
Michael Mitchell

*Michael Mitchell* is an honorary visiting professor at the Yesu Persaud Centre for Caribbean Studies at the University of Warwick, and lecturer in English at the University of Paderborn, Germany.

Though much has been made of the fact that *Silent Winds, Dry Seas* is the first Anglophone novel from Mauritius to have achieved wide circulation, readers of Caribbean fiction will be struck by an impression of familiarity. The reason is not hard to find. Competing European colonialisms that established plantation economies have given rise to broadly similar phenomena. In Mauritius, as in parts of the Caribbean, slave labour was followed by a system of indenture, and later by economic decline as cane sugar became less profitable. When the British took over more colonies at the beginning of the 19th century, they established systems of colonial control which left previous economic, social, cultural and linguistic structures relatively intact. Thus, in Mauritius, French – spoken by the previous planter elite – remained the dominant language and the root of the widely spoken Creole, while the administrative and educational system were British. After the introduction of indentured sugar workers, a vibrant Indian community established itself, retaining and developing its Hindu and Islamic culture, but also aspects of its clan and caste features within the stratified economic and cultural island society.

This is the society into which Vinod Busjeet’s protagonist, Vishnu Bhushan, is born in 1949. It is a coming-of-age novel in which not merely the central character’s initials but also the
narrative subjectivity reveal its proximity to a memoir based on the author’s own experiences. As such, it does not entirely avoid the memoir writer’s temptation to get the family history documented in full. The author has stressed the fictionalizing elements in interviews; he has condensed the material, for example by reducing multiple cousins to one or telescoping events that happened over months to three action-filled days when the island is hit by a cyclone, but nevertheless the ‘flash-forward’ at the beginning of Chapter 1, containing the mother’s story of her first love and her dealings with the Bhushan clan, is heavy going. When the narrator himself becomes the focus of the story, however, the judicious use of the well-chosen detail and strategically placed elements of humour combine with a sensibility that this reviewer, being the same age as the author, finds entirely authentic. It is a reminder of how much changed, all over the world, during the 1960s.

The early pages do, however, fulfil an important function. They convey the claustrophobic pressures of a patriarchal society. These were not merely the result of an imperial framework maintaining a rigid stratification based on colour, class, wealth, status and gender, but were also perpetuated within the social systems of the oppressed themselves. So Vishnu’s mother was the one to be shamed when his father refuses to acknowledge his own son, after she quits his house as a result of domestic abuse. She is expected to acquiesce, but finds a way to pressure the clan into making him relent by damaging their reputation in a community where gossip and hearsay enforce adherence to mores and religious norms. This is also a society which demonizes and represses female sexuality so that adolescent males know it is impossible to have girlfriends without risking the physical violence of fathers, brothers and cousins against both them and the girls, and so seek early sexual experience with prostitutes that the same male members of the family resort to. The adolescent Vishnu is astonished to see call-girls willingly emerge from bourgeois homes for a rendezvous arranged by the pimp Tamby, who insiders know operates from
the Rex Cinema. It is one example of an attempt to regain control over their lives.

Sexual repression and the condoning of violence against women are aspects of social norms sanctioned by religions on the island. Vishnu, growing up in a Hindu family, experiences how religious traditions brought from India by the indentured workers have become set and fossilized in ways that Indians in the subcontinent would not always recognize. It is easy to see why that might be so. Brought to the island as ‘coolies’, or virtual slaves, Indians saw their religious and cultural traditions as a way to maintain their identity and dignity, and give them a sense of control over their destiny. Performing the rite of ‘mundan’ – the shaving of the birth hair – in the Indian Ocean, Vishnu’s mother feels she is standing in ‘a holy canal linking this sea to the Ganga River in India’ and to Shiva’s sacred city of Benaras. Yet, ironically, this very means of control morphs into a means of coercion in the name of religious values. That is something recognized by Vishnu’s Uncle Ram, who, with his irreverent attitude to religion typified in his mocking of pandits in dhotis with their ‘eggplants’ hanging down, is someone who ‘does like to challenge and puzzle’. Uncle Ram, like Vishnu’s father, prefers to wear a suit; as a station-master on the island’s railway his beloved cap symbolizes an attachment to a seemingly permanent colonial world which will shortly be swept away. Traces of the railway have now almost vanished, like those in Trinidad or Guyana. And yet he urges Vishnu to do well in his studies so that he can escape abroad. Like so many of the characters, he is ‘a bundle of contradictions’.

Vishnu’s sympathies also lie with the marginalized, particularly the women, and with any attempt to wrest control from the forces of conservatism and oppression, but his immediate goal is to win a scholarship to study abroad. He is growing up in a world which is becoming ever more interconnected, and in which conversations about cigarette cards (of Jimmy Greaves and Bobby Charlton), music (Cliff Richard and Elvis) or the news (the India–China
conflict, the Profumo affair) ran parallel with those at my own English school.

The ‘winds of change’ brought independence to the island, and yet the release from colonial control is accompanied by sectarian and interracial violence, and the stifling colonial structures are replaced by corruption and nepotism. Even the high regard in which Vishnu’s father is held by his former primary school students is not enough to ensure Vishnu gets the scholarship to Europe he should have received. In the end, he accepts a place at a Madagascan university, and from there wins a scholarship to the US. His triumphs, humiliations and insights in the States are the subject of the final chapter, and tell a story familiar to readers of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. As a boy his goal was to use a foreign education to achieve a comfortable life and assured status in the island, but given the opportunity of ‘making it’ in the world of American finance where he will be expected to show a passion for accumulating ever more money, he faces the contradiction of his ‘inner Gandhi’, or perhaps that sense of 1960s idealism which was so hard to hold on to. The author’s career in international economic development is an indication of the compromises his protagonist might have made.

The book’s title alludes to a Hindi phrase Uncle Ram calls out each evening – ‘Hawa baand, samoondar soukaray’ – an invocation for the winds to be silent and the seas dry. Against the powers of nature, or even more against personal disasters, the wish to take absolute control is an impossibility, a contradiction in terms. The pointless and unjustifiable lawsuit Vishnu’s father pursues through the esoteric clauses of the French legal system in Mauritius assumes a symbolic function: ‘Why are you at each other’s throats for a few miserable acres of barren soil that the white sugar barons dumped on Indian coolies at a good price?’ If control in that sense is impossible, words are what remain. The book, in that sense, is an attempt to take control of memory and impose a kind of order on records of contradictions, puzzles and challenges. The poems interspersed
between the chapters add considerable emotional power to the narrative. Above all, *Silent Winds, Dry Seas* is an important contribution to the literature emerging from the worldwide legacy of the indenture system. The novel ends with a reference to Paul Simon’s song ‘America’, as though it was a search for American reality, whereas in fact it provides an unforgettable portrait of Mauritius, and as such might equally have quoted the title of an earlier Simon and Garfunkel hit: ‘Homeward Bound’.