

## **Indian Diaspora in Mauritius: Recreating Home in Ananda Devi's *Pagli***

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### *Abstract*

*The Indian diaspora in Mauritius, shaped by centuries of migration and indentured labour continues to maintain strong ties to its ancestral heritage. The Hindu religion serves as a vital cultural anchor for the Indian community in Mauritius with its rituals, customs and traditions helping to maintain a strong sense of cultural identity within the island's diverse multicultural society. Ananda Devi is a prominent Francophone writer who navigates the cultural landscapes of the Indian diaspora in Mauritius. This paper explores the cultural dynamics of the Indian diaspora as manifest in Ananda Devi's *Pagli*, by drawing from the theories of Avtar Brah, Paolo Boccagni, and Stuart Hall. The paper attempts to highlight how the Indo-Mauritians recreate home through their rituals, traditions, and customs to establish a sense of belonging and connection to their homeland, Mother India.*

**Keywords:** Homing, Hindu cultural practices, ancestral heritage, Indian diaspora

### **Introduction**

Francophone writer Ananda Devi Nirsimloo hails from Mauritius. She presently lives in Ferney-Voltaire in Geneva. She is the author of seventeen books and a compilation of poetry and short stories. She was adorned with the title of Chevalier des Arts et des Lettres by the French government in 2010 and has won numerous literary honours. It is intriguing that although Devi has rarely visited India, she provides an extensive observation about its cuisine, epics, myths, customs, and traditions, particularly those of the Hindus, in her writing. Ananda Devi was exposed to Indian culture through her mother, who hails from Andhra Pradesh in India. In an interview entitled *Peut-être est-ce l'Inde mythique qui m'habite*, Ananda Devi states: "I couldn't claim to know India, yet this nation is deeply ingrained in my mind and spirit." Devi also declares in an interview with Patrick Sultan: "For a long time, India's part was important in my writing, and cultural, religious, and mythological references are abundant."

Mauritius, a small island nation in the Indian Ocean, is a testament to the impact of migration, colonisation, and cultural amalgamation. The island's population, predominantly from African, Indian, Chinese, and European descent, reflects a rich cultural tapestry. The Hindu community comprises a significant portion of the island's population. It has been a key player in shaping the social, cultural, and religious milieu of the island. The arrival of indentured labourers from

India in the 19th century marked a pivotal moment in the island's history. Ashutosh Kumar affirms: "Mauritius, in 1834, was the first colony to import Indian indentured labourers, followed by British Guiana in 1838, then Trinidad and Jamaica in 1845" (2017:24). These labourers, primarily from the northern and southern parts of India, brought with them a wealth of religious traditions, social customs, and practices that have remained central to the cultural identity of the Indo-Mauritian community. Hinduism, in particular, with its intricate rituals, religious festivals, and mythological traditions, continues to thrive in the Mauritian context, despite the passage of time and the challenges of diasporic displacement. Gijsbert Oonk states: "There are currently approximately 20,000,000 people of South Asian origin living outside of India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, with the majority in Africa, the Caribbean, and Oceania. Although there are regional variations in their adaptations, in many ways, they display a common 'Indian' identity" (2007:9).

### **Analysis**

Agnes Heller states that: "If the privileged place [i.e. the home] was destroyed by war or a natural catastrophe, or if necessity or curiosity compelled a group to abandon it for good, the spirit of the ancient home was normally carried on the back of the community" (Heller: 2-3 in Boccagni, 2017:51). Homing is conceptualized as a process through which individuals and groups establish a sense of place and belonging. Boccagni's idea of "homing" refers to how diasporic communities develop a sense of belonging and home, even when they are no longer directly connected to their homeland. Paolo Boccagni affirms:

The re-attachment of a basic sense of home to a place is informed by the home cultures that people bring from the past, as for the ways of using domestic space, the meanings and functions of domestic objects and the implicit views of what a "proper home" should look like. (2017:55)

Certainly, the most subjective and complex aspect of homing is the emotional process of reconciling feelings of displacement, nostalgia, and attachment. Migrants often experience a complex web of emotions. It is from longing for a home they can no longer access to the creation of new emotional bonds with their present location. For Boccagni, emotional homing is not merely about returning to the 'homeland', but about reconceptualizing and reimagining the meaning of home in the face of displacement. Dovey points out that: "emotion plays a pivotal role in the gendered everyday experience of home, and in the ways of "commodifying" the desire of it (Dovey: 1985 in Boccagni, 2017:11). For the Indian community in Mauritius, home is not just a physical space but a mental and emotional space which is recreated through the ongoing practice of religious rituals, community gatherings, and the transmission of cultural knowledge from one generation to another. Avtar Brah emphasizes the concept of 'diaspora space,' where multiple histories, geographies, and cultures intersect. The diasporic identities are not fixed but fluid, constantly evolving in response to new cultural and social experiences. Avtar Brah asserts:

'Home' is a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination. In this sense, it is a place of no return, even if it is possible to visit the geographical territory that is seen as the place of 'origin' (1996:188).

Stuart Hall's theory of cultural identity offers a framework for understanding the role of memory, continuity, and change contribute to identity formation within diasporic communities.

He further states that identity is not inherent or static but rather constructed through narrative, history, and cultural practice. Stuart Hall affirms:

Cultural identity is not a fixed essence at all, lying unchanged outside history and culture. It is not some universal and transcendental spirit inside us on which history has made no fundamental mark. It is not once-and-for-all. It is not a fixed origin to which we can make some final and absolute Return. (226)

Memory plays a primary role in the process of re-homing. Migrants often hold on to memories of their homeland as a means of preserving a connection to a place that is no longer physically accessible. Stuart Hall adds that: “Cultural identity is always constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative and myth. Cultural identities are the points of identification, the unstable points of identification or suture, which are made within the discourses of history and culture. Not an essence but a positioning” (226). Memory, particularly the collective memory of the Hindu community, plays a significant role in *Pagli*. The recreation of home in *Pagli* is therefore a process of negotiating memory, identity, and belonging in hybrid, multicultural space in Mauritius. Devi’s novel frequently reflects on the past and the lost connection with India, especially the trauma of migration and separation from their ancestral land. However, memory also becomes a tool for cultural preservation. The retention of Indian language, preserving customs, and practices allows the people to maintain a sense of belonging. Devi portrays this through her characters in the novel.

Drawing on these theories, one can understand how Hindu cultural practices in Mauritius are not merely preserved as relics of the past but are actively reimagined and reconstituted by the Indian diaspora. Devi’s novel reveals an invincible bond for their homeland by portraying the cultural traits that Indo-Mauritians have embraced for ages. The novel *Pagli* portrays the story of a married Hindu woman, Daya, residing in Mauritius. The protagonist of the novel defies the social norms and abandons her spouse as he had sexually assaulted her when she was thirteen. After being tormented of being married to the same man who had abused her and unable to move on from the relationship, she develops an extramarital affair with Zil, a Creole fisherman. She is portrayed as a rebellious woman who defies cultural standards and destroys the institution of marriage and her marital home. Owing to her infidelity and immorality, she is locked in a chicken shed and left to die amid torrential rains.

The predominant cultural marker in the novel is religion. Hinduism made its way to the island nation when Indians were shipped to Mauritius as indentured labourers by the French colonizers. Paul Younger notes: “The Mauritian Hindus claim to be more Hindu than the Hindus of India” (2010:53). Religion in the Indian Diaspora is one of the most significant cultural aspects highlighted in the novel. Vasquez points out:

Religion helps immigrants imagine their homelands in diaspora and inscribe their memories and worldviews into the physical landscape and built environment (2005:238)

The practices and beliefs of Hinduism in Mauritius are deeply rooted in the traditions brought by Indian indentured laborers. In the book *Literature of Girmitiya*, Zareen notes: “In Mauritius, Asians continue to preserve their cultural heritage in various ways. There are many rites, rituals, and religious festivals that are introduced and practiced by Asians in Mauritius. Kalimai worship, Holi, Mahashivratri, Sankranti and Ram Nawmi are few to mention” (135). These festivals often serve as points of re-identification, where individuals come together to affirm and reassert their cultural identity. Additionally, in Mauritius, wedding festivities typically extend for four days. Hindu wedding customs are intricate and differ widely across various

regions of India. The traditional marriage ceremony is practiced differently in each community, shaped by local traditions and cultural influences. In some areas, the celebration is a simple and graceful affair, while in some families, weddings are marked by grandeur and lavishness. This is pertinent in Boccagni's theory. Boccagni notes that:

The ways in which home-related ideas, values, and cultures circulate across different settings, having in migration one among several other channel of cultural diffusion. (2017:22)

In the novel, Ananda Devi gives a detailed explanation of the tradition of the bride wearing a red sari on her wedding day. In addition, she brings in the Haldi ceremony, which is a traditional Hindu pre-wedding ritual where turmeric paste is applied to the bride and groom by family and friends to bless them with prosperity and longevity. Daya indicates: "Toutes ces femmes venues me passer de la pâte jaune et odorante sue les joues, les bras et les pieds en un rite d'appartenance et de fertilité" (74) (All these women came to apply the yellow, fragrant paste on my cheeks, arms, and feet in a rite of belonging and fertility). She also offers precise descriptions of the bride's jewelry, including the chain, bangles, and maang tikka, which Hindu women typically wear on their foreheads. Daya describes her attire on her wedding: "Ils m'ont habillée de rouge et d'or. Ils ont tressé mes cheveux et m'ont mis du noir autour des yeux et des bijoux au cou, aux poignets et sur le front" (73) (They dressed me in red and gold. They braided my hair and put black around my eyes and jewels on my neck, wrists and forehead). Hindu wedding customs often involve wearing specially selected marriage saris. Weddings are deeply tied to colour, and the meanings of specific colours can vary across religions. In Hindu tradition, brides in India traditionally wear red, a color closely linked to the Hindu goddess Lakshmi. The author intentionally incorporates the color red throughout her novel, from the description of the location "Terre Rouge", Red Earth to the bridal attire of Daya, to the sensual dress of Mitsy, Daya's companion, and even the soil after a heavy rainfall towards the end. In her interview, Ananda Devi states that: "I thought of the place where I would set the novel, and the village called Terre Rouge ['Red Earth'] came to mind. As soon as I thought of this name, the novel crystallized in my mind, with the symbolism of the colour red of the wedding sari, Mitsy's sensual dress, menstrual blood, the tikka on Daya's forehead, marking her status as a married woman, and the flood of red mud that will end the novel." The tikka is a sacred red powder, signifies a woman's entry into her marital life. The red sindoor symbolizes the protection of marriage and remains as a reminder for women to remain loyal and devoted to their husbands. Daya details that: "Il m'a mis le tikka rouge au front. Nous avons échangé des guirlandes de fleurs" (76) (He put the red tikka on my forehead. We exchanged garlands of flowers). In Mauritius, Hindu women traditionally wear a tikka on their foreheads. The author demonstrates her knowledge of Hindu wedding traditions, highlighting the custom where the groom places a tikka on the bride's forehead and they exchange flower garlands. Moore emphasizes:

The desire for home as a goal towards which people behave purposively, which can be traced across literary, religious, and epic traditions. (Moore: 212 in Boccagni, 2017:24-25)

Many key Hindu rituals, such as those associated with childbirth and marriage, involve usage of ghee. Hindu weddings and ceremonies are also deeply connected to fire, which is believed to purify the surroundings. Daya describes that: "Puis le feu m'a happée. Alors qu'il s'élevait des bâtonnets de manguier, nourri par le ghee odorant que le pandit y déversait, j'ai pris la

première poignée de riz cru et l’y ai jeté” (74) (Then the fire overtook me. As it rose from the mango sticks, fed by the fragrant ghee the pandit was pouring into it, I took one handful of raw rice and threw it in). In the novel, the pandit asks Daya to pledge her vows of loyalty and obedience. However, Daya defies tradition by declaring her rebellious vows. As she challenges the customs that confine her, the pandit and her cousin are shaken and taken aback. The “sacred fire ceremony” plays a central role in Hindu marriages, and the author provides a detailed account of how this ritual is carried out. One of the key ways by which diaspora communities re-establish a connection to their homeland is through the revival of cultural practices. These rituals are deeply connected to the sense of home. They enable migrants to recreate a “sacred” space which exists beyond the physical boundaries of their homeland. During the nuptial ceremony, Daya furiously screams and discards her sari, jewelry, and garlands. By destroying these symbols of marriage, she rejects the cultural expectations of the Hindu community, asserting control over her body. She defies her husband’s claim over her body, declaring she won’t bear his child and ultimately rejects her marital home.

Language is another key element through which Hindu cultural identity is preserved in Mauritius. While Creole and French dominate as the languages of quotidian life, Tamil and Hindi continue to be spoken within the Hindu community, particularly in religious and cultural contexts. Hage points out:

Migrants’ home reproduction does not entail only gaining access to a dwelling place. It also requires some cultural and emotional retention of past, home, and homeland, through everyday mundane practices such as the use of the native language, the ways of eating or dressing, and sociability and consumption at large. (Hage: 1997 in Boccagni, 2017:52)

Despite varying ethnic and linguistic backgrounds, certain shared cultural aspects that resonate with most immigrants in the diaspora. In Mauritius, Bollywood serves as a primary source of entertainment for many Indians. As Bollywood films are predominantly in Hindi, the language becomes a key aspect of Indian identity, even for those whose native languages are different. Patrick Eisenlohr declares: “Hindu Mauritians, the largest ethnic group in the country of north Indian origin, cultivate Hindi as their ancestral language” (2006:8). The novel *Pagli* incorporates several Hindi terms throughout the text, such as “dulinn”, “tikka”, and “khol”. Daya makes constant attempts to disrupt the sanctity of the Indian Hindu home. Filled with anguish and rage, Daya invites a beggar and adorns her with the wedding sari, to ridicule the sanctity of the house. Daya mentions that: “Je l’ai drapé sur ses épaules maigres, comme si c’était elle la dulinn, la nouvelle mariée” (25) (I draped it over her skinny shoulders, as if she were the dulinn, the new bride). The title of the novel, *Pagli* translates to madness in Hindi. In the novel, the term “Pandit” is used to describe the priest who conducts Hindu marriage rituals and temple ceremonies. Devi describes: “Le pandit avait commencé ses prières” (74) (The pandit had begun his prayers). The frequent appearances of these Hindi expressions in the novel highlights how the Indo-Mauritians commonly use them in their daily conversations. The next important cultural element emphasized in the novel is the cuisine of the Indian diaspora. Food is deeply intertwined with cultural identity as it serves as a way to stay connected to one’s cultural roots and cope with feelings of homesickness. Movindri Reddy points out:

Throughout the Diaspora, food maintains some continuities with the regional cuisine of India but is strongly influenced by local ingredients and culture. Food is a central component for imagining a culture, it works to resist and affirm notions of home and

belonging. (2016:154)

The novel has an exhaustive knowledge of Indian cuisine. In India, wedding and festive feasts are traditionally served on banana leaves, with a delightful array of rice, rotis, lentils, vegetables, curries, and sweets. The novel highlights these dishes during Daya's wedding and also reflects on how women prepare traditional Indian meals in her new marital home. Devi describes: "Délibérément pilées avec la rage des cœurs secs, libérant de plus en plus fortement leur arôme comme une vie qui s'échappe lorsque le corps est broyé par la mort, et se déversant en pluie dans l'huile bouillante où les feuilles de karipule achèvent de cuire. Les graines de moutarde se révolteront jusqu'à la dernière minute" (48) (Deliberately pounded with the rage of dry hearts, releasing more and more strongly their aroma like the life that escapes when the body is crushed by death, and raining down into the boiling oil where the curry leaves finish cooking. The mustard seeds will rebel until the last minute). Daya watches as the women prepare Indian food at home and the author delves into the details of the tempering technique commonly used in South India, which involves oil, mustard seeds, and curry leaves. The novel also references ingredients like rice, ghee, cumin seeds, coriander seeds, and dhal. Even the spices are ground by hand at home to preserve their full, rich aroma. The author highlights how Hindu women dedicate hours in the kitchen.

The caste system, one of the cultural markers, is a social hierarchical structure in Hinduism, as outlined in the *Bhagavad Gita*, which divides society into four categories: Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaisyas, and Sudras, based on their occupations. The term *Dalit* refers to the group formerly known as 'Untouchables' in India. Brah notes: "The esteemed values and modes of behaviour in society are most likely to be those that are associated with the dominant groups in society" (1996:19). For many years, higher-caste individuals held greater social status than those in lower castes. People in the lower castes often performed jobs deemed ritually impure and relied heavily on manual labor. Traditionally, lower-caste individuals were excluded from entering higher-caste homes. Barrier and Dusenbery affirm: "Caste rather than religion provides a more enduring marker of identity in the diaspora and symbolises diversity, locality and difference" (2003:4). In Mauritius, specific ethnic groups are often linked to particular types of work. Hindus are associated with agriculture, while Creoles are typically fishermen or involved in various forms of manual or semi-skilled labor. This division is evident in the novel, where Zil, Daya's extramarital love, is depicted as a Creole fisherman who is treated as an Untouchable. Daya breaks the marital vows of chastity and falls in love with Zil. Daya is cursed for having touched an impure man. Besides, when Daya brings home a beggar and serves her delicious meals in the living room, the entire family is flummoxed. Devi notes: "Puis les femmes sont revenues avec des gants, de caoutchouc, du détergent et des bâtonnets d'encens. Elles ont jeté tout ce qu'elle avait touché aux ordures, nettoyé le reste, parfumé et purifié les lieux" (25) (Then the women returned with gloves, sponge, detergent and incense sticks. They threw everything she touched in the garbage, cleaned up the rest, perfumed and purified the place). They chase the beggar out, discard everything she has touched, and clean the house thoroughly, restoring it to its "pure" state to maintain their Hindu customs and beliefs. Boccagni notes:

migrants' sense of home can be attached to different points of reference and enacted on several scales – from the micro-level of the individual body to the household and kinship groups and networks, to larger entities such as neighbourhoods, cities, nations, and beyond. (2017:50)

As migrants are detached from their homeland, they engage by recreating home in their new environments through the revival of their holy cultural practices.

At the end of the novel, Daya is humiliated, whipped, and locked in a chicken coop on account of her adulterous affair. Daya wails that her family has planned to offer her as a sacrifice with the chicken. Daya mentions: “Je suis avec les poules invisibles. Je suis comme elles une chose sacrificielle attendant la mort.” (122) (I’m with the invisible chicken. Like them, I’m a sacrificial creature awaiting death). Daya’s statement reference to the animal sacrifices common in Hindu temples. Animal sacrifice is a traditional practice in Hindu temples, where it is seen as part of ritual worship. Singing in praise of her extramarital love with Zil, Daya breathes her last with stoicism amid the torrential rains in the village.

### Conclusion

Ananda Devi’s *Pagli* evidently portrays that the Indo-Mauritian community exhibits an obsessive loyalty to their motherland and glorifies their ancestral culture. Gurharpal Singh observes: For most overseas Hindus, India, often depicted as ‘Mother India’, holds deep spiritual, symbolic and sentimental reverence (2003:3). The notion of home extends beyond a physical location, existing in the shared memories, practices, and emotional connections that tie individuals to their ancestral past. Brah affirms:

The word diaspora often invokes the imagery of traumas of separation and dislocation, and this is certainly an important aspect of the migratory experience. But diasporas are also potential sites of hope and new beginnings. They are contested cultural and political terrains where individual and collective memories collide, reassemble, and reconfigure. (1996:190)

Hindus in Mauritius continue to preserve their rituals, traditions, and customs to have a sense of connection to their homeland. The rituals, ceremonies, and language depicted in the novel are not merely cultural artifacts but serve as vital expressions of identity, resistance, and continuity in the face of displacement. Caught between two worlds, the author effectively portrays the complex dynamics of belonging and cultural retention. Through their enduring link to India, the characters reveal that home is not just a place, but a vibrant collection of rituals, beliefs, and memories that shape their identity. Home is not fixed but also fluid. Home can be recreated in a different setting as it becomes a site of hope and new beginnings.

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