectations of the mono-Mauritian identity that claims a combined identity made of multicultural fragments.

Yet Caddy’s or Temple Drake’s Southern (white) traditions dominate their Selves that have been halved by their desire to be free and the burden of the Old South. Their newfound liberties saddle them to face the anger of the white men. Women have always stomached the unambiguous forms of erasure and silence in both colonial and postcolonial patriarchal structures. But their marginality is amplified when these women resist the patriarchal net. One example of resistance is Caddy’s refusal to remain virgin before marriage in *The Sound and the Fury*, or Temple Drake’s decadence into prostitution in *Sanctuary*. In the same way in Mauritius, many girls of Asian origin do not feel the need to conform to their parents’ or society’s traditions. Exposed to Western values for long, and exposed to media and Internet, Mauritian girls today celebrate their emancipation from the patriarchal gaze through their sexuality, through the destruction of cultural barriers.

Many Faulknerian female characters are smothered in the Southern white man’s world. Other Faulknerian women characters however stand firm; for example, Rosa Coldfield in *Absalom, Absalom!*, Dilsey Gibson in *The Sound and the Fury*, Lena Grove in *Light in August* or Rosa Millard alias Granny (Bayard Sartoris’s grandmother) and Cousin Drusilla in *The Unvanquished*, Temple Drake in *Sanctuary* and *Requiem for a Nun* and Addie Bundren in *As I Lay Dying* are examples of fortitude in the face of change, and of patriarchal compulsory ideas and choices. Caddy and Temple personify the last relics of the South, but they have transmuted through their privilege as white to unfasten the white patriarchal knots on virginity and chastity. Though transgressing the Southern centre, women in Faulkner’s fiction are stripped of their individuality because they cannot trek outside this Southern axis. In *The Sound and the Fury* changes cannot licence Caddy to be free, she is shackled by the cultural and historical force of the South though William Faulkner’s many attempts to give voice and visibility to the ‘voiceless’ Caddy. Caddy’s hybridity, therefore involves not her ‘race’, but in the expression of her ambivalent cultural ideology. Hybridity symbolizes the crucial interaction of origin, race, class and indeed nation. Mauritius too celebrates its hybridity through the mélange of our various origins, our multifarious cultural customs, our multiethnic traditions and our desire to act and feel global.

The postbellum subsidiary identities of the South attempt thus to dislocate the centre with its tendency to homogenise cultural (North versus South) differences. Accordingly, Caddy in *The Sound and the Fury* and

---

<sup>6</sup> Pushpa Naidu Parekh, “Redefining the Postcolonial Female Self: Women in Anita Desai’s *Clear Light of Day*,” In *Between the Lines: South Asians and Postcoloniality*, eds. Deepika Bahri and Mary Vasudeva (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996), 276.

Joe Christmas in *Light in August* have to accept their multiple, numerous selves. The white individuals suffer from rootlessness and identity-conflict due to the entangling ideologies and myths of the South. In a parallel tone, many Mauritians, aware of the force of history and the expectations of globalisation, are drifted by the force of the multicultural nature of the island, the culture to be followed by the family and ancestors, and the desire to be a global citizen embracing the Western identity completely.

Hence, Faulkner is indirectly trying to say that obsessive antebellum characteristics (myths, ideology and history) are more devastating to the new Southerners than the Civil War was catastrophic to the Southerners. Mauritians however cannot forget the past and our history because everyday is a reminder that we are citizens of an island which is relentlessly trying to prove we are the tiger of the Indian Ocean, that no one can control or hegemonise us. The postcolonial standpoint taken in this paper proves that, through Faulkner's celebration of his heritage of the new construction of the South, the dynamics of hegemony, subaltern-ness and oppression –after the Civil War, after the abolition of slavery - still prevail in the South. Mauritius is a nation that is forging its identity continually, blending the past and the desires and dreams of a future whatever our ancestral roots. Mauritians negotiate multicultural aspects of the island in everyday dealings. The colonial legacy is found in the master of three languages: English, French and Creole. Our tri-lingualism demarks us from the frozen past as we celebrate our multiethnic characteristics in our communication. But our space resonates the past, our voice sings the pre-independent Mauritius, our eyes remember the black and white photographs of our collective memory and our soul remains Mauritian like the Southerners' soul will always beckon for the dead South.

#### 4. References

- [1] Baker, Charles. *William Faulkner's Postcolonial South*. New York: Peter Lang Inc., 2000
- [2] Du Pre Lumpkin, Katherine. *The Making of the Southerner*. Alfred A.Knopf, Inc., 1946. Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, 1991
- [3] Hines, Thomas S. *William Faulkner and the Tangible Past: The Architecture of Yoknapatawpha*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996
- [4] Lefebvre, Henri. *The Production of Space*. Translated from the French by Donald Nicholson-Smith. Oxford and Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 1999
- [5] Loomba, Ania. *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*. London and New York: Routledge, 1998.
- [6] Memmi, Albert. *The Colonizer and the Colonized*. Editions Buchet/Chastel Corrêa, 1957. Translated by Howard Greenfeld. New York: The Orion Press, 1990
- [7] Naidu Parekh, Pushpa. "Redefining the Postcolonial Female Self: Women in Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day*." *Between the Lines: South Asians and Postcoloniality*, eds. Deepika Bahri and Mary Vasudeva. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996. 276.
- [8] Radhakrishnan, R. "Postcoloniality and the Boundaries of Identity." In *Identities: Race, Class, Gender, and Nationality*, eds., Linda Martin Alcoff and Eduardo Mendieta. Malden, MA, USA and Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing, 2003.
- [9] Sanga, Jaina C., ed. *South Asian Literatures in English: An Encyclopedia*. Westport, London: Greenwood Press, 2004
- [10] Viljoen, Louise. "Postcolonialism and recent women's writing in Afrikaans.(South African Literature in Transition)" *World Literature Today*. (1996). State Alumni, ELibrary. 5 June 2006. <<https://alumni.state.org>>