How was the migrant Indian labourer in Mauritius able to see beyond the socio-historical circumstances of his presence on the island? What inner resources did he develop to overcome his geographical and cultural dislocation? How did he integrate into a creolised environment in order to secure his future? This study will show that it is not only the social implications of the colonial history of labour migration and the related ‘Creole-coolie’ conflict on the labour island, but also the personal history of family, communal and national integration that have shaped Indo-Mauritian identity. To this end, this study will examine the figure of the Indian labourer and small time planter in Marcel Cabon’s *Namasté*, Abhimanyu Unnuth’s *Le Culte du sol* (the original in Hindi, *Ek Bhiga Pyar* was published in 1972) and Nando Bodha’s *Beaux Songes*.¹ I will show how the

selected texts construct an Indo-Mauritian identity within a triadic network of relations that incorporates his attachment to the land for economic survival, to the village for his ethnic consciousness and to the creolised Mauritian society at large for a definition of his national self. I will use the term ‘Indo-Mauritian’ in order to emphasise the history of migration without freezing the figure of the Indian in Mauritius within the confines of the ‘coolie’ myth. Given the history of the usage of the term by the State to categorise its population, my use of the term may seem inappropriate. However, since my analysis in this study does not explicitly follow religious paradigms and the novels under scrutiny do not make the cultural difference between Hindus and Muslims a crucial point of tension, I could justify the use the term for the practical purposes of this study.

Early Mauritian poets, novelists as well as literary historians have represented the Indo-Mauritian, ‘arrière petit fils de coolie’, as one for whom home and ethnic identity were imprisoned in the heroic, ethereal and idyllic Aryan India of the epics. The imaginary return to a pre-hegemonic world as a vision of empowerment was both imposed on and internalised by the community of indentured labourers and their descendants. To the Indian in the creolised society of Mauritius, the image of a sacred India became the adopted myth of self-preservation and of racial dignity. The complete transfer of the Indian village system (caste, temples, ‘baitkas’, ‘panchayat’ and festivals) to Mauritius, which was encouraged by the British colonial authorities, facilitated the easy maintenance and propagation of ancestral tradition and culture.


2 For the purposes of this study, creolised society is an island society that brought together different ethnic groups from diverse geographical regions to participate in and sustain the plantation economy of a European colonial administration.


The village system provided security to the family at the communal level in a society where an Indo-Mauritian population had largely outnumbered the Africans and mixed-race Creoles. At the same time, the village system enclosed this population within a mythological framework and isolated it from Creole and national spaces. Did individual Indo-Mauritians challenge these imposed stereotypes and myths? Does Mauritian literature expose these ideological constructs and formulate less essentialist visions of ethnicity in a plural society?

In this context, it is interesting to note that an intellectual dialogue on creolisation and ethnicisation has been put in place by Khal Torabully through his poetic vision of ‘coolitude.’ Torabully proposes the concept of ‘coolitude’ as a ‘kaleidoscopic identity’ that embraces ‘creolisation and a cultural métissage of experiences’ in Mauritius. He uses ‘sea’ imagery and more specifically the ‘coral’ image symbolically to represent the coolie’s ‘cross cultural relation with his multiple heritages and selves.’ Véronique Bragard in her article, ‘Transoceanic echoes’ believes that ‘coolitude’ is ‘a poetics, an aesthetics of migration, that attempts to recover and reassess the transoceanic crossing of coolies, establishing it as the central metaphor that is constitutive of a new perspective on Indian identities:’

It is impossible to understand the essence of coolitude without charting the coolies’ voyage across the seas. That decisive experience, that coolie odyssey, left an indelible stamp on the imaginary landscape of coolitude.

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6 Brinda Mehta, Diasporic (Dis)locations- Indo-Caribbean Women Writers negotiate the Kala Pani (Jamaica: University of West Indies Press, 2004), p. 56.
8 Ibid., p. 222.
In effect, as a composite identity that privileges survival over suffering, Torabully defines ‘coolitude’ as being both the reconstitution of the memory of the Creole-coolie conflict and the establishment of a poetics of racial and cultural mixing based on an ‘Indian element.’\textsuperscript{10} He argues that the coolie’s initial ‘repli identitaire’ was a reaction to the group’s rejection by the island’s Creole society. Therefore, the coolie’s only way to negate the traumatic sea voyage was to construct his ‘Indianité’ by using mythical India as the ultimate referent. Torabully’s poetry, on the other hand, establishes a poetic reaffirmation of the voyage and he perceives the figure of the coolie as ‘in-between’ in an ongoing process of exchange across the Atlantic and Indian Ocean regions. ‘Coolitude’ posits ‘an encounter, an exchange of histories, of poetics of visions of the world, between those of African and of Indian descent, without excluding other sources.’\textsuperscript{11} This vision appears powerful and liberating in its attempt to transcend racial and ethnic categorisation in plural societies. However, as Brinda Mehta in \textit{Diasporic (Dis)locations} points out, Torabully’s vision which privileges the ‘personal is poetical’ approach becomes easily transformed into a ‘displaced imaginary construction of nostalgia’ \textsuperscript{12} His concept of ‘coolitude’ as a hybrid identity perceived from an ‘Indian’ angle is not very different from the romanticised Mauritian identity as reflected in Camille de Rauville’s\textsuperscript{13} \textit{indianocéanisme}, Jean-Georges Prosper’s \textit{créolité indienocéaniste}\textsuperscript{14} and Edouard Maunick’s \textit{métis royame}.\textsuperscript{15}

Furthermore, the cultural Indianisation that Torabully seeks to re-conceptualise begs the theorisation of a cultural Africanisation of the island that scholars like William Miles feel

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{10} See Carter and Torabully, \textit{Coolitude}, p. 144.  \\
\textsuperscript{11} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 150.  \\
\textsuperscript{12} Mehta also reads coolitude as an Indianised version of negritude that stresses cultural positivity instead of racial positivity. \textit{Diasporic (dis)locations: Indo-Caribbean women writers negotiate the kala pani}, p. 56.  \\
\textsuperscript{13} Camille de Rauville, \textit{Littératures francophones de l’Océan Indien} (Saint Denis: Éditions de Tramail, 1990).  \\
\textsuperscript{15} Edouard Maunick, \textit{Ensoleillé Vif} (Paris: Éditions Saint Germain des Prés, 1976).}
is inadequately carved out in Mauritius. Either way, depoliticised agendas of cultural affirmation in contemporary society that do not take into account specific socio-historical and geo-political contexts of the formation of ‘hybrid identities’ can only lead to further ethnicisation of individuals in plural societies. In fact, Torabully’s coolitude is premised both on the politics of Creole-coolie conflict and on the emblematic interchangeability of the two terms. Actually speaking, the two terms are not interchangeable as historian Vinesh Hookoomsing is quick to point out. In Mauritius the term ‘creole’ has different linguistic, cultural and ethnic trajectories and therefore the coolie and the Creole cannot be considered as interchangeable emblematic figures. He considers the coolie as a historical persona, a culturally specific figure of the past and disagrees with Torabully’s choice of coolie as an ahistorical emblem of a culturally composite present. ‘Coolie’ was a generic term used for any contracted colonial labour as there were also African and Chinese coolies on the island of Mauritius.

Summarising the above discussion, it can be said that in its redefinition of Indo-Mauritianness Torabully’s ‘coolitude’ is a poetical alternative that replaces the myth of ethereal India with a more empowering myth of a transoceanic voyage in its framing of a hybrid Indo-Mauritian identity. But like some other postcolonial concepts of hybridity, it seems to privilege a mythical frame over a socio-political paradigm. From another disciplinary perspective, anthropologist Thomas Hylland Eriksen, in his study of ethnicity and nationality in Mauritius,

16 William Miles, ‘The Creole Malaise in Mauritius’, African Affairs, 98:391 (1999), 211-28. Miles regrets that nothing similar to the forceful vision of Negritude in the Caribbean has been developed to define Creole identity in Mauritius.

17 While Mehta may be right about coolitude’s depoliticised agenda, she may have overlooked the fact that Torabully does not equate coolitude with Negritude but relates it to ‘creoleness’. The poet, in fact, argues that the empowering vision of coolitude is to indiannité what creoleness is to Negritude.

18 Vinesh Hookoomsing, ‘Créolité, Coolitude: Contextes et Concepts’, in L’océan Indien dans les littératures francophones, ed. by Kumari Issur and Vinesh Hookoomsing (Paris: Karthala, 2001), p. 273. The author argues that these letters in English present a forum where the coolie had the opportunity to express himself (complaints, anxieties, desires) to the Other in the language of the Other. Hookoomsing (2001), p. 262.
assumes that ‘every Mauritian possesses, consciously or not, a particular cognitive model of the ethnic setup in the island’. Based on this assumption, he argues that a Mauritian kaleidoscopic identity is in fact a public or a national comportment that hides a more ethnicised private or communal self. I agree with Eriksen in so far that a national discourse of cultural fusion like a poetics of cross-cultural relations cannot mask ethnic differences. However, in my response to Eriksen’s division of society into oppositional spaces of the private and the public, I will use a triadic structure that incorporates family, village and nation. I will show that Mauritianness is articulated between the changing spaces of conflict and collaboration that link the individual, the community and the nation. This reading will privilege racial and cultural functionality over racial and cultural positivity.

With the exception of Nando Bodha’s *Beaux Songes* the other two novels under examination are considered classics in their contribution to the literalisation of the Indian immigrant experience in Mauritius. Marcel Cabon’s *Namasté* and Abhimanyu Unnuth’s *Le Culte du sol* do not convey a historically specific time frame and can generally be said to represent Mauritian society in the 1960s. *Beaux Songes* on the other hand takes us very specifically through the first turbulent years of the independence movement in the 1950s to the nationalist uprisings and political movements in the late 1960s and ends with a letter dated 1971. In all three novels, the village is the primary spatial unit of belonging and a closely-knit patriarchal family is the emotional centre. In *Namasté* Ram’s position in the village where he has acquired land from a deceased uncle is that of an outsider. Even his wife Oumaouti is not from the village. On the other hand, the idealistic, courageous and rebellious young men, Som in *Le Culte du sol*...
and Mohan in *Beaux Songes*, operate from within their own villages and they are both strongly supported by their families. Som lives with his handicapped brother, Heera and his sister Vimla, while Mohan in *Beaux Songes* lives with his wife, Suman his two children Kamal and Arti and his old mother Phoolan. All three novels take us through the different experiences of Ram, Som and Mohan in their creation of a culture of survival as they interact within and between family, village and national networks. It is around the themes of tradition (symbolised by land) and modernity (symbolised by education) in the narratives that I will examine the Indo-Mauritian’s interactions with his family, his village and the Mauritian nation.21

As pointed out earlier, it was assumed that in Mauritius the Indian migrant’s renunciation of the idea of return was largely compensated by the symbolic re-appropriation of the host country as Mother Earth. On the other hand, Carter and Ng argue that by the middle of the twentieth century the indenture system was working like ‘a sophisticated well oiled machine’ and had created a group that had economically and politically distanced itself from its Indian past to secure a successful Mauritian present:

> From the early years of merchant run labour mobilisation using local ‘duffadars, arkatis and maistris’ to bring in recruits, the indenture system became over the 19th century, a sophisticated well oiled machine, running largely off its own by-products, the time-expired immigrants it had created, rather like the sugar factory itself.  

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In their study of Indian immigrants in Mauritius, Carter and Ng point out that even if ‘contract migration, by its nature, marked a break with the past; it also created new communities of

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21 A gendered reading of this interaction is also crucial but is beyond the scope of this present study.

providers and property owners overseas’. They show that every group played its part in ‘constructing, sacrificing, compromising and cohabiting and forging the rainbow nation’. In the three novels under examination here, the relationship of the protagonists to their lands shows that working as a plantation labourer or a small-time farmer was not merely a symbolic re-appropriation of ‘foreign’ land; this land constituted both a financial necessity and a social investment for the indentured labourers and their descendants in their new environment. The importance given to the dramatisation of disaster (either man-made or natural) in the novels’ plot structures foregrounds the significance of land as an economic marker and signifier of family values and social norms.

In *Le Culte du sol*, Heera the handicapped protagonist is obsessed with his land. Even if he can just about make both ends meet with the revenue he earns from his fields, they constitute his only economic asset. This is crucial because it enables him to educate his brother and sister so that they can integrate into a modern Mauritian nation. Heera’s belief in Mauritian nationalism comes through in his conversation with Som: ‘Peux-tu nier le fait que si notre pays est si avancé aujourd’hui, ce n’est que grâce à ses champs?’ When Heera reminisces about the difficulties of his ancestors, he makes a difference between his grandfather who had to struggle because of a cultural and geographical dislocation and his father whose failure stemmed from his inability to manage his own land. While Heera genuinely believes in the importance of carrying on with the economic and cultural legacy of his Hindu ancestors for the good of the nation, Som chooses agriculture as a profession only out of compassion for his brother. It is his choice as an individual and it is not defined by nostalgia for a lost land. As an atheist, Som represents the new-generation, island-born Indian who considers Hinduism as a cultural knowledge that he is proud to share. On the other hand, he refuses to accept this heritage as a symbolic bond that ties him unconditionally and

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23 Ibid., p. 99.
24 Ibid., p. 120.
25 *Le Culte du sol*, p. 133.
emotionally to the narrow confines of his village community. Som’s school education even if incomplete has given him sufficient skills (linguistic and social) to access and be accessible to networks of progress outside the family and village. In their new ‘homeland’, French is clearly accepted as the language of social mobility and tourism has become the most significant marker of local and global connections. Som’s improvised role as a French-speaking tour guide to a group of tourists in the temple can be symbolically read as his effort to transcend narrow ethnic boundaries and to assert a plural Mauritian self.

Heera and Som are the two faces of the modern Indo-Mauritian. Heera is traditional but not narrow-minded. It is Heera’s physical infirmity (as a result of a sickness) that constrains him and not an over-determined sense of cultural dislocation. His attachment to his land is personal and pragmatic. Som, even if not bound by religious norms, has a keen sense of family loyalty and social justice and both brothers have strong links to the village. Som’s short temper (stressed several times in the narrative) makes him take justice into his own hands in his fight against the obstructionist forces of his own community (symbolised by Jogiya and his family). Unlike his brother Heera, he is prepared to incur the wrath of Jogiya’s family in his search for Truth. At the same time, awareness of his legal and social rights also takes him to state establishments of justice where he is helped by his friend Suren, a successful lawyer and youth leader.

The representation of women in Le Culte du sol does not reflect the mythical imagery of Mother Earth. The conventional mother–figure is replaced by two other female figures in the novel: Heera’s sister (Vimla) who represents the educated and modern Hindu woman, mindful of conventions but not passive and submissive like her ancestors, and her friend (Karouna) who represents the humanity of the oppressed. While a motherless

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26 ‘Tu es peut-être un saint. Mais pas moi. Tu considères le pardon comme la plus grande des vertus, alors que pour moi, c’est la justice qui mérite cette place.’ (Le Culte du sol, p. 100)
Vimla enjoys the protection of her brothers, poverty-stricken Karouna (her mother is in jail for a crime she did not commit) has to fend for herself. Fearing the evil Jogiya’s advances, she places herself voluntarily under the care of Vimla’s brothers. She is warmly welcomed into the intimate family circle of Heera, Som and Vimla. She reclaims her identity through her dignified trust in humanity and her unconditional offer of companionship to the handicapped Heera. In the novel, the image of a harsh geography of dislocation is replaced by a space of empathy, compassion (karouna in Hindi means compassion) that binds displaced individuals. Even if the court acquits Som for striking Jogiya down and justice wins over money power, in what seems to be an ideal society that marries convention and modernity effectively, the novel does not end on this note of complaisance. Anxiety, uncertainty and insecurity are recurring features in any dynamic society. The novel ends with Som going to the fields knowing that Jogiya’s revengeful brothers have laid a trap for him.

Heera’s personal culture of forgiveness and Som’s social culture of justice clash but they are both required for complete integration at the level of the family, village and nation. Som’s mauricianisme\(^27\) is not encapsulated in the nostalgic remembrance of a trans-oceanic crossing or in a traumatic interaction with a pluri-ethnic nation. Suren represents the intellect of the new nation, collective justice and national pride. Jogiya, on the other hand, stands for greed, money and power, characteristics that are not bounded by geography, ethnicity and class, Som, the rebellious and idealist villager is the heartbeat of the new nation. The dynamic relation between the three forces, sometimes violent, sometimes peaceful will ensure the continual course of mauricianisme. Abhimanyu Unnuth’s novels are timeless. They borrow conventions of Indian literature in Hindi and interweave another geo-political reality into this frame. His novel, *Le Culte du sol* is an effective counterpoint to

celebratory and aestheticised readings of cultural hybridity in creolised communities.

*Beaux Songes*, as it takes us through the political developments of Mauritius between 1951 and 1971, also takes us through the life and times of Mohan and his family in the village of Beaux Songes. The novel begins with the arrival of Suman as a young wife to the village and ends with her death. Unlike Heera, Mohan does not own land; he works in a sugarcane field. As he gets more and more involved in grass-roots political movements for independence, he finds himself without a job on the plantation and is forced to work in the mountains of Midlands as a wood cutter. It takes him out to the larger community, provides him the opportunity to collaborate with the poorer African Creoles but it also takes him away from his wife and children. His daughter is forced to leave school and his wife, Suman, has to toil doubly hard to make ends meet at home. While land (or lack of it) as source of misery drives Mohan away from his family and his village and plunges him into the wider community of Indian activists and nationalists, the school, around which his son’s life is centred, takes Kamal into a larger community of Europeans, Creoles, as well as children of all classes and castes from other Indian villages.

The novel provides three experiences (those of Suman, Mohan and Kamal) of the independence movement in Mauritius in the turbulent 1960s. Suman lives and dies ensuring the daily survival of her family and home, emotionally distanced from agitations affecting the State. Mohan works hard but his emotional connection with his family is displaced onto the arena of political action in his own village and outside in the wider national community. Both Suman and Mohan face disappointments despite their unflinching commitment to their chosen path. Suman is saddened by the absence of Mohan and Mohan is disillusioned by the harsh reality of the world of politics. Even Mohan’s son, Kamal, learns to face bereavement and loss at an early age when his good friend and young mentor at school, Vijay, dies in an accident. While his father is fighting for his right to be free of colonial oppression, Kamal places his school at the centre of his life. This space becomes central to his
personal aspirations and by winning a scholarship to attend secondary school in another village he eventually integrates into the wider space of the nation. Suman representing the family unit and village, and Mohan, representing his community at the national level, together constitute the face of the modern Indo-Mauritian. Both aspects complement each other even if their collaboration is often punctuated with experiences of loss. Kamal is the future that will place the Indo-Mauritian on a global path to success. The letter reaching out to Kamal’s French teacher in France symbolically translates this vision. Kamal believes in the significance of the religious scriptures read by the village elder, Teeluck, but he is not imprisoned by a conventional image of mythical India. Nando Bodha’s novel foregrounds the combined values of ancestral tradition and modern education. At the same time, it does not undermine the history of the Indo-Mauritian’s militant involvement in the making of a modern Mauritian nation.

Marcel Cabon’s Namasté parallels Ram’s passion for his land with his zealous obsession for his wife, Oumaouti. Ram, irresponsible and careless in his youth, becomes a transformed man when he inherits his uncle’s land in another village. The narrator commends Ram’s role in devising new ways to get better yield from his land as well as his active role in village activities despite being treated like an outsider by the other jealous villagers. His generosity, his courage and his knowledge of ancestral traditions as well as his success as a small-time farmer have earned him more enemies than friends. Ram’s place in the village is tragically thwarted by the cyclone and the death of Oumaouti and his unborn son. Distraught by this tragedy, Ram loses his mind and abandons his home and belongings.

Khal Torabully and other critics read Ram’s madness as the result of being too obsessively involved both with an idealised past of Indian epics and with an idyllic present with his possessions – both his land and his wife. Ram’s madness, Torabully says, is a cultural alienation that is based on ‘cultural and economic negationism’ suffered by the first generations of
Indian immigrants. Ram is not a first-generation immigrant. His father was born on the island and he belongs to a generation that was truly established as a coherent ethnic group. But does the narrator wish to convey the message that, in order to create a sense of self in unfamiliar space, acquiring and cultivating a piece of land is not everything? Ram develops a successful relation with his land as a productive farmer. By offering a piece of his land to build a ‘baitika’, he makes a visible contribution to the village community and by marrying Oumaouti he establishes a family unit. Yet, this traditional network does not help him recover from the effects of the cyclone. Heera’s initial reaction to the destruction of his field by Jogiya, in Le Culte du sol, is not very different from that of Ram in Namasté. However, unlike Ram, Heera is supported by his family and community and he recovers after the initial shock to till his land with renewed optimism. Moreover, for Heera, land and Mauritian nation are intricately linked, whereas land in Namasté is represented as an ethnicised space isolated from wider Creole and national spaces.

I will argue that Ram’s flight from reason signals a return to his earlier period of drifting that he gave up to devote himself to his inherited piece of land. Even before he loses everything, his outsider status makes people perceive him as mad, ‘sorcier’, ‘pagla, longaniste’. So Ram’s presence in the village is a mere parenthesis in his own life. Ram’s mad meanderings in the forest after the death of his wife and the devastation of his property oppose the fixity of the Indo-Mauritian identity as ‘coolie’. Cabon’s novel, like the two others discussed earlier, subverts the inflated myth of the symbolic appropriation of the host country as Mother Earth. Ram’s madness is not despair or the insolvable predicament of the coolie, as Torabully and other critics suggest, but the possibility of a new and liberating language that suggest a new story with new networks of significance that include spaces outside the family and village and within another narrative ‘logic’ that Unnuth searches for in his poem – one that can be generated by a violent disentanglement from the past:

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28 Coolitude, p. 186.
29 Namasté, p. 952
J’aime à oublier
que je suis prisonnier de couleur
c’est pourquoi je dis
que je vais hacher la logique
Et tu trouves à rire.30

Colonial society and the displaced community of immigrants imposed a colour-identity (‘prisonnier de couleur’) on the Indian in Mauritius. In many ways, Ram like the others in his adopted village, was a prisoner of this identity-logic (‘la logique’). Ram’s effort to integrate is to go against the grain of his natural narrative – hence his inability to cope when tragedy strikes. The cyclone has destroyed Ram’s adopted identity but his own narrative lives on. Ram’s flute survives his death and so will his empowering logic of wandering. On hearing the magical flute for the first time, the villagers wonder: ‘Et d’abord était-ce une flûte ou une force nouvelle, un atout, quelque chose qui témoignait contre eux, dont ils n’auraient pas raison?’31 Ram’s language of the flute ‘disconcerts’ and ‘surprises’ but it survives because it erases imposed narratives. Ram’s music liberates the ‘prisonnier de couleur’ but like the poet in ‘La Logique,’ he is scorned by everyone because they think he is mad.

In each of these novels, it is very clear that Indo-Mauritianness or Indianness in Mauritius is matter of conscious choice and a reasoned acceptance of its consequences. The novels have differing literary qualities and this study does not address the effectiveness of style, structure and technique. What the three novels have in common is their objective to reframe this identity outside the box of imposed myths and literary stereotypes. They reconnect the Indo-Mauritian to a historical past without chaining him to an illusionary emotional legacy and they draw his future without dissimulating the limitations of his present. It is within the complex triadic relation of family, village and nation that Indo-Mauritian identity can be

31 Namasté, p. 953
understood. Yet another dimension, one that is outside the scope of the present study, must be added to this framework: the transnational network generated by global movements of talent, capital and goods between the spaces of ancestral and modern India, Indian Ocean islands and Europe.

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