

Queer N/Oceans: Vore and Child Abuse in Ananda Devi's *La vie de Joséphin le fou*

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Article abstract

This article argues that in Ananda Devi's *La vie de Joséphin le fou* (2003), the protagonist Joséphin assumes the form of a human-eel monster, engaging in acts of vorarephilia or “vore,” to satiate a murderous desire underwater. This analysis conceives Joséphin's aquatic world as a paradoxically queer, abject, and maternal space in which Joséphin terrorizes two underage children as both their abductor and protector. Devi further reconfigures in her novel the archetype of the protective eel in Mauritian shamanistic practices by depicting Joséphin as a predatorial human-eel figure. Joséphin's violence against the children as he assumes such a monstrous embodiment serves as a metaphor for child sexual abuse in Mauritius where, at the time of the novel's publication, an estimated 2,600 children were victims of molestation.

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Benjamin Hiramatsu Ireland

La Mer elle-même tout écume, comme Sibylle en
fleurs sur sa chaise de fer.

Saint-John Perse, *Amers*.

Motherhood destines us to a demented *jouissance*
that is answered, by chance, by the nursling's
laughter in the sunny waters of the ocean.

Julia Kristeva, "Stabat Mater".

A recent shift in Francophone Studies privileging aqueous bodies as sites for theoretical exploration has offered generative re-readings of texts that allow readers "to move beyond conceiving [oceans] as empty, but rather as part of a 'meshwork' of natures integrated into human experience" (Anderson and Peters 12)¹. Research has yet to address how a *queer* ocean—with its metaphorical and material associations—could reframe considerations of nonnormative sexualities appearing in Francophone Indian Ocean literatures². So-called "queer oceans" as imagined, aquatic worlds in which nonnormative sexualities and sexual practices propagate may allow for novel representations of sexual interactions between humans and nonhuman species, including creatures residing in oceanic territories³. One curious queer sexual practice that this article will examine is vorarephilia, more commonly known as "vore"—a fetishistic desire to ingest another living subject in full or the passive desire to be fully consumed or violently eaten by another creature⁴. Anime and virtual pornography frequently depict underwater vore scenes involving animals, human-animal hybrids, and monstrous ocean creatures who consume one another⁵. A close consideration of vorarephilic, underwater creatures may offer insight into how queer aquatic worlds generate, as Kathrin Bower notes, "escapist, emancipatory, and erotic [desire], a combination of attraction and repulsion that marks [a] relationship to [the] mother muse" (132). Such a figurative

1 See Ingold, for an insightful analysis on reconceiving oceans as theoretical networks. On recent works treating representations of aqueous bodies in Francophone literary productions, see Elhariry and Talbayev, Frengs, and Talbayev.

2 This article's usage of the term "queer" is informed by David Halperin's explanation of the term. Halperin defines "queer" as "not a positivity but a positionality vis-à-vis the normative—a positionality that is not restricted to lesbians and gay men but is in fact available to anyone who is or who feels marginalized because of her or his sexual practices" (62).

3 Scholarship pertaining to the fields of Queer Ecologies and Queer Human-Animal Studies abounds; however, rarer are the works that consider aquatic creatures within a queer continuum. See, for instance, Harris and Jones, Hayward, and Chen.

4 Vore differs from cannibalism to the extent that vore is a paraphilia and fetish, whereas cannibalism is not. Paraphilic practices of consumption are labelled as "soft vore." However, these practices could escalate to involve corporeal mutilation by mastication, known as "hard vore," which entails the murderous consumption and chewing of another body in which both the consumer and consumed engage in a shared, mutual sexual pleasure. See Lykins and Cantor. Queer scholarship has yet to consider vorarephilia as a queer mode of embodiment; and this article illuminates potential avenues of critical analysis by placing import on the abjecting erotics of mastication and ingestion.

5 For instance, the online imageboard known by global fetish community members as E621.net offers hundreds of visual examples of underwater vore scenes involving animated fish and human-animal hybrids.

ocean—a paradoxical site of escape, the erotic, and of maternal signification—constitutes an aptly imagined space to explore within Ananda Devi’s eleventh novel, *La vie de Joséphin le fou* (2003).

Serenella Iovino would call *Joséphin* an example of an emerging “interspecies literature” in which the work’s narration revolves around a nonhuman creature’s lived perspectives and affective states (44). Scholarship on *Joséphin* has strikingly elided considerations on the novel’s representations of interspecies relations and nonnormative sexuality. Ritu Tyagi, for instance, has qualified *Joséphin* as an interspecies work whose topsy-turvy autodiegesis manifests “despair, destitution, [and] madness” (“Feminine’ Desire” 65). In their feminist readings of the novel, Véronique Bragard and Serge Ella Ondo describe the presence of the ocean as a space of escape and a liberating maternal force (Bragard 86; Ondo). Regarding Joséphin’s qualities as a metaphor for postcolonial alterity, Amaleena Damlé posits that “[Devi’s] texts neither exclusively relegate the human-animal to an abject debasement, nor excessively celebrate the hybrid as a revolutionary figure” (514). Yet, a queer reading of *Joséphin* that applies theories of the maternal informed by Julia Kristeva’s works in conjunction with the queer notion of “vore” could offer an alternative perspective to Damlé’s vision of an “othered” Joséphin. Devi’s mobilization of a human-animal figure in relation to so-called “abject abasement” precisely allows the author to make implicit commentary on a largely overlooked social injustice in Mauritian society. Framing the ocean and the human-animal figure appearing in *Joséphin* as queer, maternal, and abjecting, this article addresses how queer acts of vore serve as metaphors for child sexual abuse in Mauritian society⁶. Queer acts of vore further redefine the ocean space in Devi’s novel as queer and predatory—a site where vorarephalic sexual abuse and the subsequent destruction of physical bodies paradoxically accompany a simulated, false solace of a maternal embrace.

As this article suggests, Devi’s integration of numerous vorarephalic scenes in the novel—namely, between a human-eel monster who rapes and murders two underage human girls under the sea—sheds a symbolic light on victims of child sexual violence in Mauritius who have long been rendered invisible by the taboo-nature of the subject. Characterizing a sexual predator as a murderous, vorarephalic eel, Devi revivifies the representation of eels appearing in traditional Mauritian shamanistic practices in which eels have long maintained associations with practices of protecting children from demonic spirits. Devi’s perversion of the protective eel figure in Mauritian spiritual practices, which the protagonist Joséphin embodies through his eel-human form, is representative of the destructive, predatory nature of child sexual abuse. Devi acknowledges that the Mauritius appearing in her works is “a close sibling of the Mauritius [she] know[s], but it is not the real one” (Jean-François 143). By creating a distance between her “literary Mauritius” and her actual islandic home, Devi offers a noteworthy way to comment from afar on the social injustices plaguing “real Mauritius.” Devi accomplishes this commentary by framing her “literary Mauritius” as a metaphorical reflection of her true home country. The major difference in *Joséphin*, however, is that her “literary Mauritius” is located predominately under the ocean.

Queer Eels, Oceans, and the Maternal

Joséphin opens *in medias res* with a voyeuristic scene under the sea off the coast of Case Noyale, Mauritius, from the narrative perspective of Joséphin, a feral child and the novel’s monstrous protagonist. Joséphin describes seeing two fifteen-year-old child

6 Approximately five-hundred minors were recorded to have been sexually exploited in Mauritius in 1995. The high number of cases of child sexual exploitation in Mauritius show that the phenomenon remains prevalent: 1,175 children fell victim to child sex abuse in 2012, almost a decade after the publication of *Joséphin*. In 2012, Mauritius infamously became among the top ten global destinations for child sex tourism in Africa. See Business Mega.

siblings, Solange and Marlène, whom he had recently kidnapped. Joséphin notes that both children, deemed his “princesses,” are asleep next to him and are inexplicably able to breathe underwater (9). Prior to this opening scene, Joséphin forcibly drags both children into his underwater lair. The feral child shifts his gaze onto the abducted Solange who sleeps in his burrow. Exhibiting trouble concatenating words and ideas, Joséphin explains whom he sees:

Penser à recueillir le sable où elles ont dormi, après, et l'étaler là où moi je dors, ainsi dormirai un peu sur elles, en elles [...] ah mes petites. [...] [M]a Solange dort recroquevillée pouce en bouche, robe levée haut haut haut à la lisière de quel âge a-t-elle, quinze ans. [...] [J]'aimerai bien [...] écouter le bruit léger de succion, sa langue sur son pouce écouter, froissement d'une cuisse contre l'autre. (9-10)

Joséphin's fixation on a thumb-sucking Solange, accentuated by her “succion,” immediately establishes an eroticized visuality of the sleeping child. The desire to sleep “en elle” by placing himself into the sand impression on which Solange sleeps, coupled with the “froissement d'une cuisse” that tempts him to look pruriently at her shortened dress, places import on Solange's intimate bodily areas. Joséphin proceeds to cover the sand over the sleeping bodies of Solange and her sister Marlène while he later “lèch[e] un petit peu le cristal de sable collé à [ses propres] doigts” (13). The sand, as Joséphin describes, is “crèmeux”; and the underwater sand floor becomes like a “bain de crème épaisse” that engulfs him (20).

The suggestion of ejaculate, represented by the thick, creamy sand on which Joséphin lays and by the sticky crystal on his fingers, sexualizes the sand elements of the ocean. For Joséphin, the ocean becomes the site of metaphorical perversities wherein seemingly innocent oceanic elements like sand manifest highly sexualized significations. Solange's forceful sucking of her thumb is juxtaposed with the visuality of Joséphin's licking creamy sand from his fingers—an act symbolizing the release of ejaculatory fluids on his fingers. Upon seeing Solange's thumb in her mouth, Joséphin is engulfed in sand-ejaculate, which suggests that Solange's thumb serves as a phallic proxy for Joséphin's ejaculating penis. Furthermore, the sexualized interaction under the ocean between Joséphin and an innocent Solange is reinforced by Joséphin's predatory violence upon kidnapping Solange. The kidnapped Solange and Marlène become primary and vulnerable objects of his sexual desire. Joséphin acknowledges the fear with which the two sisters live while abducted: “[L]eurs yeux sont noirs et terrifiés, pauvres pauvres petites, connaissent rien de la vie, rien, savent pas de quoi il faut avoir peur” (57). In a scene that parallels the voyeuristic opening of *Joséphin*, readers gain access to Joséphin's desire to taste yet again a terrified, defenseless Solange:

Le sable est resté collé sur ses jambes nues en séchant, les cristaux de sable brillent sur ses mollets, je sais que cela aura un goût salé et croustillant et aussi le goût de sa peau unique, bien sûr, miellé, elle est bien réveillée [...] elle me voit, sursaute, gémit doucement et se met à trembler, trembler jusqu'à claquer des dents. (56-57)

The sticky sand-ejaculate that dries while maintaining a “goût salé” is also sweet and accompanies Solange's soft moans and trembles. The sand that Joséphin interprets in the same way as if he were describing semen acts as a nourishing aliment whose “crème de lait [...] [le] nourrissait” (22). Accordingly, the oceanic element of sand becomes symbolic of human sexual reproductive fluids that Joséphin consumes, which frames his relationship with the two powerless girls as predatory and alimentary.

The sandy underwater bed is also the physical location where Solange and Marlène sleep, as well as where Joséphin seeks shelter to escape from his own biological mother's

abuses. Joséphin, as a human/eel monster seemingly enamored by the taste of human ejaculate, manifests a sexual attraction towards humans despite being a nonhuman, monstrous creature. Joséphin's attraction toward Solange and Marlène is queer because it foregrounds a nonnormative sexual dynamic between a human/fish monster and two humans—a one-sided trans-species affectual interchange strictly from Joséphin's perspective. As Mel Chen notes regarding the queer erotics of trans-species interactions:

[Human-animal] mixings [...] participat[e] in an animacy hierarchy by exercising a kind of substitutional, horizontal logic of species displacement (altering kind), intervening with the slower, largely lineal place of the sexual reproduction of species. (129)

Joséphin's queerness is exemplified by his trans-species hybridity that combines human and eel forms. Through such a monstrous hybridity of human and nonhuman, Joséphin nourishes and drives his sexual morbidity to extreme limits. He successfully uses rape and murder as vehicles preempting any form of sexual reproduction with the two underage children. Any possibility of lineal, trans-species reproduction through the presumed exchange of ejaculate between Joséphin and one or both of the children could entail insemination and childbirth. Because Joséphin murders both children after raping them, such potential reproduction is made impossible. Furthermore, as Chen explains, the ocean serves as a site of "queer animality" wherein human-animal transmogrification and sexual aberrances unfold in a "proper location of animals" that undercut "human typological]" categories (128, 129). This queer, oceanic space in *Joséphin* allows for sexual exchanges to transpire, including the most abominable between monsters and humans. In Chen's logic, Devi's queer ocean transcends the typological categorizations traditionally defining oceanic creatures precisely because Devi's ocean is home to a completely fictional eel/human monster maintaining a sexuality. An added element to such a queer ocean is Joséphin's peculiar, sexualized relation to the maternal. This maternal influence not only frames Joséphin's relationship to his own humanness, to his child victims, and to the ocean, but also illuminates the motivations behind his prurient proclivities on the ocean floor.

Joséphin's mother, whom he calls Marlyn Moro despite the lack of physical resemblances with the American sex symbol Marilyn Monroe, is a prostitute residing in Case Noyale. She is subjected to the physical dominance of her male clients, which remains a source of fixation for the young Joséphin. The feral child's bed is in direct physical proximity to his mother's, and he bears witness to the numerous acts of prostitution in which her mother and male "tontons" partake. Using infantile language, Joséphin makes note of the small cardboard separator between his bed and his mother's: "[J]'en ai toujours eu beaucoup des [sic] tons-tons à travers la cloison de carton ondulé qui sépare mon lit du sien" (16). Joséphin recounts an episode when he was three years of age in which he remembers innocently attempting to fondle his mother in the way of one of the "tontons." Both his mother and male client violently beat him as a consequence of this action:

j'entends le tonton du jour qui dit 'donne-moi tes' puis 'donne-moi tes' et le lendemain, elle est debout devant la table de la cuisine [...] avec pas beaucoup de vêtements dessus, je suis venu derrière elle et en souriant pour lui plaire parce que hier elle avait l'air contente quand le tonton lui a dit ça elle a ri [...] mon visage juste à la hauteur de ses, c'est rond moelleux chaud doré j'oublierai jamais ça sous sa robe [...] la plongée dans quelque chose d'immense et de dense et de si rond [...] j'ai dit [...] 'donne-moi tes' et puis 'donne-moi tes', mais. La gifle m'a fendu la lèvre en deux. Ça a fait une grosse giclure de sang sur elle et par terre. [...] Il [Le tonton] a cassé la bouteille sur mon crâne. J'ai couru sans pleurer jusqu'à la mer. (17)

At three years of age, Joséphin is unaware of the sexual request implied when he intimates the word “fesses.” Innocently repeating the male client’s request to see her naked buttocks, Joséphin embraces his mother’s rear to feel a sense of security and peace. His mother’s client subsequently injures Joséphin, rendering the child unable to gain any form of physical affection from or proximity to his own mother.

Rejected by his prostitute mother, Joséphin immediately seeks solace in the ocean into which he descends while transforming into a human-eel monster. He notes the healing quality of the maternal ocean upon entering the sea: “Très vite la mer a lavé et cicatrisé mes blessures, [...] la mer était entrée en moi” (19)⁷. Although such a therapeutic ocean offers Joséphin an outlet within which the waters temporarily erase his scars, the ocean remains a space for his sexual imagination to disseminate widely. In particular, Joséphin takes pleasure in having eels explore his body. He further imagines engaging in vorarephalic relations with eels under the sea:

[L]es anguilles [...] se sont glissées partout pour m’explorer et qui m’ont pas fait mal, pourtant elles auraient pu, elles auraient pu me mordre et me laisser tout saignant dans la boue et me manger bout par bout mais elles l’ont pas fait, [...] je les tue juste pour manger pour devenir un peu comme elles [...] enfants de la même mer. (59)

Joséphin proceeds to kill, masticate, and ingest the eels after envisioning the possibility of eels eating him after exploring his body. Joseph Santiago notes the paraphilia relating to the desire of passive ingestion, which can lead readers to ascertain Joséphin’s fixation on ingestion as a sexual fetish. Santiago explains:

Vore [...] is the fetish for the act of eating [...] even being eaten or swallowed whole. [...] The same primitive part of the brain that controls the want and need to eat [the hypothalamus] also controls sexual arousal. (104)

Associating such sexualized eels as “enfants de la même mer,” which can also be read phonetically as “mère,” Joséphin discloses his desire to eat his eel-siblings. In so doing, Joséphin commits a “hard vore”-inspired fratricide while under the protection of a seemingly maternal ocean. Yet paradoxically, such a maternal ocean—one that gives the impression of being a protector for the feral child—is the site where Joséphin’s rage reaches a paroxysmal threshold. With an uncontrollable rage and unhealed by his oceanic mother, Joséphin ultimately imagines the morbid murder of his own biological mother. Accordingly, Joséphin has two mothers at this point in the narration: (1) Marlyn, his abusive biological mother; and (2) the ocean, his pseudo-remedial, figurative mother.

Truly “fou” and having been subjected to his biological mother’s violence, Joséphin imagines committing an act of matricide on Marlyn. In this regard, returning to see his mother, Joséphin takes her life—along with the life of her male client—with a sharpened seashell:

elle sourirait et m’accueillerait et recevrait mon cadeau mon étoile ma nacre, mais quand je suis arrivé elle était là ivre abrutie idiote d’alcool il y avait un homme qui lui faisait je sais pas trop quoi [...] il lui faisait comme sur un cadavre, alors mon coquillage pointu tranchant, je l’ai planté et je l’ai enfoncé et j’ai lacéré et j’ai tranché d’abord dans le dos de l’homme [...] tellement il était gros c’était laid cette graisse que les entailles offraient au regard puis lorsqu’il est tombé j’ai continué sur elle, trancher ses yeux pour pas voir ce vide [...] de ma mère. (82)

7 The paronomasia *mère/mer* becomes especially pertinent when considering the maternal signification of the ocean.

Joséphin elects to use a seashell—a synecdoche of the ocean—to induce the gruesome murder of his own mother. This act of matricide transpires in a dream sequence, blurring the porous boundaries between Joséphin’s imagination and his realities. Yet, despite the seemingly cryptic nature of the matricide transpiring within this dream sequence, the implication is that Joséphin did murder his mother and her client because they cease to reappear in the narration. The blurring between dream and reality becomes particularly salient when the feral child moves toward murdering his kidnapped children whom he proceeds to rape⁸. In this regard, Joséphin dreams that both children “vomissent encore et encore sur [lui],” which leads the feral child to beat and rape them before their subsequent demise. Joséphin notes: “[J]e [les] frappe encore et elles crachent du sang [...] je [les] défonce et elles font exploser leurs organes” (84). Awaking from what he thinks was seemingly a dream on the heels of murdering his own mother, Joséphin remarks the remains of the two children who lay dead next to him:

Corps désacrés, massacrés, font eau de toutes parts. [...] [L]eurs bouches dévorées. Pénétrées, profondément, par la mort. [...] La mort est entrée ici, je sais pas comment, est entrée en elles dans leurs cuisses écartées, dans tous leurs orifices, pendant que je dormais. Je n’ai rien su, rien entendu. (86)

The juxtaposition and sequencing of both scenes involving a matricide and a gory child murder under the sea reconfigure the ocean as a queer, abject space in which signifiers of the maternal are placed in contiguity with interlocking signifiers of death and aberrant sexuality.

Abject M/Oceans: Vore and the Necrophile

For Kristeva, the abject entails the separation from one’s mother and positions the mother (and that which is maternal) into the realm of death, defilement, and the repulsive. Kristeva notes that the necessity to sever one’s relationship with the mother acts as a vital step towards identity formation. Kristeva advocates for a relationship with the mother that is paradoxically matricidal and erotic:

Matricide is our vital necessity, the *sine-qua-non* of our individuation, provided that it takes place under optimal circumstances and can be eroticized—whether the lost object is recovered as erotic object [...] or it is transposed by means of an unbelievable symbolic effort, the advent of which one can only admire, which eroticizes the other [...] or transforms cultural constructs into a “sublime” erotic object. (*Black Sun* 27-28)

Joséphin kills his biological mother Marlyn with a seashell in an act of matricide within his imaginative dream sequence. Before murdering his mother, Joséphin laments that he was unable to “remplir” the emptiness of his mother after offering her his “nacre”—a species of erect mollusks heavily resembling a phallus while underwater (82)⁹. Joséphin prefigures the erotic undertone of the “nacre” earlier as he watches Solange and Marlène sleeping and explains that he would offer the children “nacre” from which they could taste fish sperm or “laitance de dame-béri [...] [ce] liquide précieux au goût fade ment âpre [qui] leur donnera de la vigueur” (55). The visual juxtaposition of the children

8 Because the primary manner in which Joséphin manifests his sexual attraction with Solange and Marlène is through rape, the act of rape becomes for Joséphin a queer mode of sexual engagement because rape foregrounds a nonnormative sexual practice that, as Sharon Marcus notes, “engenders a sexualized female body defined as a wound, a body excluded from a subject-subject violence” (397). As such, Joséphin’s rape converts both children’s bodies into corporeal wounds that problematically channel, nourish, and satiate his sexual aberrancies.

9 The shells containing sharp ends are commonly known as *Pinna nobilis*, which are endemic to the Mediterranean and Indian Ocean regions.

drinking fish sperm (“laitance de dame-béri”) from an erect clam (“nacre”) codifies the clams as phallic proxies.

Joséphin is the object of sexual abuses from his own mother while residing in Case Noyale, and Joséphin purposely seeks refuge in an ocean that he regards as one that “berc[e]” and “guéri[t]” (21). Joséphin notes that his mother would

ven[ir] inspecter [s]on corps et [s]a tête, toucher [son] oreille qu’elle avait mordue un jour; [...] elle explorait sa douleur sur [s]on corps, [il était] son livre d’histoires [...] elle se cherchait bêtement sur [le] corps [de fils]. (21-22)

These forms of implied sexual abuse to which Joséphin’s mother would subject him as a child give rise to Joséphin’s murderous retribution as he uses his piercing clam to murder his mother. Strikingly, because Joséphin cannot use his *own* phallus to gratify himself, he must resort to using a phallic clam as his own phallus to murder his mother in order to become physically and emotionally liberated. The usage of such a clam-phallus—an overlapping of the oceanic with male genitalia—infuses sexual signifiers into death: the child’s symbolic penis lodges into the mutilated maternal corpse. In this queer interpretation, Joséphin’s phallic defilement of his mother’s abject, lifeless body renders him a symbolic necrophile vis-à-vis his own mother. Patricia MacCormack notes the specific queer(ing) relation between those who engage in necrophilic actions with deceased, mutilated bodies:

[T]he possibilities of affect fold the corpse as [an] active entity with the necrophile in her/his openness to being affected and [to] create new affective possibilities within the corpse through experimentation with the limitlessness of the corpse. (MacCormack)

Because Joséphin mutilates his mother Marlyn’s body with his clam-phallus, the affective relationship towards his mother is queer since it blurs the nonnormative sexual boundaries between dead/alive, child/adult, and son/mother. Marlyn’s existence ceases to maintain any form of signification for Joséphin. Serving as an “experimental matter,” a corpse becomes evacuated of any mutually beneficial sexual signification (MacCormack). However, a corpse does allow for new, morbid engagements of sexual affect to channel within the necrophile, pushing the corpse violator to “unheard of becomings” and “fearsome involutions” (Deleuze and Guattari 240). Joséphin is finally able to attain Marlyn’s flesh after his former, childish attempt of grasping her buttocks in the presence of Marlyn’s male client. Yet, Joséphin’s necrophilic defilement of his mother is short-lived. The new affective possibilities for the feral child-*qua*-necrophile allow him to shift his queer interaction with his deceased mother onto the two children who later become his next sexual victims.

Joséphin projects his deferred sexual, abject desires toward his murdered biological mother onto Solange and Marlène. As such, both children are immediate recipients of Joséphin’s maternally influenced, necrophilic affect. Joséphin heavily eroticizes Solange whom he would “lèche” and indulge in the child’s “liquide de paradis” (84). Joséphin additionally comments on her alluring eel-like nature: “Solange, [...] elle est venue tout de suite comme ça elle a glissé comme une anguille de sa roche glissé [...] vers moi” (30). Killing both his mother and Solange (as well as her sister), Joséphin recognizes that his purpose in life is to die by vorarephilic suicide by the very creatures that provide him with a source of sexual pleasure. Referring to eels, Joséphin declares: “Ça met du temps à être dévoré, un grand corps d’homme. Les anguilles sont, elles, si petites” (88). Joséphin prefigures his deathbed earlier in the novel when he had found himself amidst numerous eels covering his body upon awaking: “[Q]uand je me suis réveillé au matin j’étais couvert en entier, entièrement couvert d’un onduleux tapis d’anguilles affolées par mon odeur de mer et de chair” (24). Joséphin understands that his identity and purpose involve

attaining vorarephalic sexual gratification by being eaten alive, which would place him more closely to an ultimate, liberating death. In this regard, Joséphin proclaims: “[J]e ne suis plus qu’un corps étranger, blessé, immobilisé” (87). Yet, despite his desire to become an immobile corpse, his humanness manifests in his own paradoxical embodiment of maternal qualities that—like the sea—are seemingly genuine but are in fact deceitful.

Joséphin embodies the role of a mother despite his violent murder of Marlyn and the children. Joséphin acknowledges that he seeks to protect Solange and Marlène from the cruelty of the world of his mother so that the children do not become like his own destitute mother. Notably, the images that Joséphin uses to describe his maternal relations to the children revolve around the images of food ingestion. For instance, comparing himself to a mother bird feeding her children, Joséphin says to Solange:

Et mes mains aussi elles sont vilaines, qui voulaient décortiquer un crabe pour toi toute seule et te le faire manger bouchée par bouchée comme une mère oiseau son petit [...] mais je vous ai maintenant, mes fillettes, mes bonbons, mes sucres d’orge, je vais longtemps vous regarder vivre et vous goûter de yeux parce que moi aussi, j’ai envie de bonheur. (65)

Allofeeding, or the transferal of one food item from the mouth of one bird to another, is associated with nourishing the recipient; but it also can act as courtship between two species of birds¹⁰. Although Solange and Marlène are kidnapped, they are also inheritors of a predatorial affect cloaked as maternal love, which is accentuated by Joséphin’s term of endearment for the children: “petites filles” (13). Even Joséphin regards internalizing Solange’s abject vomit as beautiful just as much as “le corps humain [...] lorsqu’il est mort” (77). The narration’s thematic of ingestion and expulsion foregrounds vorarephilia as a driving force behind Joséphin’s predatorial and alimentary desires.

In vore-related scenes in the novel, Joséphin is fixated on consuming his child victims, such as Solange whom he discloses his desire to taste (65). Such intake also includes sea creatures like shrimp that Joséphin would eat, including “le reste [...] avec la coque la tête les pattes et tout” (76-77). The most explicit creatures to which he passively subjects himself are the eels that devour him. Joséphin remains passive vis-à-vis eels while noting: “Je regardais [les anguilles] prendre possession de mon corps, explorer chaque surface, [...] je me raidissais en attente de la première morsure” (51)¹¹. The feral child later replicates the act of vore onto eels by ingesting eels as a form of nourishment:

je voyais poindre des petites gueules ouvertes aux dents fines, parfois tout près d’autres parties sensibles de mon corps, facile pour elles de me dévorer. [...] [C]e qui était resté en moi c’était leur odeur, cette odeur d’anguilles [...] qui m’a ensuite permis de les pêcher [...] quand je mangeais les anguilles, [...] c’est comme ça que je suis devenu un homme. (51, 55)

Joséphin’s passive engagement with masochistic experiences of being devoured by eels to the point that he consumes the very eels that slide on his body is noteworthy. The ocean—an ontologically abject, queer space in Devi’s novel—permits Joséphin to engage in vore as a paradoxical way to obtain masochistic yet emotionally-unfulfilled

10 Joséphin refers to the children as “voix d’oiseau” who make bird-like sounds, such as “pui-pui-pui” and “tchoutchoutchou” (62). He also later refers to them as “oiseaux” (80).

11 As noted earlier, Joséphin’s biological mother takes possession of Joséphin’s body above ground, while eels take possession of the feral child’s body in the ocean. These bodily possessions demonstrate how both maternal figures (i.e., Marlyn and the ocean) are inseparable from signifiers of sexual abuse. Accordingly, both maternal figures symbolically foreclose the possibility that the abused Joséphin could discover a true, loving mother.

nourishment. Accordingly, the ocean provides Joséphin with a false sense of autonomy while nourishing his vorarephilic desires.

As seen in virtual pornography catering to queer, paraphilic fetishes, vorarephilia oftentimes extends beyond humans and involves sea and alien creatures. Vorarephilic scenes may also transpire in aqueous bodies, such as oceans, lakes, or pools; however, vore is typically depicted as a land-based act. Joséphin's fetishistic and fatalistic attraction toward being eaten by ravenous eels aligns with the corporeal traumas inherent in acts of vore. Joséphin asserts in this regard: "[J]e suis. Le pêcheur fou, [...] l'homme anguille qui [...] se laiss[e] mordre par [l'anguille]" (70-71). The oceanic space allowing for the fruition of Joséphin's vore fantasies is not only abject, given Joséphin's predilection towards murder-rape, but also queer because it positions sea-creatures and humans together in a sexual relationship within a cross-species continuum. Nonhuman non-heteronormativity complicates models of queer agencies because numerous oceanic creatures, such as certain species of fish or coral, shapeshift their genders and sexualities, which is typically not the case among humans and other land-based animals (Roughgarden 34). Unlike queer theory models orienting around alternate kinship models and non-procreative sex, a new kind of queer vore model formulated in light of Devi's novel could potentially generate new visions into non/human relations. Such a queer vore theory between non/humans could take into simultaneous account the sea and its paradoxical maternal influences.

Susan McHugh offers a compelling warning to theoreticians who have sought to merge representations of nonhuman animals with humans to create a framework of queer readings:

Grafting humanistic theoretical models to queer and animal analysis risks a dangerous sort of endgame, one that brings nonhuman subjects into the conversation only by emptying out their particular significance, the embodiments in space and time of which they speak so eloquently. (165)

In *Joséphin*, the merging of eel and human forms to create a monstrous creature offers an important element to this article's queer reading of Devi's novel. The eel monster that Joséphin becomes—a "Zozéfin-zanguï" as he calls himself—is a child who finds his safety within the pseudo-maternal waters of the ocean (15). Yet, the negative affects engulfing the dejected Joséphin prompt within him the desire to murder his mother and the children. Kristeva posits the relationship between depression and violence in relation to the maternal: "[D]epression, like mourning, conceals an aggressiveness toward the lost object [the mother]" (*Black Sun* 11). The depressive state in which Joséphin finds himself is framed by both death and the vorarephilic. The ocean thus repositions Joséphin to align sexually with vorarephilia while he simultaneously pursues the false comforts of an ersatz mother underwater. In so doing, for the vorarephilic sea monster like Joséphin, the ocean fuels a sexual aggressivity inseparable from a perpetually lost yet recovered maternal object.

Devi's interspecies narration moves away from land-based manifestations of queer sexuality to the sea-world and allows Joséphin's vorarephilic queerness to unfold in an unstable environment. Such an environment parallels the instabilities in Joséphin's shapeshifting identities as both eel-child and matricidal rapist. As Jon Anderson and Kimberley Peters advance:

The sea is [...] unstable in terms of form (from still calm to waves), [...] and changeable in terms of its chemical state. [...] The water world is therefore in a constant state of becoming; it is a world of immanence and transience. The water world has a fluid ontology. (11)

The shapeshifting characteristics of the ocean, which Joséphin notes as a space that “règne” yet “cicatrise” and “fait peur” as a “monstre,” echo similar qualities that Joséphin exemplifies as a voraphilic eel-child (21, 23, 31, 79). In this regard, Joséphin notes: “J’ouvre mon royaume. [...] Moi. Vilain. Zozéfin-fou. Celui qui [...] éventre [les] sennes [des pêcheurs]. [...] [Il] faut dire que je fais peur. [...] Je suis un cadavre ambulante” (11, 69, 81). The ontological shapeshifting from human to sea-monster takes form within a geographic space that is ontologically fluid and queer. For Joséphin, the ocean acts as a liberational forum where his paraphilic desire to consume and to be consumed enables him to embrace matricide. In so doing, Joséphin recognizes that his place in life is paradoxically through embracing death. As Kristeva notes: “For a man and for a woman the loss of the mother is a biological and psychic necessity, the first step on the way to becoming autonomous” (*Black Sun* 27). For Joséphin, matricide (and by extension, the murdering of the children) drives him to find an autonomous freedom through his own suicide where, for the first time, the feral child “[ne] ressent[] aucune souffrance” (88).

Zanfan begne: Mauritian Eels and Child Abuse

Throughout Devi’s novel, readers see evidence that Joséphin deftly grooms and confines Solange and Marlène by employing language typical of that of a child abuser: “[M]es petites fées, [...] venez, venez, mes petites. [...] Vous resterez ici protégées de tout” (45). At Joséphin’s mercy, Solange and Marlène are rarely given a voice within the narration. Both children are passively silent, bemoaning their fate to each other as kidnapped victims; or Joséphin actively silences them by replacing their perspectives with his own. For instance, Joséphin often comments on their states of trepidation, which further fuels his desire to molest them:

[E]lles ont commencé à pleurer en se serrant l’une contre l’autre et ça m’a fendu le cœur. [...] D’ailleurs j’ai fait que danser [nu], je les ai pas encore touchées même si je voudrais bien le sable sur la jambe de Solange et les vaguelettes de graisse de Marlène. (58, 60)

The narrative window through which readers have access to Joséphin’s depraved world is controlled by the child rapist himself. Joséphin is aware that he is engaging with an external reader—namely, Devi’s readers who may be questioning Joséphin’s motives and justifications on why he captured the two children. After all, Joséphin accosts readers in the beginning of the novel: “Vous raconter maintenant? Oui, peut-être” (15). A recipient of Joséphin’s tale, Devi’s reader thus becomes a co-participant in Joséphin’s “literary Mauritius.” Joséphin is noticeably quick to clarify that his monstrous eel nature contrasts from the perhaps non-monstrous eels with which readers may be more familiar: “Anguilles. [...] Zozéfin-zangui, oui, comme ça aussi on m’appelle. [...] [M]ais moi, j’ai des crocs des griffes des ongles” (15). Joséphin is not only aware of his own corporeal monstrosity differing from the protective eels that he seeks to find, he also implicates the reader with a knowledge of his kidnap and subsequent abuses. Accordingly, the reader remains in close proximity to Joséphin who renders fluid the barrier between (1) Joséphin’s underwater universe and (2) the space outside the narration within which the reader resides.

In this manner, readers access Devi’s underwater world as extradiegetic witnesses to Joséphin’s crimes. Readers also bear witness to the most frequently observed fish in the narration that becomes a physical extension of Joséphin’s body: eels. Within Mauritian shamanistic practices, eels take on an important spiritual signification. Devi cogently rebrands the eel figure as a predatorial entity in the novel, whereas Mauritian spiritualism has traditionally regarded eels as protective creatures. As Maya De Salle-Essoo affirms, there exists a traditional Mauritian practice integrated within the country’s spiritual tradition called *zanfan begne* whereby a baby is bathed in a small tub filled with an herbal

tea made from *dilo ant de*—water taken from the mouth of a river that irrigates into the ocean (92). The child is placed within this herbal water along with a living eel during which time a Mauritian enchanter or “longaniste” recites incantations. The enchanter proceeds to make a small wound on the child’s arm before applying a curative cream to complete the ritual as the eel circles around the child. As De Salle-Essoo notes:

Ce rituel de protection est effectué contre les agressions extérieures morales ou physiques, ce rituel ayant pour but de rendre l’enfant invincible et le protéger des dangers. Ce rituel marque d’ailleurs l’entrée de l’enfant dans la communauté afro-mauricienne. (92)

This protective visual in which a child is placed alongside an eel—a physical proximity evocative of Joséphin and his eels—is replicated but rendered perverse within Devi’s narration. Joséphin’s eels become a corruption of the traditional Mauritian eel used in protective ceremonies, particularly considering that eels were highly regarded and plentiful in the ocean areas surrounding Mauritius (Hollingworth 17).

Devi repurposes this image of the protective eel to advance her narration within which readers can uncover social criticisms deftly camouflaged as metaphors. Ritu Tyagi notes the strategic use of intertextual rewriting within Devi’s writing:

Devi rewrites the ancient folktale of love and sacrifice. [...] [She] uses Hindu myths and folktales in her works, as they play a pivotal role in the Indo-Mauritian culture. [...] This convergence of myths and folklore with reality [...] [allows] Devi [...] to revisit them, scrutinizing the role of submission and passivity they imposed on women. (*Ananda Devi* 171)

Joséphin illuminates the metaphorical representation of female violence through Solange and Marlène, and Tyagi rightly suggests that the reader’s attention should consider how Joséphin intervenes in granting agency to these two girls who are symbolic of “all female teenagers who resemble Marlène and Solange” in the face of violence (*Ananda Devi* 55). Yet, of equal import to analyzing gender in *Joséphin* is considering the variables of *age* and *type of victimizations* with which Marlène and Solange are associated. Namely, Marlène and Solange are adolescents who are raped under the patina of a monstrous tale revolving the interactions between an eel-child and two children who die in his hands. A nuanced reading of *Joséphin* that considers these two variables reveals that Devi’s interspecies narration qualifies both children and their subsequent abuses as metaphors of child rape in Mauritius.

In an interview in which Devi is asked why she “almost exclusively write[s] about the most powerless beings in the world, children and women abused in a patriarchal and violent environment,” Devi responds: “My need to go toward the most destitute comes from the necessity of being concerned for my characters, to push them to their farthest limits, until they understand who they are” (Stillman 24). Devi also notes the cruel nature of her novels influenced by Mauritian society thus, “There is in Mauritius a latent violence that we do not necessarily perceive as a stranger” (Priya 252). Devi’s home country of Mauritius has long had a dark history involving the sexual exploitation of children. Studies from the UNICEF/WHO and other organizations indicate that large demographics of children between 11 and 13 engage in prostitution in multiple areas of Mauritius with an estimated total of 2,600 victims of child rape in 2004 (Bureau of International Labor Affairs 2004). Their abusers would include lawyers, ministers, and members of the Mauritian Parliament (Ackbarally). In a report appearing three years prior to the publication of *Joséphin*, the Working Group on Contemporary Forms of Slavery notes that in 2000

the existing legal provisions on child prostitution were inadequate to effectively prosecute child sexual exploitation, and there was insufficient police resolve,

capacity, and sensitivity to intervene in cases of child prostitution. (Bureau of International Labor Affairs 2003)

These statistics and reports appear around the publication of not only Devi's *Joséphin*, but also Shenaz Patel's *Sensitive* (2003)—two rare examples of Mauritian literary works that explore highly taboo themes of child rape and abuse. That *Joséphin*—a sexually-abused child—is used to advance a metaphorized narrative of child abuse underscores the cyclicity of uncontainable child sexual violence. Devi has typically harnessed her novels around thematics of colonialism, female violence, and prostitution that pertain not only to Mauritius, but also to other areas of the world, including Great Britain¹². In *Joséphin*, Devi carefully replicates the social vices of Mauritius and of all nations plagued by child sexual abuse within her fictional literary universe unfolding primarily under the ocean. In so doing, Devi's mobilization of fiction—a genre allowing abject social, sexual, and affective abasements to propagate—creates an all-too familiar closeness with dark social realities lying outside her novel.

Conclusion

Joséphin exposes the disturbing reality of child sexual abuse carefully folded into a narrative involving human/animal sexuality, vore, and abjection. This narrative reconfigures the traditional Mauritian ritual of *zafan begne* by perverting the eel figure that normally symbolizes protective qualities. *Joséphin*'s eels traverse what can be qualified as a queer ocean; and such an ocean facilitates a reinterpreted understanding of how the ocean's fluid ontology—from its tidal flows to shapeshifting characteristics—mirrors *Joséphin*'s physical, affective, and sexual instabilities. *Joséphin* is unable to gain the emotional nourishment he seeks from his own biological mother, which forces him to turn against her through a highly symbolic, sexualized act of necrophilic matricide. Throughout the novel, vore acts a way for *Joséphin* to obtain a false sense of nourishment and emotional satiation through his queer interactions while assuming his hybrid human-animal form. By fusing signifiers of death and sexuality, particularly in relation to sexually abused children and the maternal, Devi offers a critical commentary on the alarming realities of child rape in Mauritius. Devi's implicit commentary on child rape culture endemic to her "literary Mauritius" extends to any nation beset with child sexual abuse cases. Like a maternal embrace, Devi's ocean not only encloses Mauritius in the manner of a protective muse, but also offers "real Mauritius" an expansive horizon toward a better future.

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12 Devi elaborates further on this point in an interview in 2015: "I am not only talking about Mauritius in my books, I am talking about human beings who happen to live in Mauritius and who could be from anywhere in the world" (Zuckerman).

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