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**Joy Mahabir**

***Jouvert***

**Bloomington, Indiana: Author House Publishing, 2006, 168 pp.**

**by *Louis Regis***

*Jouvert* is the autodiegetic retrospective of Anaise, an Indo-Caribbean artist, who reflects on the complex travelling which brings her from her home village of Mt. Stewart (a sugar-cane village to the east of San Fernando in South Trinidad) to Brooklyn, New York where she establishes herself as a masquerade designer. It is a novel that is crafted and colored with the sensitivity of the Carnival artist for whom visual art must be/come alive, energized with the restless, kinetic spirits of Carnival.

*Jouvert* engages themes of social anthropology, namely, family and kinship, gender and creolization. While these themes are compelling in their own right, their artistic treatment is what elevates the novel above anthropological observation and analysis. Mahabir's art transcends and transmutes anthropology and enables the successful rendering of mundane and historic events into an unforgettable, imaginative, carnival-colored narrative. *Jouvert* is a celebration and an examination of art, artistic consciousness, the artistic process, and the situation of the artist in contemporary Caribbean society.

In *Jouvert*, art is the sum of the artist's experiences: it is the result of an honest wrestling and coming to terms with the sometimes conflictual "natives" of her person, and a coming to terms with all the elements and forces which produce her and her family. Art for Anaise is an engagement with all the dimensions of self, family, and society. This is at times a painful experience but one that empowers the artist. Art has the social responsibility for taking the people for whom it is intended beyond the crossroads of their existence. The novel affirms that, "the crossroads is the starting point, that the path from the crossroads is not linear, and that one can take along time before one ventures out" (149). Anaise concludes after a long period of introspection that, "Art never abandons you, [it] meets you in a space of reconnection" (140).

*Jouvert* highlights significant moments in Anaise's movement towards self-discovery in this space of reconnection. These moments are recounted in a seamless weaving of narrative threads. The art of weaving itself is characterized by subtle almost imperceptible spatial and temporal shifts; in this case, it is facilitated by the stream of consciousness. Anaise, the first-person narrator and protagonist, is at times audience to the histories of her biological and pumpkin-vine family. These histories, which are presented as embedded narratives, have to be told in their entirety to enable the artist to reconnect the complicated and fragmented threads of her genealogy, which is a necessary part of her psychological preparation for creativity.

Memory and reverie enable the temporal and spatial shifting which connect Annaise's discrete experiences and reflections. The rain which pours down on her first masquerade designs in Brooklyn takes her back in imagination to the rain which sometimes beat like an unruly steelband on the galvanized roof of Black Maharajin's house in Mt. Stewart. Black Maharajin, invoked in this way, guides us through the tangle of memory. She dominates Annaise's memory of her first encounter with the Creole space that is the ultimate space of reconnection. This is the intersection of the several ethnic cultures that contribute to the development of civilization in the region, and is the space into which Caribbean peoples have poured their collective experiences and energies.

For Annaise, this Creole space is both virtual and real. It is as much Mt. Stewart with its untold histories and mysteries of maroonage and indentureship as it is any region of Trinidad, which had "its own geography, its own interpretation of Trinidadian and even Caribbean culture" (70). It is also Brooklyn and Toronto, arguably two of the largest Caribbean cities outside of the Caribbean basin. It is as much peopled with ancestors as the masses of ordinary people who live the complex reality of a cosmopolitan Caribbean. It is defined by the paintings of Wilfredo Lam, which integrate sacred and secular Afro-Caribbean iconography, and by traditional representations of Mother Lakshmi, which are to some extent the Indo-Caribbean equivalent. But it is equally defined by two dominant Caribbean cultural practices, music, and cuisine, in particular, those of Trinidad. Chutney and calypso thus are as important to any Caribbean representation as are pelau and roti.

Above all, however, the Creole space is dominated by Jouvvert, which is the opening act of Carnival itself and is one of the most public and open expressions of communal art in Trinidad and in the Caribbean as a whole. Annaise describes the San Fernando Jouvvert in this way:

And it was Jouvvert morning again in San Fernando: the earliest hours of dawn, the darkness primal and safe, steelpan music sweetest at this hour, rum, weed, jab molassie, pay de devil, Midnight Robber, down de road, bacchanal, the joyful streets spilling over with people dancing, dancing, dancing. (6)

But *Jouvvert* is also invested with a mystical and philosophical aura. Annaise describes it as a time when, "all the doors of the universe are fleetingly, wantonly flung open" (6), and when, "the world turned upside down in a space of mystery" (159). It is the hour of the Midnight Robbers who, sublimated above mere masquerade, "were like gypsies or mysterious wanderers who came to Jouvvert from the margins, from the most forbidden places of the world, to articulate unspoken and invisible truths" (7). Sundar Popo, the pioneer of chutney, whose couplet, "Nani make a mistake / And cut off Nana throat," revives memories of what Annaise calls the left-handed side of the experience of Indo-Caribbean women, is himself envisioned as a Midnight Robber, "stealing a place for his music at a time when Indian culture and people were regarded by the middle classes as inferior and peasant" (130).

As with all reality there is a negative side. Annaise's first lover, Renegade, a free-spirited individual, drowns in the early morning hours: "He had gone swimming as usual in the early hours of dawn, in the Jouvert hours when death has an open invitation, and the sea had decided that it was his time" (62). In this case, Jouvert functions in the novel as a metaphor for open-ended possibility. Jouvert symbolism sublimates into philosophical principle and colors Annaise's perception of reality. The temple in the sea, the triumph of Sewdass Sadhu, a rebel who defies the plantation's denial of his right to worship, is described as, "quiet and simple and full of courage and creativity. It felt truly intrinsic to the Caribbean, like a place of beginning, a jouvert place" (71). The brightly colored jhandi flags close to it look, "like abstract Carnival figures dancing stridently" (76). Even matikor, a Hindu ritual of the earth that celebrates fertility and transformation, is perceived as a form of jouvert (144). Jouvert is also a metaphor for civil and civilized behavior in the Creole space. San Fernando, the site of Annaise's awakening to the vitality and anarchy of Carnival, is envisioned as, "our Jouvert city," and its cosmopolitanism as, "enduring Jouvert harmony" (136). In Brooklyn Annaise knows that, despite her condemnation of him, Rachele will forgive an errant Andy because, "Trinidadians follow the social rules of Jouvert, where space is given to everyone" (126).

Annaise's position in this Creole space is anchored by her memories of Black Maharajin, who embodies Creole space and the integration of Indian and African ancestries and cultures. She functions as Annaise's guardian spirit or spiritual guardian and is her link to past and future as she negotiates the complicated business of family history, a necessary prelude to self-knowledge. Annaise remembers her arrival in Mt. Stewart looking exactly, "like the woman in one of my mother's old paintings *La Belle Creole*" (21). The green and purple batik dress she wears, and the pose she strikes are the costume and pose when she tries ineffectually to outstare or shame Annaise's Toronto-based relatives who deny her a piece of land they neither want nor need (84). They ignore her, or perhaps do not even see her. Tradition, though powerful, is sometimes helpless in the face of single-minded greed and materialism.

Black Maharajin is the embodiment of the fierce feminine energy which manifests in matikor in which Annaise dances for the first time when she returns to Trinidad seeking that reconnection which is necessary to her practice of art. Maharajin, who boasts Haitian ancestry, is the cousin of those women in the Jacmel painting, owned by the Haitian Pierre, of "a river scene of women bathing painted in brilliant yellows and blues, the colors of Ochun and Yemaya" (131). When Annaise finally owns that painting and mounts it together with the painting of Mother Lakshmi, she experiences the dream and the calm that shape her definitive life-changing decision to become a masquerade designer. She believes that Black Maharajin guides her to this awareness.

It is not too far outside the realm of possibility that Black Maharajin and Marie, Annaise's mother, are analogous to the Jacmel painting in the case of the first, and to that of Mother Lakshmi in the case of the second. Marie is the other manifestation of that energy. She is passive but enduring, dutiful, and self-sacrificing, rooted in place and culture, but ever conscious

of art and accepting the travails and triumphs of life as preparation for her own artistic statement. The Brooklyn apartment, symbolically blessed by the two paintings and their symbolic referents, can be read as Annaise's mourning ground, the place from which she emerges convinced of and committed to her mission as priestess of "the fierce and vulnerable art of the Caribbean" (159).

A reader brings to a text a cluster of meanings; as I read on and on images from James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* kept alternating with others from Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye*, which is a female artist's retrospective of her career. Joy Mahabir has painted the portrait of the artist as rebel, the only real role for the Caribbean artist who must reconcile her multiple identities as part of the process of individuation. She is also very aware of her marginality as artist and she equates this marginality with the shack in which she first meets Black Maharajin on that fateful first visit to a Carnival mas camp: "For us from the Caribbean, the space to create, to make art and mas, is like the booth I sat in that night, an extremely fragile space. It is a space that must be protected fiercely; a space that must always be fought for" (5).

Claiming the complex of her identities as an Indo-Caribbean female artist resident in the diasporic Caribbean, she rejects equally the patronizing complacency of her Toronto-based relatives and the claustrophobic embrace of the circle of school friends who are her natural peer grouping. She also abandons her ambition to become a gallery artist. She disdains all these stifling certitudes for the exciting unpredictability of the Creole space of Brooklyn Jouvert where a bass woman possessed by the music falls and is caught by her supporting group.

*Jouvert* demands an accompanying calypso soundtrack. To a literal-minded person like myself, the calypso that comes to mind is Shorty's "Jour Ouvert" (1974), which describes from the perspective of the reveler, the jouvert scenes described in the novel from the perspective of the visual artist. Like Mahabir, Shorty describes a San Fernando jouvert of steelbands disturbing the pre-dawn silence, of gyrating revelers, of "Soulful, funky, swanky pickney / Openly smoking tampi." Shorty, himself a restless rebel whose transgressive melodic and rhythmical innovations found fulfillment in the musical innovations of soca and sokah, would have smiled in appreciation of Joy Mahabir's achievement.

Given all the foregoing, it seems only natural to identify the author in terms of the signifying rhetoric of the Midnight Robber she has created for the novel:

Away, down from the regions claimed by conquerors came I  
Spawn of the Earth Goddess  
Now the motive of my sudden appearance here today  
Is to accomplish the most impossible expedition  
Or my fate has led me to take up this challenge with my bare hands  
To bring freedom to my people.

*Jouvert*, Joy Mahabir's first novel, is a powerful manifestation of this phenomenon of awakening.