

OUR MAN IN MAURITIUS

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To say that this special issue on “Indian Ocean Imaginaries” is the culmination of a long time scholarly dedication to unearth the aesthetics that configures the Indian Ocean as a literary gem is a gross understatement. The word “culmination” confers the feeling that something coveted has been achieved, which certainly applies to our academic endeavour and yet, inherent in the word there is also a sense of closure, a sensation of accomplishment that forecloses continuation and which clearly resists the inexhaustible energy that has propelled our work. In other words, “Indian Ocean Imaginaries” is indeed a culmination of sorts but, more importantly, it is the material recognition of the *ongoing* work conducted by a group of people whose academic tenacity echoes the resilience of the very Indian Ocean that is their object of study. On an intimate, personal level, “Indian Ocean Imaginaries” trespasses the purely academic scenario to embrace the remembrance of one person, Farhad Khojraty, our man in Mauritius, who left us on 23 July, 2020. Unexpected as death always is, Farhad’s was emphatically uncalled for and, therefore, we, as friends, in an attempt to defeat death’s impinging forgetfulness, claim back our man in Mauritius in the imaginative cartography of our “Indian Ocean Imaginaries.” However, before we lay claim to the island of Mauritius via our man, let us first embark on a narrative detour that will bring to the fore another island, Zanzibar, a crucial depot in our peculiar biography of the Indian Ocean.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25145/j.recaesin.2021.82.12>

REVISTA CANARIA DE ESTUDIOS INGLESES, 82; April 2021, pp. 175-180; ISSN: e-2530-8335



In *Beginnings, Intention, Method*, Edward Said ponders on the specificity of origins when he puts forward a series of interrelated questions: “Is the beginning the same as origin? Is the beginning of a given work its real beginning, or is there some other, secret point that more authentically starts the work off?” (Said 1988, 3).¹ Inspired by Said’s incisive questions, we too would like to flesh out an origin for our Indian Ocean adventures, in general, and this “Indian Ocean Imaginaries” adventure, in particular. Thus following Said’s questioning mood, we too wonder whether our journey to Zanzibar was what started it all or whether there was some “other, secret point” that “more authentically” stamped this beginning as an *original* beginning. Be that as it may, we are going to grant Zanzibar this honorary position as origin and so, declare the island our Indian Ocean commencement.

If a geographical location had the capacity to contain a historical recipe of the Indian Ocean –spices, slaves, incommensurable water– this place would be Zanzibar, the small island off the Indian Ocean coast that is now part of Tanzania. Zanzibar was, to us, a gift; a well-deserved destination after years of academic labour, a prize hard won. On 11 July 2010 the world’s eyes were set on Johannesburg, South Africa, where the final match of the FIFA World Cup took place, a match that proclaimed the Spanish squad, “La Roja,” the winner of the most important soccer championship. We enjoyed the victory in Rome, at Fiumicino Airport, to be more precise, our stopover to Zanzibar, our Indian Ocean beginning. It was in our visit to “The House of Wonders,” one of the most emblematic museums in Stone Town, where we decided that the Indian Ocean was to be the locus of our further research. Totally mesmerized by the history of the place, the vibrancy that emanated from the food stalls around the Old Fort that hosted the Zanzibar International Film Festival we attended and the novels of Zanzibar’s most iconic writer, Abdulrazak Gurnah, we planted the seeds of what would later become our research group, *Ratnakara. Indian Ocean Literatures and Cultures*.

Other journeys have followed Zanzibar, other Indian Ocean sites have been visited and each one of them has contributed to shape what we regard as an eclectic Indian Ocean inventory. It has been Mauritius, though, the island that has imprinted our Indian Ocean inventory with a somewhat more indelible, emotionally-laden record. This is a record that bears a face and a name: Farhad Khoyratty, our man in Mauritius. He was the one to open to us the doors of the University of Mauritius, where he worked, and he was the one who helped us to organize the creative writing workshop with the people from the Chagos Refugees Group. But he did much more than this: he guided us through the complexities, ambivalences and richness of the history and culture of Mauritius, exhibiting the island’s idiosyncrasies, its lights and shadows, with always humorous insights. A connoisseur of food, he would arrange succulent outings to varied Mauritian restaurants, from the most refined to the most unsophisticated but, we can assure you, in all cases the food was simply excellent and the conversation superb. He would stop at a street stall for us to try authentic

¹ Said, Edward W. *Beginnings, Intention and Method*. Granta Books, 1988 [1975].



Indian ice-cream, a delicacy we would most surely have missed had it not been for his extreme kindness. He was much more than a respected and respectful colleague; he was our friend and his company is sorely missed, his absence a gnawing grief.

We could not attend his funeral, one of the many consequences of Covid19 restrictions, and we wonder now how we will react to stepping on Mauritian soil without his guidance, his company, his smile. This is an ominous journey laying ahead of us, a journey we will certainly undertake because it *must* be undertaken. There is somebody waiting for us in Mauritius, Bilall, Farhad's beloved. As such, he has inherited Farhad's title and thus he has become now "our man in Mauritius." We dedicate this special section on "Indian Ocean Imaginaries" to our dear friend, Farhad, our man in Mauritius, who we love and will always cherish. There is no better way to do this than starting the issue with the poems Bilall, our present man in Mauritius, wrote in memory of his lover and life companion, Farhad Khoyratty.

Poetry is a gift which in turn is given as a gift to the world. And it is an inclusive world, opening the door of one's life to a guest, Humankind's sacred 'other'; to the guest, the fellow-traveller, the gift of experience, of vicariousness, of empathy, of rest.

Farhad KHOYRATTY

THE QUEST

Rowing down the Styx,
What a fool have I been?
Baffled as I remember,
I let the Charon slip while burying you,
There are no comforting words,
I deserve to be anathematized,
Shunned like Meursault,
I brought two this time,
As I crossed the river of tormented souls,
So many of them darting around,
Shoals of souls,
You are not among them,
But there lying in my heart,
I am becoming you,
I am You.

MY TRYST AT MIDNIGHT

My body was trembling
Ensnared yet I was rattling on
Feeling the deaf adder pressing against my chest
We were not running abreast.
Longing to see my beloved in you,
Befuddled, as you see my bewildered look
I am puzzled
Naked and restless
Abashed by hidden thoughts



THE WAITING

Quite an unusual existence,
The Vyāna is no more,
I am morphing
Let the vultures be
Do not contend, my love
Life is uneventful, but
How unbearable Not to
Hear your mellifluous voice
Kiss your sinful lips.
Yes, my Beloved,
This tantalizing scent of your body,
This touch of yours, so sensual
I am distraught
Oh my beloved,
I am passionate
I yearn to see you again,
How long will this stint end?
I desire you.

I've morphed into something I dread
Spurned,
I fear your rejection
A lot of prevarication,
In such predicament,
Drop this hedonistic pursuit,
And hear my anguish cries,
Hear my unwritten lines,
I desire you.

THE DEATH CAMP

“Arbeit Mach Frei”,
An understatement of No respite,
Few words that make us all shudder,
You've been hired in this death factory without your will,
So you will toil to death,
To make the Schadenfreude thrills.
A derelict Fortress sacredly guarded,
A Forbidden City for the Emperor of tramps.
We were mice scurrying and whipped,
Petrified,
Oh Dervish, at least mice onboard were not tortured.

Captured, our happiness ebbing away,
Wrung all emotions out of our body,
The cries, the pains, the screams,
The rapes, the tortures,



We no longer cry for our children,
Yes, Demeter, trees continue to blossom.

You became remains,
Remains, mere remembrances
No more wallowing in pity, Just remains.
Counting your unnumbered days,
Has the sun outwon the moon?
You've lost count in this starry night,
The screams, the voices,
These brusque wailing sounds echoing in your head,
You depict yourself in one of Munch's paintings,
But this time your cries are unheard.

You passed by the chestnut tree,
Hardly could you gaze at the inflorescence,
But spot a lovely place to be, a place to seek solace,
An aiding branch to support the weight of your body,
Hung your body timidly like a dry chestnut,
From there you would be contemplating the efflorescence on the wall,
Your dead body would look pretty serene,
That very second you would be liberated,
Escaping to the hell of Angelico seems more welcoming,
Beyond doubt, Nietzsche, this is amor fati.

RESUMING WORK AFTER THE BURIAL

Thrown into an unknown yet known land,
A promised land I was promised,
Eyes staring,
Starving lips moving,
Devoured by the eagerness of inquisitiveness,
Gushing to hushing,
Pricked by curiosity,
A thick disposable needle,
I was The Blanche Dubois in New Orleans, except for the attire,
I wanted to retire the second their dazed gaze brush me,

Queen of Sheba, they thought they were,
Without the charm and allure,
Reigning on this marshy swathe,
Aficionados of gossips,
The old granny would join in,
Nothing concrete,
Gobsmacked, how frivolously futile her contribution is,
Her only contribution is the paleness of her skin,
I have to take it to the chin,
Such performance deserved a standing ovation,
With much mirth, she would eat with a good appetite,



The tattletale lady.
Hegemony is a not a tale,
You meet them during your End-of-Year party,
Your relationship would be on the tip of their tongues,
Murmuring how depraved your life is,
Miss Nincompoop shone from the herd and would call you filthy,
She will get away with murder by denying it,
Her smile comforted her,
She knew it all along,
She would escape scot-free.

Bilall JAWDY

