

THE CANE-CUTTER'S SONG
Translated by Vidya Vencatesan

In 1999, I was asked by the French publishers Dapper to translate a novel by the Guyanese writer David Dabydeen into French. This novel, entitled *The Counting House*, told the story of a couple emigrating from Bihar to British Guyana at the end of the 19th century. The first part was set in India, and the second and third parts in Guyana.

When I read the book, I felt that I knew this world perfectly: after all, I had come from a similar background, even though my paternal great-grand-parents had emigrated to Mauritius from the Andhra region. The great difficulty, as a translator, was getting the mix of languages and cultural references across in French; and, as the third part of the novel was written in Guyanese English, I had to find –indeed, invent– an equivalent “language” that would be a mix of Creole and French, and still remain intelligible to French readers. Because of time constraints, I did not feel I had done justice to that third part, and that I had gone far enough in the linguistic process. It was, in my eyes, a translation failure I still rue today.

This is why I can perfectly measure Vidya Vencatesan’s extraordinary accomplishment in translating Raphaël Confiant’s *La pause du chacal*, a novel telling the story of a South Indian family’s emigration to Martinique in the same historical context as Dabydeen’s novel and as my own familial story.

Raphaël Confiant is a renowned Caribbean writer, one of the authors, with Jean Barnabé and Patrick Chamoiseau, of the seminal essay *Eloge de la créolité (In Praise of Creoleness)*. His style is unique in that, as Vencatesan explains in her foreword, he uses French words, Creole words, Tamil words and neologisms to convey the sheer vitality of the cultural mix he describes. Words are ripped from their origins, twisted into new pronunciations, spellings and meanings, and reborn as marvellous hybrid creatures deploying colourful wings. Gods are transformed into beings with new names and powers. And his characters too are brimming with the potentiality of a new, emerging culture.

“My imagination, he said in an interview, is linked to this lost world in which I lived during my first fifteen years”. This was the world of the sugar cane plantations, the colliding worlds of the white plantation owners, the recently emancipated African slaves and the newly-arrived Indian *coolies*. The Creoles and the Indians jostled for a place in these tiny islands, separated by culture, religion, language, and a wholly different worldview. The consequences of colonial history are still felt today in all these islands and former colonies, as their inhabitants try to build a new world while remaining obstinately, often divisively, attached to their ancestral cultures.

This history, this story, so familiar to my eyes, is, strangely, largely ignored by Indians in the subcontinent. They are more concerned with the later diaspora to Western countries, a story of success and untold riches for some. But the story told in this book is different in that this diaspora took place at a time when sailing away meant breaking away: crossing the ocean, the *kaala paani*, signified being dead to one’s caste. Often were the funerary rites performed when family members took to those ships. There was an illusion of return, never

fulfilled. And, at the time, no communication was possible. The break, when it happened, was complete.

The publication of this novel in India is important for this rupture, this breakage, to be understood. Vidya Vencatesan's translation is so fluent, so mellifluous, that the author's tones, poetry and cadences can be clearly heard. The mark of a good translation is that readers are so seduced by it, they do not realise it is a translation.

This book will, I hope, bring a new awareness of this part of India's history that has been ignored for so long; and a new understanding of how the historically violent collision of different cultures can become a generative impulse, and the foundation of a new understanding.

Ananda Devi