

## **Breaking the insular clichés: An overview of *The Last Brother* by Nathacha Appanah**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Since the 1990s, Mauritian literature has erupted with vigor, thanks to the works of many island writers. The literary production of Mauritius is essentially in French, English, Creole and Indian languages. Nathacha Appanah, a Mauritian writer of Indian origin, has contributed immensely to the Mauritian literature written in French, through her vibrant representations of the island, and by her versatile style of writing. It is worth noting that four of her novels have been translated in other languages, including English, hence her works deserve to be better known to the English language readers in India. This research article reflects on the historical backdrop of her fourth novel "*The Last Brother*", her second novel to be translated into English by Geoffrey Strachan. The story focuses on the friendship between two boys who wish to escape from the burden of solitude, with a powerful backdrop, based on real events which took place in a small tropical island during the Second World War. During the year 1940, some fifteen Jews managed to flee from Europe in order to escape the holocaust, hoping to reach Palestine, through the sea. However, upon attaining their destination, the refugees were denied entry by the British rulers, because they didn't have required papers. Consequently, they were deported to Mauritius, where they were interned in an exile camp. They were imprisoned in the camp till the end of the war in 1945.

**Keywords:** contemporary French literature, insular concept, historical context, anti-Semitism.

### **Introduction**

Nathacha Appanah is an established Francophone writer as well as a significant international voice in the literary world, through the translated versions of her novels. This successful writer belongs to the new generation of Francophone writers. Born in Mauritius, she hails from an Indian family of indentured labours of the late nineteenth century, the Pathareddy-Appanah. Having done all her schooling in her native country, Nathacha Appanah is very quickly fascinated by literature as well as journalism and discovers writing as a teenager. She is seventeen years old when she wins a literary competition which offers her the possibility to publish her articles in their columns. Thus, she collaborates a few months in a prolific way to the literary page, by writing many chronicles and news. Driven by her interest in journalism, she became a copywriter in an advertising agency, then editor for a publishing house specializing in esotericism. Her qualities made her to win a scholarship of three months in France. Leaving for a stay of three months, Nathacha Appanah stays longer in France. She joins the editorial staff of a weekly magazine where she works for three years. Her arrival in

France marks not only the beginning of her career as a journalist, but also the resumption of her vocation as a writer. In six novels, she has seduced the public and the critics. Since the publication of her first novel in 2003 to that of her latest novel in 2016, the books of Nathacha Appanah were duly appreciated by critics and readers through its various representations of islands, including Mauritius, an island area characterized by varied connotations. Coming from an exotic island such as Mauritius, she has kept in touch with her roots by attributing a prominent place to the islands in all her novels, despite their contrasting plots. However, the island is just not a subject or a theme in Appanah's writing; she goes beyond the clichés and myths about islands, by representing the insular space through different shades, influenced by the historical, cultural and socio political background, set as the backdrop of her stories. It should be noted that her novels have been translated in 16 countries.

*The Last brother*, the fourth novel by Nathacha Appanah, which has been translated in English in 2011, has its story set in Mauritius. But this time, the novelist tries to evoke an unknown period in the history of Mauritius during the Second World War, through the memories of a septuagenarian, who recounts his poignant childhood through two dimensions: on the one hand, it is about a beautiful friendship between two boys, having nothing in common except their gloomy childhood; on the other hand, it involves incorporating a historical element, a little known chapter of Mauritian History. The story features Raj, a young Mauritian, and David, a young orphan Jew, belonging to two different worlds, but destiny united them in the tropical island. Until the age of eight, Raj lived with his family in the village of Mapou, located in the north side of Mauritius. The year 1944 is a turning point in the life of Raj, who was the only survivor of a cyclone, which carried off his two brothers. Moreover, he was often beaten up by his angry and alcoholic father, who used to abuse him physically. It was then that the family decided to definitively leave Mapou, to settle in Beau Bassin. Despite this change of mood, little Raj was finding it difficult to accept the absence of his brothers, and plunged into his loneliness. Raj's father got a job as a warden at the prison of Beau-Bassin. It was there that he met David, a little Jew who was imprisoned with many other Jews. Although he spoke a foreign language, his presence and kindness were a great comfort to little Raj. From what he understood, David was from Prague and he was an orphan. At that time, Raj knew almost nothing about the devastating war. He had found a friend in the form of David, which was all that mattered. The two children were bound by a particular affection. David represented the long last brother, a soul mate for the local boy, who was longing to spend his time with his dear friend, despite knowing nothing about him. For the little Jew, who spoke only a few words, Raj was like a lifesaver angel who helped him come out of the internment camp, providing him with a safe and loving shelter. They started making small nocturnal getaways together, when everyone was asleep. Due to a hurricane, which broke a side of the prison wall, Raj decided to flee with David to Camp Mapou, where no one could find them. The two boys set off on a perilous adventure, for the road was strewn with natural obstacles, which had to be skillfully overcome. Raj harbored the illusion of wanting to become a family of three brothers again with David. Unfortunately, before his dream could come true, the little Mauritian faced a

terrible drama: his dear friend could not survive the fever which he had been experiencing from the beginning of their escapade. It was only afterwards that Raj learned the truth about the internment of the Jews in the prison of Beau Bassin.

The historical context seems to add a new dimension to the friendship between Raj and David. During the year 1940, to escape Nazis prosecution, some 1500 Jews from central Europe embarked on an ancient steamer, the *Atlantic*, which promised to lead them to Palestine, the Promised Land. The Jews had no other way out than to join Israel, the land of their deliverance. So some decided to leave the country, to reach the Promised Land, which will serve as their only refuge. Unfortunately, when they tried to enter the port of Haifa, Palestine, without proper immigration papers, they were considered illegal immigrants by the British authorities, who refused the entry of these Jews in Palestine. The boat carrying the few hundred Jews was then redirected to Mauritius, a British colony. On December 26, 1940, two ships carrying some 1,500 Jews landed in Port Louis, more than a year after the beginning of the Second World War. Upon their arrival on the island, they were placed in the prison of Beau Bassin known as the detainment camp. Far from being considered political refugees, they were treated as prisoners. During these years of exile, the daily life of the Jews was painful, especially since they were not allowed to go out. Families were separated, and they suffered of shortage of food and adequate clothing. They remained incarcerated for five years, with no real contact with the outside world. Every day, they dreamt only of one thing: to reach Palestine. It was not until August 1945 that the refugees were brought to Haifa, leaving behind them a cemetery where 127 prisoners were buried. They died of diseases such as typhoid or tropical fever, since their bodies were weak due to the stress of a prison life. David was one of them. This incident marked forever the memories of Raj, who will remember these moments towards the end of his life. Regarding this particular novel of Nathacha Appanah, it is about exploring the interior of the country, and discovering its real picture, through its savagery and ferocity. Moreover, the representation of the island breaks the clichés and the myths attached to them, for they are often associated with sunshine and beautiful palm trees. However, *The Last brother* reveals the ferocious part of Mauritius, marked by the harshness of its land and the immense forest of Beau Bassin, often devastated by powerful cyclones. The story also leads us to follow the course of rivers and trails leading to secret locations. In this novel, nature appears somewhat ambivalent, sometimes destructive, and sometimes protective. Its rains and its terrible cyclones mark its destructive side. Nevertheless, it is nature that provides Raj's mother with natural resources, such as herbs, to prepare effective remedies for all kinds of ailments. Thus the island is illustrated through varied images: it is sometimes mysterious, sometimes full of resources, and often destructive by its unpredictable nature. While placing the island in a precise socio-political context, this novel by Nathacha Appanah deals with a rather delicate theme, while camouflaging it behind the story of a very special friendship, which transcends races and religions, even the years. While remaining a concept that dates back to the last century, anti-Semitism joins other forms of discrimination and racism that are topical, as well as the uprooting that faces any people torn from their country. In this particular case, the island space bears historical connotations, unknown to the world, going far beyond the usual

stereotypes. Indeed, despite its remoteness from Europe, Mauritius played a significant role during the Second World War.

### **Conclusion**

In her novels, Nathacha Appanah seems to abandon the exotic aspect, to represent her homeland through various realistic panoramas, closely related to the existence of the characters. It is no longer a question of dreamy beaches near which the characters live, and meet in the shades of coconut palms, nor to simply illustrate the natural beauties of the island. The latter does not detach from the story, but seems to mingle with the existence of the characters. Mauritius, as a backdrop, seems to exert some influence, beneficial or harmful, on the existence of the characters concerned, who have to go through many revealing twists and turns, implicitly linked to the hidden facets of the insular space. More than just a geographical space, the island concept plays a vibrant role in breaking all exotic stereotypes associated to it, by emerging as a multifarious horizon, which can be threatening, comforting or even source of nostalgia, having thus a powerful and a realistic place in the narrative structure of her novels. In *The Last brother*, Nathacha Appanah evokes the story of a friendship, trying to survive and conquer a hostile adult world, but it's also the story of a larger fight against genocide, abuse and discrimination.

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