

# WOMEN OF VOLCANIC ORIGIN

Ananda Devi is the most important contemporary Mauritian writer, author of more than a dozen novels, and several collections of short stories and poetry, currently living in France and writing in French. Recently, her works have become available in Poland thanks to successive translations by Prof. Krzysztof Jarosz from the Faculty of Humanities of the University of Silesia.



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Ananda Devi considers herself first and foremost a humanist writer. Since women are more likely to be victims of violence, many of her works feature protagonists who are rejected and wounded and have little chance of escaping their suffering. After all, where should those living in Mauritius – a small island of volcanic origin surrounded by an endless ocean – escape to?

Ananda Devi's writing draws inspiration from both Eastern and Western influences – her mother represented a more Eastern perspective in her family, while her father raised her on Grimms' fairy tales. Now living in France, Ananda Devi continues to navigate this tangled cultural landscape. The title *Indian Tango* refers to *The Last Tango in Paris*, while Saad, the protagonist of *Eve Out of Her Ruins*, is fascinated by Rimbaud's poetry. The latter novel is set in Mauritius, as is the case with many of Devi's works, where the woman has to conform to expectations and often falls victim to violence. Typical protagonists of Ananda Devi's books are Mauritian women stuck in family and social structures that have remained intact for generations.

'Western researchers believe that what occurs in countries like Mauritius is the result of colonial rule', comments Prof. Krzysztof Jarosz. 'However, the role of women in Eastern societies is strongly conditioned by tradition, as Ananda Devi demonstrates in her books. Perhaps this special and unique character of the local culture is her greatest contribution to feminist literature.'

The writer used to distance herself from feminism. Nowadays, she believes that women's rights are something we should always strive for. After all, Mauritius is where the father of the main character of *Moi, L'Interdite* proclaims that 'daughters are a curse'. In *Pagli*, on the other hand, a host of *mofines*, guardians of the traditional patriarchy, follow young Daya's every step and warn her of the consequences of adultery: 'Don't go where

you are trying to go. Don't even look in that direction'. The romantic relationship between Daya, who comes from an Indo-Mauritian family, and the Creole fisherman Zil is a transgression of racial norms. The seemingly multicultural island turns out to be full of divisions and prejudices. Although Eve and Savita from *Eve Out of Her Ruins* share a very close friendship, out in public Savita's parents avert their eyes from Eve's family as if they were a bunch of 'copulating dogs'.

In Mauritius, if a woman does not neatly fit into the commonly accepted framework, she is ostracised. The protagonist of the novel *Moi, L'Interdite* gets rejected by her own family because she was born with a cleft lip. The self-aware Eve knows that she does not fit into any category: she is neither ready to be married, nor one to be used and abandoned. Daya from *Pagli* makes her family furious when she takes in a homeless female beggar. Daya's maladjustment is rooted in a traumatic event: when she was 13 years old, she was raped by her cousin, whom she will be forced to marry. 'Why do women end up paying for the wrongs done to them by men?', asks Ananda Devi in an interview. Savita was murdered by her teacher after she saw him sexually abusing Eve, but the public begins to wonder: 'What did she do to provoke such a thing?'

Prof. Krzysztof Jarosz points out that Ananda Devi's sensitivity to violence against women is rooted in a family story she heard at a young age, which would later become the plot of *Le sari vert*. In the novel's pivotal scene, Dokter pours a hot pot of rice on his wife's head, causing her death.

Devi's female characters often find themselves isolated from the rest of the community. Daya is declared a crazy person and locked in a henhouse, whereas the protagonist of the novel *Moi, L'Interdite* gets hidden away in a lime kiln by her own family. Rejected by humans, she becomes feral and joins a pack of wild dogs. If anyone comes to the rescue, it is always another woman. The little girl with a cleft

lip rejected by her parents is looked after by her grandmother, while Daya finds support in her friend Mitsy. The close friendship between Eve and Savita allows the girls to get out from under male domination and create what Eve describes as the 'poetry of women': an understanding beyond words, a synchronisation of gestures. After Savita's death, it comes as no surprise that Eve confesses: 'I am essentially dead'. Her 'death' does not last long: Eve cuts her hair, thus acquiring the appearance of 'a lioness whom no one dares to look in the eye and whom no one dares to touch'. After this symbolic transformation, she takes revenge and shoots Savita's killer. Ananda's protagonists do not want to be stuck in victimhood: beneath the surface of the patriarchal order of Mauritius there is a lava of rebellion boiling. Given this context, the references to the volcanic origin of the island take on an interesting character. Prof. Krzysztof Jarosz writes that *Eve Out of Her Ruins* is, in a sense, 'a story of the announced and achieved eruption of a volcano of anger: an eruption focused on avenging the oppressed women in an act of violence carried out by the titular character portrayed as a volcano'. Daya, too, feels the boiling magma inside, waiting to erupt. Before being confined to the henhouse, she exacts revenge on her husband. By undressing during their wedding night, she disarms the rapist, who was only capable of sex born of violence, dependent on the submissiveness of his victim. Daya is aware of her power over the predator. The women in Devi's books do not remain passive: they cross boundaries, break ties, and escape.

The writer's strength is her ability to adopt the Eastern perspective to look beyond the West and vice versa. She criticises Western feminists who see the world only from their own point of view, which is incompatible with the situation of Mauritian women. She is equipped with a keen critical mind that enables her to understand both the East and the West.