This volume by Felicity Hand comes as a ground-breaking, and first book-length, critical study on the work of the Mauritian author Lindsey Collen. From the introductory section to the conclusions, the book engages the reader in an analysis of Collen’s fiction and succeeds in bringing to the surface both the politics and poetics underlying her œuvre. Hand also unveils for the reader the major concerns and literary strategies informing the works of Lindsey Collen in a manner that parallels, to a certain extent, the latter’s narrative style inasmuch as she ushers us into a communal triangular bond, in which she becomes the mediator between the reader and Collen’s fiction.

The degree of complicity required to achieve the creation of this bond — and therefore, our understanding and appreciation of the novels of Lindsey Collen — is successfully accomplished through Hand’s effort to enhance our knowledge of the Mauritian context in which Collen writes and which serves as a setting for her work. Indeed, it is precisely this exuberance in Collen’s depiction of the locale, by means of her numerous references to Mauritian culture, history, geography, customs and cuisine, along with her resort to Creole vocabulary on multiple occasions, that Hand sees as one of the accomplishments of Collen’s fiction. According to Hand, this inclusion of local elements contributes to the presentation of Mauritius as a mosaic ensemble of religions, ethnicities, languages and cultural influences which models the views and attitudes of Collen’s characters and immerses the reader within the richness of the local Mauritian context. In her exploration of Collen’s work, Hand offers us a double-sided view of this aspect, asserting that this abundance of local references “demand(s) a certain degree of intellectual commitment and effort on the part of her readers, but they are rewarded in turn by a refreshing repositioning as regards our postcolonial world” (Hand 2011).

Accordingly, Hand devotes part of her Introduction and the whole of Chapter One to providing a brief, though highly informative, overview of the recent history of Mauritius, as well as offering an insight into the socio-cultural and political situation of the country. This certainly helps to comprehend the themes, attitudes, tropes or scenes present in Collen’s novels. In keeping with this, Chapter One also introduces Hand’s accurate coinage of the term *clethnicity*, which becomes one of the pivotal concepts in her analysis. By means
of this new category, Hand attempts to transcend the binary opposition between class and ethnicity that, according to her, “seems so much to hamstring Collen’s work” (Hand 2010: vii). Hence, it reflects Collen’s view, according to Hand, that it is impossible to identify clear-cut categories within the highly heterogeneous nature of Mauritian reality, particularly “the inescapability of poor economic resources being identified rather too closely with ethnic essentialism” (Hand 2010: 21). This notion reinforces one of Collen’s chief purposes in her narrative, the promotion of a blurring of boundaries and divisions based on class, gender or race.

The next five chapters deal with the critical analysis of the five novels in English published by Collen up to 2010.1 From the outset we find a commitment towards honesty and a remarkable aspect of Hand’s study is its distancing from the type of scholarly study which fails to critique authors, tending towards hagiography. Thus, in her discussion of Collen’s There is a Tide, Hand points out the flaws in the first novel of an author who struggles to make her work an instrument of political action while still being in the process of finding her own literary voice. In fact, the commitment with honesty is double-sided, as she also observes Lindsey Collen’s own awareness of these weaknesses in her work, which she acknowledges in the “author’s note” preceding her narration. As Hand remarks, in There is a Tide (1990) Collen attempts to present a utopian society as the ideal order to which Mauritian people need to aspire and strive to reach through their action. However, Hand contends, she fails to provide a reliable link between this desirable reality and the past which is to be rejected. The author does not, however, underplay the relevance of this first novel by Collen in the whole of her oeuvre. Despite the inconsistency or apparent lack of solidity in the ideological scaffolding of the narrative, Hand argues, it succeeds in anticipating some of the elements that will be at the core of Lindsey Collen’s fiction and political activism, such as the philosophy of femihumanism, the rejection of fixed categories of class, ethnicity or gender, or the essentiality of preserving the plurality and hybrid nature of Mauritian identity. Likewise, some of the central literary techniques and motifs in her later novels —including the resort to a stream of consciousness style, the presence of triads of characters linked together to epitomize the multifarious nature of Mauritian life and society, the palimpsest quality of the text and its interaction with other narratives and the motifs of food or the cyclone as polysemic tropes— are highlighted throughout this discussion inasmuch as they set the bases for Collen’s vindication through fiction.

Hand’s discussion of Collen’s narrative seems to gain particular solidity in her analysis of The Rape of the Sita (1993), the book that plunged Collen into the limelight after she was awarded her first Commonwealth Prize (the second arriving in 2005, with her novel Boy). Prior to the discussion on The Rape of the Sita though, Hand affirms her commitment

1 As Felicity Hand announces in Chapter One, Collen’s sixth novel in English, The Malaria Man and her Neighbours, was published in 2010 (2010: 2). In this new novel, Collen makes an allegorical use of the illness to unveil the parasites that continue to exist in our society. Likewise, she perseveres in her purpose of calling the working classes to action for renewal and social change (Groëme-Harmon 2010).
to the denunciation of the symbolical ‘rape’ of the author through the coercion of her liberties as a writer and political activist. Paradoxically, while the novel is a condemnation of the injustices of a dictatorial system trapping women within a form of contemporary slavery, Collen is at the same time a victim of a similarly oppressive order, as a consequence of which she was accused of blasphemy and her novel was depicted (in Mauritius) as an intolerable offence against Hindu religion and tradition. The similarities with the case of Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses* on its publication a few years earlier, in 1988, and the controversy it provoked are also brought to the fore. This brings the reader, probably familiar with Rushdie’s case, much closer to Lindsey Collen’s plight. With Collen having found her voice and style with this novel —and thus having become capable of communicating her message and purposes more efficiently— Hand devotes herself to unveiling Collen’s ultimate intentions and insists on her idea of the novel as being, rather than a blasphemous depiction of religion, a celebration of religious tolerance “by deliberately (con)fusing the ethno-religious origins of her characters” (Hand 2010: 63).

Hand succeeds in revealing the central literary strategies that lead to the very kernel of each of the novels analyzed. In *The Rape of Sita*, she draws attention to Collen’s use of intertextuality as a means of modeling her reproof of patriarchal oppression and her presentation of the maimed reality of Mauritian women. In this regard, Hand underlines the confluence of certain literary traditions in Collen’s novel —namely, a reinterpretation of Hindu mythology, folklore tradition and canonical Western texts, such as T. S. Eliot’s *The Wasteland* or Shakespeare’s *The Rape of Lucrece*. Simultaneously, the regressive nature of trauma and the impossibility of hiding or burying it are also pointed to.

The focus upon women, as Hand observes, is more patent in Collen’s third novel in English. In this respect, the author highlights Collen’s call for communal solidarity among women in *Getting Rid of It* (1997) as a means to overcome the injustices of a patriarchal and eminently classist society. Again, Hand applauds Collen’s mastery in combining literary artistry while conveying a political message. The return in this novel to one of Collen’s pivotal motifs, the triadic element, to subvert established notions of binomial categories proves here, according to Hand, to be especially convenient insofar as it is linked to the call for female unity recalled by feminist struggles for collective bonding and complicity among women in contexts such as Suffragist Britain.

Through Hand’s revision of *Getting Rid of It*, we come to appreciate Collen’s actual degree of commitment with the socio-political situation of Mauritian people —and more particularly in the case of this novel, with the adverse reality of women in this context. Accordingly, the author of this volume skilfully draws attention to some of the most significant aspects that account for this political pragmatism in Collen’s novel, one of which is the all-enveloping decentralizing philosophy that operates in the narrative. This occurs not only at a thematic level —the plot being focused upon the disposing of the corpse of one of the three women protagonists’ miscarried foetus, which is equated with notions of fixed gender roles for women. Additionally, at a constructive level, the strategies in *Getting Rid of It* are similarly raised upon the politics of the erasing of gender or class
boundaries and the promotion of communal action. In this sense, as Hand notes, Collen prevents all of her characters from emerging as privileged voices, although they may, on certain occasions, serve as spokespersons for her own ideas (Hand 2010: 107).

A strong point of this volume, aside from the visibilization of the ideas lying at the core of Collen’s fiction, is the author’s dexterity at decoding the significance of recurring images and motifs. In her analysis of *Mutiny* (2001), Hand revisits the motif of the cyclone, which she had dealt with previously through her examination of *There is a Tide*. Her conclusions lead her to a re-reading of the image of the cyclone as a symbolical leveller of social classes and categories insofar as it represents a destructive and inescapable force for everyone, irrespective of social or economic status, gender, ethnicity or religion. Likewise, on the grounds of its devastating power, the cyclone, Hand signals, epitomizes the possibility of renewal, of the new beginning Collen desires her readers to fight for.

The volume includes a chapter on the author’s latest novel at the time of publication, *Boy* (2010). Hand underlines how this novel perseveres in the issues Collen has been concerned with throughout her literary and political career. Thus, beneath the *Bildungsroman* tale of Krish, the young protagonist, we continue to delight in the discovery of Mauritian cultural and geographical singularity, as well as being invited to believe in the power of communal action and the need to collaborate to achieve the collective aim of social and political change. Anny-Nzekwue (2005) also highlights this aspect in Collen’s novel: “Here Collen’s position is made clear: There must be a determined cooperation from everyone — cooperation in the form of a push or a shove — in order that Africa can be set free from the rut. *Boy* may be a psychological novel, but it does not hide its political bent”.

Hand completes this in-depth exploration of Lindsey Collen’s narrative in English with a chapter in which she states the final conclusions of her analysis. This section is certainly helpful, as it offers a well-defined summary of the main points in Hand’s discussion, and a vivid portrayal of Collen’s fiction. Hand’s unveiling of the work of this author as a political instrument, with a pragmatic function towards social change, along with its determined call for collaborative action, are restated here. We are also reminded of the femihumanist perspective from which the reading is approached and which — as has been demonstrated throughout the volume — becomes particularly useful for the study of Collen’s novels. Hand also persists in her desire to bring to the surface the aesthetic value of the narrative framing the political content of Collen’s *oeuvre*, which she essentially defines as “a strong and earnest political commitment transmitted through a powerful poetics” (Hand 2010: 6).

This volume’s revision of Lindsey Collen’s novels in English comes as an undoubtedly illuminating and enriching overview of the work of an author who, as Hand very aptly shows us, beyond past accusations of blasphemy and offence, succeeds in taking us closer to present Mauritian reality through her effort to elicit communal solidarity and social transformation. At the same time, we are invited to enjoy the cultural wonders of a land which, blessed with the paradisiacal conditions of its geography, aspires to improve its social and political order. Thus, like the cyclone motif in much of Collen’s fiction, Hand’s work provides a refreshing approach to the novels, while simultaneously promising to
destroy certain earlier readings of the narrative and to bring about new insights into the
texts.

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