

Exploring distorted family values and representations through humour in David Jaomanoro's play *La Retraite* (1990)¹³

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Abstract

For all times, the family is at the basis of most society. It is the space where individual characters are built. However, in today's world, family values are undergoing some deep and drastic transformations that are affecting interpersonal relationships. Literature, in its role of social mirror, serves as a catalyst reflecting this ever-evolving society and projects our humanity at its best or its worst. In his play, *La Retraite* (1990), Malagasy writer David Jaomanoro chose the lens of absurd humour to reveal his vision of the distorted values that are gnawing at the core of the Malagasy family. He delivers a sharp socio-economic, political and cultural critique of a corrupt society through the combination of a dynamic set of characters, a surreal plot and a peculiar narrative presence designed to produce some tragi-comic effect.

Introduction

Borrowing Bergson's theory on the communal nature of humour and its use as a tool for denunciation, Sophie Chassat reminds her readers of the rather serious social role attributed to laughter and humour in times of crisis. Contrary to the assumed lightness they would usually evoke, humour often serves as a gentle reminder that something is off.

Humour is far from laughter (...) humour was assigned a social function (...) that of a judge of appropriate social behaviour and that of redeemer as well... laughter carries a

¹³ Jaomanoro, David 1990. *La Retraite* in *David Jaomanoro, Oeuvres Complètes* 2017. Ranaivoson Dominique, Ed. Section 'Théâtre.' Paris: Sépia, pp.91-116

certain note of conformism. Laughter likewise keeps the group cemented... and it plays a cathartic role.¹⁴ (2015, 97)¹⁵

This something off is what we discover along the scenes of David Jaomanoro's social play where nothing goes as expected; social norms and representations are often blurred and murky. Fortunately, humour is there to help point out what is wrong and to patch up the humanist crisis and collective trauma that Malagasy modern society is currently undergoing. One may assume that Jaomanoro's choice to turn to humour in this play is first a reference to its role as judge, pointing out what is wrong within the Malagasy family. Most importantly, there is also the need for a catharsis; some healing power that art and literature can harness whereas the real-life situation may be worse and no concrete solutions are at hand. In an interview about his works, David Jaomanoro explained what he tried to achieve with this play with concise but intricate wording:

I tried to put into my theatre pieces an incantation, a wording that comes close to imprecation, so as to bring onstage a situation that is both debased and debasing through characters who are handicapped by a deep social fracture. (Ranaivoson 2017, 14)¹⁶

The following article will take us into the world of the play *La Retraite* (The Retirement) and the realms of a Malagasy society in crisis as we follow the conflicted and surreal situations into which the main characters find themselves. A detailed and vivid description of crude, yet subtle scenes where rationality does not hold a place lends a farcical aura to the whole narrative. We can cite as examples women giving birth at the town dump; a street where women are selling their babies along with tomatoes and other bits and pieces, printing ridiculously absurd prices on torn cardboard; a whole lineage living off scavenging and having built a fortune but still choosing to beg for a living etc. An analysis of the play's storyline and dynamic characterisation as well as the author's particular use of humour to create a tragi-comic effect will allow a critical overview of the Malagasy family and its underworking. Despite its light tone, this one-act play of twelve scenes is an open critique at

¹⁴ *Le rire n'est pas drôle (...) (on lui a assigné) une fonction sociale. (...) C'est un jugement qui sanctionne un comportement social inadéquat et qui a pour but de ramener dans le rang ... Il y a du conformisme dans le rire. (...) De même, le rire soude tout un groupe ... et il a également un rôle cathartique.*

¹⁵ All translations are by the author. The French or Malagasy original quotations are available in the endnotes.

¹⁶ *'Je travaillais dans ces pièces une parole incantatoire, une profération proche de l'imprécation, pour mettre en scène une situation dégradée et dégradante à travers des personnages handicapés par une fracture sociale profonde.'*

what the author considers as a consequence of a failing socio-political and economic system which he tried to capture through its smallest unit, the ruptured traditional family. The families showcased in the play are handicapped by some extreme lack, which hampers their interpersonal relationships as well as their humanity. They are all carrying their poverty on their skins and in their minds; parents and children, youth and ageing alike.

1. Humour as social criticism

As the play unfolds, the audience is presented with a shockingly vivid and realistic image of poverty but instead of addressing one's compassion toward this material poverty and lowly existence, attention is riveted to the characters' individual inner thoughts, the motivations behind their actions. The peculiarity of the play resides in the writer's way of appealing to the audience's pity and tolerance for the characters no matter how miserable they may be. He is calling unto the onlooker to direct criticism on what's happening, the circumstances, rather than on the characters who are only human.

‘This is my way of contributing to an ongoing social debate and to sympathise with those people who are running forward to find a better life, challenging their fate. I am not speaking on behalf of the politics, nor do I carry anyone else's voice. I only tell the facts as I see them happen, with my sensitivity.’ (Ibid.)¹⁷

The compassion carried in the author's writing voice produces a deep sense of tragic humour as one watches the characters react to and fight against their fate. Written in 1990, the play is heavily politicised in terms of denouncing social injustice and corruption. The title itself evokes an imaginary, idealised ‘retreat’ or ‘retirement’ from the world of non-employment and the never ceasing hustling it produces. The writer's opinions about the country's current political and socio-economic dead-end is echoing as a presence behind the sporadic narrative interferences where the father figure Rabezara shares his meditative thoughts. This man, who is one of the main stirrers of the play's plot, although he has failed at being a father authority for his own children; can hardly refrain from delivering a full-fledged sermon about this ideal retirement that all characters in the play are dreaming of. He thus sets the tone and rhythm of the play's ebb and flow.

¹⁷ ‘C'est ma façon à moi de participer à un débat social d'actualité que d'accompagner dans leur fuite en avant ces individus qui refusent leur destin, qui aspirent à un mieux-être. Je ne me substitue pas au politique, ni à qui que ce soit. Je relate simplement des faits, avec ma sensibilité.’

Jaomanoro's play displays two family patterns that are prevalent within modern Malagasy society. The first one is the Westernised model of the nuclear family with father, mother and children as main members. This pattern is represented in the play through the couple Rabezara and Bao with their three children: Lita, Zanety and Holy. From the outside, this family could be like any other modest Malagasy family where the parents are cohabiting with their son and two daughters, all students at the University of Antananarivo. However, an in-depth look at the relationship inside the family during the rare times the children happen to be around reveals some stark differences between the generations. Instead of the relation dictated by seniority that characterises most Malagasy homes, there is a clear sense of distancing and coldness in the children's disdainful attitude towards their parents.

The traditional code of conduct, based on an unequivocal respect for the elders, has been broken within Rabezara and Bao's home as the children grew to despise the parents and to express openly a disapproval of their chosen employment and related social status. Indeed, although the children want to look up to their parents, they find themselves lost in confusion as the life choice of the parents contradicts all the values and representations they have internalised. There is an obvious contradiction between what they learned to be true - notions of hard work and ethics, principles of meritocracy and individual contribution to society, *Fihavanana* and solidarity, social justice and so on - and what they are seeing and hearing at home. This contradiction in conceived and lived values produces a latent confusion leading to self-disavowal and a feeling of un-belonging in those young people. As is the case with many Malagasy youths, they have trouble fitting in the society they live in. The son, who holds a particular place within the home as the only male child, uses the privilege of this position to disregard his parents and belittle his sisters on every occasion he opens his mouth. The daughters, however, given their assigned subordinate status within the family, seem to be moderate and less direct in their rejection of the parents and their job as scavengers (Sc.2, 97). Moreover, the children are not the only ones who feel distressed by family life. Bao, the mother, is also constantly complaining about the fact that nobody in the home pays attention to her. Her husband distributes 'hugs and caresses to a complete stranger' but does not even have a single gesture of tenderness for her (Sc.3, 100); whereas her children lets her toil day and night without lifting a finger (Sc.3, 105). The exchange between the family members and their reaction at Ravao's arrival in the home (95-97) reveals how none of the relationships inside the family circle is functioning healthily. There are no clear boundaries as to where

each member belongs nor what a family is supposed to bring to an individual. Mishaps appear here and there, some more obvious and impairing than others.

The growing tension within individual families is slowly disparaging the Malagasy society. Many members of the older generation are often heard complaining about the falling out of the obligation of mutual care and the respect due to the elders in today's modernised life. Likewise, a growing number of young people feel bridled by the community's silent rules and duties. The invasive presence of the group that sometimes overshadows individual selves is creating a cleavage between different philosophies of living. 'One's whole life is spent within a succession of communities that are going to leave unshakable imprints on one: the large family or the clan from which one springs, the village where one lives, and the ancestral tomb which will constitute one's final home upon death'(Urfer and Rajeriarison 2010, 69).¹⁸ The community and the family may remain the only referent for many older people but in the eyes of the younger generations, who have enjoyed the illusion of individual freedom through their access to other life styles, the family structure can become a prison from which it is quite hard to escape. Many people rather shun the relationship based on mutual duties and responsibilities they associate with the extended family and choose to associate with people they feel closer to. There seems to be more sense in striking a form of social ties with people one shares values and interests with rather than maintaining good relations with people one barely likes because of ancient alliances, a shared past history and ancestors or blood ties. '(...) Family ties are maintained essentially for convenience but do not bring much in terms of human value. Albert has developed a network of family from here and now... Individual well-being, self-realisation, have become some primary elements of his identity building.' (Crenn 2013)¹⁹ These words express what many contemporary Malagasy tend to think. They give priority to their individual well-being rather than in the pressure of society's judgement or the fear of losing face which dictated their ancestors' behaviours. The shift in family structure and the related values that keep the institution together renders the family of choice, closer to the heart, even more attractive and appealing in terms of attachment.

¹⁸ *Toute son existence se déroule à l'intérieur de communautés successives qui le marquent de leur empreinte durable: la grande famille dont il est originaire, le village dans lequel il vit, le tombeau des ancêtres qu'il rejoindra après sa mort.*

¹⁹ *'(...)Les relations familiales sont essentiellement de l'ordre de la convenance et qu'elles n'apportent rien au point de vue humain. Albert développe un réseau familial de l'ici et du maintenant ... Le bien-être individuel, la réalisation de soi, deviennent des composantes primordiales de (son) identité.'*

This is what happens to Rabezara's children as the influence of higher education and global culture have detached them from their roots. The children are so taken by the outside world that they rarely come home. They would even stay indefinitely on campus if they did not have to come home now and then to ask their parents for money. They explain their indifference with the shame they feel towards the parents' job scavenging that appears to be neither respectable nor reliable.

Lita: Easy to say! You're not the one who has to fill those information sheets. Occupation of parents? Scavengers. And from now on: beggars! What a progress! Can't be better! And shame, don't you know any shame?

Rabezara: Let me just ask you one question: who is signing those damn sheets of yours, at the end of the day? Han? And who is the one who puts some banknotes into an envelop without which you'd all be ex-university students for long? Han? Who? (...)

Zanety: Listen, dad...our family can largely manage with the rent from the two unoccupied rooms plus our scholarships. Why humiliate us by keeping this disgusting job? (Sc.2, 97).²⁰

Urfer and Rajeriarison in their writings on Malagasy culture mentioned *henamaso*, the fear of losing face in the eyes of society to be the utmost humiliation for the Malagasy. It lies behind most social performance and pretence (2010, 72). There is among Rabezara's children the need to assert their individuality by expressing loudly their views about the parents' lifestyle. In Lita, this individuality is shown through disrespectful words towards both his parents and sisters (Sc.3, 99). The children's attitude reflects the need of the youngsters to live a less constraining family life. This modernised notion of "commodified human relations" (Urfer and Rajeriarison 2010, 72) is for many social thinkers and the author one of the most obvious disruptions brought by globalisation on human societies. The young people are tired of listening to the elders without being listened to in return, of bowing down when those with

²⁰ *Lita: Facile à dire! Ce n'est pas toi qui remplis les fiches de renseignements. Profession des parents ? Fouille-poubelles. Et à partir d'aujourd'hui: mendiants! Quel progrès! De mieux en mieux! Et la honte, c'est pour qui hein?*

Rabezara: J'ai juste une question : qui est-ce qui les signe au bout du compte, tes fiches d'emmerdements? Han? Et qui est-ce qui glisse dans l'enveloppe les billets sans lesquels il y a longtemps que vous seriez des ex-étudiants? Han? Qui? (...)

Zanety: Ecoute, papa...la famille a de quoi vivre avec le loyer des deux pièces que nous n'occupons pas et nos bourses d'études. Pourquoi nous humilier en faisant ces travaux répugnants?

authority do not act in a way to deserve respect. They are seeking some semblance of independence and freedom of action that the traditional model of relation cannot provide.

It is first a rejection of all social constraints in the name of individual wellbeing: a legitimate demand which also constitutes an open door to extreme individualism; the signs of which are already multiplying. Left on its own, the younger generations are giving up on traditions and customs, the meanings of which they ignore because they have not been transmitted to them. (Urfer and Rajeriarison 2010, 73)²¹

However, there seems to be some dissonance in these youth's need for change. They resent their parents' occupation but do not shun from their financial support. The father and mother often remind them of this simple rule of mutual care and duties that govern most relationships, and obviously that of parents and children. The ones who take care of the expenses usually get the right to make the rules (Sc.5, 104).

The second pattern that we get to observe in Jaomanoro's play is the single parent family with mother and kid(s), which has become quite a common sight as many men abandon their children. Ravao and her newborn daughter Anjara represent this pattern in the play and many others who are not named. We learn about Ravao's story as the couple Rabezara rescues her from delivering her baby on top of a mound of garbage and welcomes her into their home (Sc.1, 94). Like many naive girls of her age, she fell in love with an unscrupulous man and got pregnant without any prospect of marriage. Actually, her lover ran away the moment he heard about her pregnancy, leaving her alone to face her parents and her ordeal. As expected, the family which is rather conservative and religious, did not give her any chance to explain; nor did any member of that family offer her some help or a solution. Whereas the family is supposed to be a refuge, a haven of safety, here it plays the role of a disruptive element as it drives one of its members onto a destructive path. Kicked out mercilessly, Ravao finds herself alone in the streets with its dangers; struggling with the fear of a new and unwanted motherhood but also the solitude and sorrow of having been dumped: '(...) this baby again and my empty hands, no support, no job, alone... what am I going to do?'(Sc.12, 115).²² Lost in the middle of her disillusion of a sham love, her disappointment only intensifies with an

²¹*Elle est d'abord un rejet de toute contrainte sociale, au nom de l'épanouissement personnel: revendication légitime, mais aussi porte ouverte à un individualisme forcené dont les signes annonciateurs se multiplient. Livrées à elles-mêmes, les nouvelles générations abandonnent des coutumes dont le sens ne leur a pas été transmis.*

²² '(...)encore ce bébé sous les bras, sans soutien, sans travail, seule...mais qu'est-ce que je vais faire?'

unsupportive family. Not knowing what to do nor where to turn to, she naturally loses trust and faith in humanity. Although Ravao meets good-hearted people to help her at the darkest time of her life, not all abandoned pregnant young women are as lucky in reality. The author suggests that many of the women with kids who are invading the streets of the capital somehow started with a similar or a close story. In addition, he points to a social order that is quite unjust towards women, the ones who will be judged harshly and excluded whereas leaving the men who shared in the ‘crime’ scot-free: “Do you really think that the world would stop turning for a couple of misers like us? (...) I’m telling you: some people are partying while others are crying. That’s life, That’s the ways of Men...” (Sc.12, 115).²³

The play serves to highlight how both family patterns have been disrupted by either the corrosion brought by poverty, despair and greed for money; or the social sickness provoked by a generalised loss of culture and tradition. In both cases, family values are losing ground, and something confused and dysfunctional has come to occupy its place as a socio-cultural unit. This situation calls for a renewal of the traditional values, of some refreshing that would allow younger generations to re-appropriate their cultural identities.

2. Family values in crisis

The play *La Retraite* is a choice layout for observing the evolution of Malagasy family values through time and individual perception. The author’s meticulous work on the characterisation, paying attention to small details, allows an in-depth overview of the effect of the setting, the corrupt society, on the major characters. Despite the fact that the play does not make a direct reference to globalisation, the influence of a globalised world through a devastatingly corrupt system, combined with a growing acculturation in the youth is evoked as the source of the disruption of the family unity. ‘This thing (corruption), as you say, takes on new faces according to the time, the places, but all in all it remains the same.’(104)²⁴ Most of the characters are lost, struggling with some inner turmoil as they try to appraise a disconcerting world.

The feeling of confusion that the protagonists are prey to has shaken up all social relations between members of the same community. The values of mutual respect and care enclosed in

²³ ‘Penses-tu que toute la terre va se mettre en deuil pour une poignée de misérables comme nous? (...) Je te le dis : les uns s’amusent pendant que les autres pleurent. C’est ça la vie, c’est ça l’Homme...’

²⁴ ‘Ce truc (corruption), comme tu dis, prend de nouveaux visages selon les époques, selon les localités, mais c’est toujours le même.’

the concept of *Fihavanana* that is at the core of Malagasy traditions are fading away and losing ground within individual lives. Traditionally, keeping good relations within the clan and the village or larger family used to define the Malagasy's world.

Malagasy identity is essentially enfolded inside the intensity of the social relations, which form its major characteristic, for better or for worse. Those relations, moulded on the model of the nuclear family is what *Fihavanana* consists of. Hence, keeping good relations is a priority and everything else comes second to that harmony of relations. (Urfer and Rajeriarison 2010, 71)²⁵

People would rather be at a disadvantage in a negotiation and lose financial benefits than break or endanger the family ties. However, modern life has impregnated other priorities, material needs, into the daily lives of individual families that made them turn to more self-centred values.

Considering the play, the particular notion of gratitude comprised in the *valim-babena* (return of care) as main value dictating the obligation of younger and stronger members of a family or community to look after the elders once they are too weak to fend for themselves is completely obliterated by the youths. The children of the couple, Rabezara and Ravao, are old enough to think for themselves, they are shown as being more critical rather than grateful towards their parents. As there does not appear to be any attachment or a real emotional bond between the parents and their children, they do not feel any duty or obligation of concern. The father attributes the children's lack of affection and insolence to the fact that their minds have been tainted by the Westernised ways they learn in books and through television. 'I wonder what they learn at school. In my days, we learned to count and to speculate very early... well, to live, you know. Otherwise, we would still be a colony by now. Where is a Nation that does not educate its youth heading to?'(Sc.2, 97)²⁶ Whereas the mother keeps repeating as an excuse that they are 'just children who do not know what they are doing.'(97)²⁷ She still hopes that they can change as they age and become more mature. The distance between parents and children has grown so large that even the internalised representation of each

²⁵ Elle [identité Malgache] réside essentiellement dans l'intensité des relations sociales qui en constituent, pour le meilleur et pour le pire, la caractéristique majeure. Et ces relations se calquent sur le modèle familial, ce qu'exprime le Fihavanana. Entretenir de bonnes relations est donc primordial, et tout lui est subordonné.

²⁶ 'Je me demande ce qu'on leur enseigne à l'école. De mon temps, on apprenait très tôt à compter, à spéculer... bref, à vivre. Sinon, je vous jure, on serait encore une colonie à l'heure où je vous parle. Mais où va un pays qui ne sait pas éduquer sa jeunesse?'

²⁷ 'Ce ne sont que des gosses, ils comprendront plus tard.'

member of the family along with their respective roles have also shifted. Although the parents are still considering their offspring as their most valued wealth or *voalohan-karena* (Randriamasitiana 2015, 53), their failed upbringing made them realise that they can no longer count on their children in their old age as their own parents did before. Some parents, however, like Ravao's companions, have shaken off this emotional preciousness of a descendant and have turned to a monetary way of valuing their kids. Some babies are given up for adoption while young children are given for work against a monetary amount; and some even less fortunate are exchanged against food or goods such as a watch, a house or a car (Sc.11, 113). Seen as 'dead weight' (114) the un-desired children are only considered for the profit they could bring in alleviating the mothers' hardships. Likewise, in the image of their peers, Lita, Zanety and Holy do not see in their parents the guiding light of wisdom or '*masoandro amam-bolana*' (the sun and the moon) who are to guide their inexperienced feet throughout the paths of life (Randriamasitiana 2015, 53). This distorted representation of roles has thus built a wall between people of older generations and youths beyond the usual generation gap; leading to tension and even ruptured family relations.

Most issues related to the loss of traditional values and cultural meaning associated with the family seem to spring from and proliferate in urban areas. This is because the sacredness of the ancestors and the pressure from the prevailing social rules assigning a tyrannical authority to the elders no longer hold where people have been divided into smaller units of lodgings. Unlike in the village where everyone lives within the same family house around the family tomb and in the premises of family lands, people living in cities are more prone to rebel against the pre-established order. In his essay on the de-structuring of Malagasy culture, Sylvain Urfer refers to urban areas as 'the appointed place for the birth of new networks of solidarity that will come to replace or even to surpass the bonds sustaining the large family or the clan. These networks create new forms of belonging, a sense of civic ownership that would naturally take over the values of a *Fihavanana* which will inevitably die out if it stays chained within the family sphere.' (2012, 33)²⁸ People in big cities tend to break free from the big family patterns and form their own networks of social support. Malagasy Journalist and columnist, Na Hassi (2019) joins him in this vision of a shifting social order as they both put forward the emergence of different forms of attachments and groups in place of the traditional family pattern. Shared affinities and trust rather than blood ties cement the groups. Both

²⁸ *Les villes sont le lieu privilégié de l'éclosion des nouveaux réseaux de solidarité, appelée à suppléer, voire à supplanter, ceux de la famille étendue. Par eux, se crée un sentiment d'appartenance civique, appelé à récupérer les valeurs d'un Fihavanana voué au dépérissement s'il reste enfermé dans le réseau parental.*

writers are quite optimistic as to the positive effect of this new family, more liberal and inclusive in essence, onto the wellbeing of each individual member. However, Jaomanoro does not seem to share this bright vision as shows the almost apocalyptic portrayal of Malagasy reality and future in the play. Although he has left some questions unanswered which allows some space for speculating, the ending of the play does not leave much alternative for a hypothetical good ending. The future of the next generation that the baby Anjara carries in her assigned destiny never seemed to be so uncertain. This dark fate is the result of a rupture in the transmission of values and traditions, which no longer holds because people are too poor to worry about other things besides finding their daily plate of rice. Poverty has even erased the very meaning of family solidarity. The preciousness of their descendants to parents and the respect for the elders have disappeared along with the traditional family. The play's plot development helps the audience appraise the irremediable consequence of a corrupt and impoverished State on its population. Poverty and hardships have slowly but surely undermined the base of the Malagasy society by distorting the family values upon which the cultural identity is grounded.

3. Poverty impeding on intergenerational transmission of values

The play demonstrates through its plot the extent of the ravages that poverty is causing to the core of the family as a social institution. Poverty prevents people from undertaking their traditional responsibilities and by extension impinges on their sense of belonging to the larger family while grooming a sense of guilt, failure and shame. Moreover, barely making ends meet also makes individual households more aware of their material possessions; taking the place of traditional kinship and the will for mutual assistance. Both Urfer (2012) and Crenn (2013) deplore the negative impacts of deep impoverishment on the Malagasy family structure as its members are wholeheartedly immersed in the struggle to "keep a decent life".

Some individuals are cut from the family unit not by choice but out of circumstances. They are cast off after bringing shame and dishonour to the family name.

Yes. I did try to turn to two or three very close relative, but they closed the door on my face with the same old tune: I am a dishonour to the family; I dragged their name into

the damps; I am a lowlife girl. Some even added that the best I can do would be to go die far away from their homes... (Sc.2, 95)²⁹

This goes to show the rigidity of family rules, rendering it obsolete and merciless in the eyes of its excluded members. Ravao, for instance, was in complete distress when the Rabezara couple rescues her and helps her deliver the baby. This scene is one of the rare moments in the play where the audience can glimpse a lingering touch of humanism in the poor characters. They demonstrated a compassionate nature that is rather lacking in most well-off urban folks. Despite their own difficult situation, Rabezara and Bao did not hesitate to help Ravao when they learned about her story and took her in their home, contrary to her own people who chased her out when she most needed help and support. Somehow, they see in this abandoned girl, their own children who have drifted away from them.

You're Zanety's age. In you, it's Zanety that I see nursing. I can see myself, staying by her side, my heart melting, telling the young child stories from my youth. They would be inventions, of course, but who cares! What matters is to feel good amidst your own people and to live a life that you have chosen and deserved. (Sc.5, 104)³⁰

Rabezara here wants to play the role of a father and grandfather by endorsing the role of a storyteller, one of the many buckles in the chain of lifecycle and intergenerational transmission of knowledge and culture. However, the chain of transmission often finds itself broken where family members no longer look after one another and care is interrupted. Indeed, when home and family are considered as the space where individual members are to find protection and support, members can be excluded and rejected for reasons as abstract and hard to conceive as honour or failure to show compliance. This part of the play somehow shows how superficial and shallow the much-acclaimed family unity can be. It quickly fades away in the face of hardships; painting the institution as non-reliable. The family mainly holds an oppressive image to the disillusioned members who are bearing with its tyrannical rules without feeling its protective shade.

²⁹ *'Si. J'ai essayé deux ou trois personnes très proches, mais c'est la même chanson qui revient avant qu'on me ferme la porte au nez : je déshonore la famille ; je traîne leur nom dans la boue ; je suis une fille de rien. Certains ont même ajouté que le mieux que j'avais à faire, c'était d'aller crever loin de chez eux...'*

³⁰ *'Tu as à peu près l'âge de Zanety. A travers toi, c'est Zanety que je vois pouponner. Je me vois auprès d'elle, attendri, en train de raconter à la petite des histoires de ma jeunesse. Inventées, bien sûr, mais peu importe! L'essentiel c'est de se sentir bien au milieu des siens, vivant une vie que l'on a choisie et méritée.'*

In place of family solidarity, there is now suspicion and distrust. We can take as example the loss of trust and consideration that family members show towards one another. Indeed, the fact that their parents are at the bottom of society in terms of social and moral worth pushes the Rabezara children to despise them. Here, Jaomanoro alludes to the fact that monetary gain alone cannot redeem an individual's worth and place within a given society. Indeed, even if Rabezara and Bao's family lineage has managed to build some fortune throughout the years by scavenging and begging, the singular and unconventional way they have made this fortune annuls its value and merit in the inflexible eyes of the community. Due to their heritage, the couple can now provide a rather comfortable life to their offspring including building a big house and sending them to the university. The parents are quite proud of this achievement as they call themselves the 'hereditary beggars' (Sc.2, 96) and do not dream of any different way of living. Being a beggar has become so much part of their identity that they are contemplating transmitting this *employment* to their descendants (97). However, to illustrate the unfairness of a system of values that only reward those it approves of; the author highlights that an acquired fortune does not necessarily change the social status of an individual. The Rabezara are still 'nobody' because they do not fulfil the required conditions.

Rabezara : (...) How many times do I have to tell you that these things are not for us? We're not on the right side; it's for the others, these.

Bao : But we TOO are the others!

Rabezara : Those others are the Mercedes, the Bmw, the Pajero, the Ford, the lunatics, the giants, the small-backed, the long-armed, the top-hatted! (*He catches his breath*) But us... You, what are you? (...) Because you think people listen to beggars? You do believe that people will bother to look at some litterbugs? (Sc.1, 92)³¹

The earned money did not earn the expected consideration and recognition as deserve any other hard-working people who would have made a way up the social ladder. Moreover, the children are undergoing some serious psychological issues of self-loathing and rejection. They do not want to be related to the debasing and lowdown life of the parents. If they could, the children would cut off their parents without much regret. None of them are willing to be

³¹ Rabezara : (...) *Combien de fois faut-il te répéter que ce genre de chose n'est pas pour nous? On n'est pas du bon côté ; c'est pour les autres, ça.*

Bao : *Mais nous sommes AUSSI les autres !*

Rabezara : *Les autres, ce sont les Mercedes, les Bmw, les Pajero, les Ford, les fous, les grands, les petits-dos, les longs-bras, les hauts-chapeaux ! (Il reprend son souffle) Mais nous... Toi, qu'est-ce que tu es ? (...)* *Parce que tu crois qu'on écoute les gueux? Parce que tu crois qu'on daigne regarder les pouilleux?*

seen in public with either father or mother, nor do they want their classmates to know where they come from or where they live.

In many instances within the play, social mobility and recognition are the primary motivations behind individual and collective actions. Besides trying to escape the hardships of poverty itself, the family is also the place where dreams of achievements are formed. It is natural for parents to wish their children to attain a better life than the one they have lived. The author reinterprets in the opening scene the often-cited Malagasy saying: ‘only fools grow to be the exact same as their fathers.’ (*Ny adala no toa an-drainy*) (Sc.1, 91).³² Therefore, even if they cannot take care of their traditional duties toward the ancestors, parents will do all they can to ensure their children’s future. Indeed, many families still believe in the power of good education, especially higher education, as the most secure way to go up on the social ladder (Randriamasitiana 2015, 62). This is the reason why the couple Rabezara have struggled so much in providing an education to their children even if their job is far from rewarding. Their children’s main asset is the fact that they did graduate from high school and are now going to the university (Sc.1, 92). The couple was so absorbed in ensuring a “correct” life to their three children that they totally obliterated their other socialising duties and representative roles. They have failed at the most important part of their parenting as per the traditional education system. They did not transmit to their children the meaning of the family and the clan, the weight of the ancestors’ blessing and the respect due to the elders. They only taught their children to make money and to buy a social status through financial achievements. On the opposite side to these parents, there is Ravao who, although she educates her child alone, is giving her extra care and attention. Jaomanoro describes with empathy how she showers Anjara with ‘infinite tenderness,’ covering her with her fading blouse³³ so that she does not catch cold (Sc.6, 107-08). Her inexperienced gestures are already impregnated with a mother’s abnegated love despite her young age. In order to lull the child to sleep, she even chants a heart-rending lament poem where she evokes the tragic possibility of losing that precious life she has been entrusted with: ‘I wasn’t prepared for this / But never could I take feeling her light die out in my arms.’ (Sc.6, 115)³⁴ This goes to say that a good education does not only refer to things that require financial means.

³² ‘*Est insensé qui ne fait pas mieux que son père.*’ (Traduction de Jaomanoro)

³³ ‘*...un souvenir de chemise*’

³⁴ ‘*Je n’y ai pas été préparée / Jamais je ne pourrai la sentir s’éteindre dans mes bras.*’

Like many parents, the anonymous single mothers that people the streets of the play (Sc.10-11) hold their children as the most precious of beings, '*menaky ny aina*' (life's essence), '*anaka andriamaso*' (the apple of one's eye). Nevertheless, the hardships of life and poverty have broken their souls to the point where they can only focus on surviving. Although the woman who talks to Ravao is aware that giving her child away for 'three hundred francs' (112) in order to feed herself is an aberration; she is also despairingly realistic in accepting to live with the ensuing guilt and regrets. 'I acted without thinking...driven by hunger. (...) I feel that my life will never be the same again. Tiana was my only treasure, my child, my blood!'(Sc.12, 114)³⁵ She carries the sickness somewhere in her mind like a curse. The scene where the women are fighting with the track-drivers who came to confiscate the illegal goods they are selling, along with the babies, depicts their extreme despair and powerlessness (113). Families are too busy fighting the chronic poverty - the majority is living under the poverty line that education is put second. They have to admit that they have failed to play their roles of carers and protectors toward their offspring as they failed at keeping the chains of transmission of values and cultural tradition alive. As Randriamasitiana observes in his article, when the parents are too absorbed with fending for the family, scraping bits and pieces of money here and there for food and clothes, unemployed and unable to provide an adequate education to their children; they will also start to neglect traditional practices (2015, 61). The more they move away from the clan and the large family's authority, the more they will forget about ancestral duties and practices. Hence, their children in turn, never having been taught those traditions, will erase them from their lives.

4. Absurd humour as statement for a needed change

Jaomanoro illustrates most changes operated at the level of the family unit that are present in this work through the use of dramatic effects such as an appeal to over-exaggeration in the characters' reactions or an unexpected turn of events. He has recourse to subversive humour in order to highlight what he considers as serious cleavage within the political and socio-cultural spheres. The whole play can be read as a statement on the impacts of deep poverty on people who are left at the hands of corrupted and scheming leaders and an uneven wealth distribution.

³⁵ '*J'ai agi sans réfléchir...poussée par la faim. (...) Je sens que ma vie n'aura plus de sens désormais. Tiana était mon seul bien, ma pupille, mon sang!*'

Rabezara's affected smartness that we discover through the narrative pauses where he delivers his meditations on life provides a cutting-edge analysis of the Malagasy society. These rather lengthy sharing of thoughts constitutes one of the most remarkable technical aspects of the play and punctuates the rhythm of the narrative. They carry a light tone that alleviates the complexity of the subject at hand. To illustrate, let us consider the following:

- Going out in the middle of the afternoon to come back only in the late evening. Then prepare whatever you've found, so that it's edible... That's work, isn't it? Tell you what: real work is when everyone is laughing at you. It's nothing like sitting in an air-conditioned office for two hours, dictating letters to a pretty secretary... (103)³⁶;
- The idea of surrendering to the street was really great, don't you think? A true revelation: no need to be a minister, a doctor, a witch doctor, an undertaker... The thing was to destroy yourself to be better. To get dirty to shine. One must get dirty; life does not befriend clean people. It's the law of the quagmire now. The more you get bogged down, the higher you fly. The greatest one is the dirtiest of all. (110)³⁷;
- People have become so blind that it sometimes takes an axe to open their eyes to the reality of their own street. Their own reality. (111)³⁸

Whether he talks about society, education, life in the streets or poverty itself, the sarcastic note of bitter realism never falters. Even if the thoughts are at times disorganised and somehow resemble the ramblings of an old man on the verge of retiring, their effect can be quite disturbing for the audience. They point out indiscriminately to what is wrong within our society but we are trying to turn a blind eye to. This hypocritical attitude is also seen in Rabezara himself. He keeps lecturing the audience about human dignity and yet, is ready to use all possible dirty tricks, such as faking blindness, to entrap the compassionate souls that happen to pass by his beggar's stall. This practice is what he calls 'setting up office' for the day's work and 'throwing the net' (111) to catch the naïve passers-by with his performed misery. Ravao is the one who points out that he too is a crook and a scum at his own level

³⁶ *Sortir vers le milieu de l'après-midi et ne rentrer que très tard dans la soirée. Ensuite préparer ce qu'on a trouvé, de manière à le rendre comestible... Ce n'est pas travailler, ça? Je vais te dire une chose : le véritable travail, c'est quand tout le monde se moque de toi. Rien à voir avec le fait de rester deux heures dans un bureau climatisé à dicter des lettres à une jolie secrétaire...*

³⁷ *Elle était vraiment formidable l'idée de se confier à la rue, tu ne trouves pas? Une vraie révélation : pas besoin d'être ministre, médecin, sorcier, croque-mort... S'anéantir pour être mieux. Se salir salement pour briller. Il faut se salir ; la vie n'accepte pas les gens propres. C'est la loi du borbier maintenant. Plus tu t'enlises, plus tu voles haut. Le plus grand, c'est le plus sale de tous.*

³⁸ *Les gens sont devenus tellement aveugles qu'il faut quelque fois une hache pour leur ouvrir les yeux sur la réalité de leur propre rue. Leur propre réalité.*

(Sc.8, 110) despite his big talks and accusations of corrupted political leaders. He too feeds on the system and its disruption. The author's choice of comic effect is verging on the absurd and the farcical given the disturbing nature of the theme that does not allow for any real amusement. In any case, the author's aim could be to raise awareness through applying a shock rather than in flattening out the bumpy surfaces.

Another comic aspect of the play is the timely effect of Rabezara and Bao's couple bickering. The play portrays them as an old couple cemented both by deep trust and by knowledge of each other, albeit love. They are mainly staying together because of habit and weariness than an enduring attachment. Nevertheless, the couple is almost endearing to the audience as we see them in both the most compassionate and human actions as well as in their weakest or darkest sides. They can perform some noble act as they took Ravao and her baby into their home; and were ready to take care of her, feed and cure her when she or her baby was sick (Sc.8, 109-110). But they can also be at their lowest as shows Bao in her abuse of her husband and her faked jealousy at his getting closer to a younger woman (100, 105). Still, despite all of the insults that infuse their daily routine and the mutual condescendence, the couple has the most solid relationship in the play. When most couples break apart in hard times, these two people have drawn their strength and grounded their home and family on the poverty that is defining and shaping their whole lives and beings. They chose street life because it is what suits them the most and thus, have accepted society's mockery. However, they are also making their own rules.

It's in the street that we keep up with the beats of time. The street is the heart of man, it is the true face of society. (Sc.5, 103)³⁹ ; I don't take anything from anyone: they give it to me. And then, I only take back what I am owed. All my life, I've been robbed, swindled, stripped, skinned, pumped, sucked... It is only fair and just that I should get back what was robbed from me. (Sc.8, 110)⁴⁰

Even if they are beggars for the outside world, they consider themselves as any other ordinary employees with valued knowhow and experience to share. That is why they evoke their right to ask for better treatment and consideration, paid vacations and a retirement. Their world is a microcosm within the wider Malagasy society and it is only possible because of the general

³⁹ *'C'est dans la rue qu'on se met au pas du temps. La rue, c'est le cœur de l'homme, c'est le vrai visage de la société.'*

⁴⁰ *'Je ne prends rien à personne: on me donne. Et puis, je ne fais que reprendre mon dû. Toute ma vie j'ai été volé, escroqué, dépouillé, écorché, pompé, sucé... Il est juste et équitable que je reprenne ce qu'on m'a volé.'*

state of corruption and rupture of that society. Overall, they are just a couple trying to make their best to survive and to provide their family a better life. They do have shortcomings but are not less humane or deserving of attention. They embody the Malagasy parents who are somehow caught in between their duties and responsibilities towards their children and the pressures of society and its preconceived notions.

Conclusion

David Jaomanoro's play *La Retraite* shows the primal importance of the family as a major social unit for identity building and culture preservation within the Malagasy society. The play reveals through the protagonists' interpersonal relationships that transformation is an inevitable effect of development; and thus, no culture or society can remain static. Along with a fast evolving world economy, the traditional family structure is bound to evolve in order for it to fit into a new global scene. The family patterns that we have followed throughout the play, both the single parent and the nucleic one, are undergoing some in-depth transformations. However, the play's tone also reminds us that there is no certainty nor any fatality when it comes to the future. Indeed, although the ending of the play has left some open door as to how each character will fare from that point of rupture on; the thin consciousness that is still holding the characters up allows some hope for a positive scenario. It is true that some characters have not moved at all: the old Rabezara couple does not seem able nor willing to change their habits; neither is their spoiled and ungrateful son Lita willing to see beyond his own comfort. So are the un-named single mothers on the streets who have given up on redeeming their lost souls. However, some characters are displaying an interesting development: the two sisters, Zanety and Holy, who are beginning to open their eyes and gaining awareness on the realities of their world have learned compassion and tolerance towards both their tyrannical brother and the stranger who has come to seek refuge in their home.

In spite of the rash possessiveness and jealousy of Bao toward her husband, the time spent with the Rabezara made Ravao realise that there can be a different family from the one related by blood. A family that represents a sustained form of mutual support and understanding. A new form of cohabitation formed by people sharing the same fate and walking towards the same goals as showed the many poor souls peopling the streets of the capital. The author seems to hang on to that fading light of humanity and consciousness to rescue and redeem the

distorted Malagasy family values. He alludes to the fact that the family pattern may undergo some inevitable changes but that does not prevent its core to survive and thrive. Whether individuals are evolving within a nuclear family or a community of varying form: foster family, family of like-minded, family of friends, refugee community, shared house family... its main function remains socialisation. The roles assigned by traditional society to each member of the family are currently changing; nevertheless, the family can remain a space where it feels natural for individual beings to seek the love, comfort, security and support that they need in order to grow and face the vicissitudes of life.

Ravao herself is reconsidering the value she gives to her daughter. What she represents to her eyes is expressed in the name she chose. 'She will be called Anjara. She is my fate, my share.'(Sc.4, 102)⁴¹ Anjara's presence is for Ravao a constant reminder of the life laid ahead of her, of the fact that she needs to be stronger from now on in order to endorse her role of mother. The closing scene shows that she is ready to fight for the new family she is about to start. All she needs is a chance to do her best. The last scene shows a hesitant Ravao who is about to abandon her baby, feeling too exhausted and down to struggle on; but at the same time feeling the weight of regret already gaining her (115). The uncertain fate of Anjara foreshadows the unknown but not necessarily tragic future awaiting the young Malagasy Nation and its growing distance from its forefathers' world. The future is heavily dependent on Ravao's inner strength and motherly concern as she will decide what education and what family she will give to her child. The traditional family pattern is fast changing but it is up to the youth to find their own place and draw their own future. There is a general shift as to what is keeping the family together as well as the values associated to it. A new setting that calls forth new ways of adapting and coping. The old belief that one does not choose one's family is starting to lose meaning as it has become possible to form new bonds that go beyond bloodline or kinship. A form of bonding and cohabitation that gives a relative space for individual expansion and growth. Still, the question remains as to whether it will be able to assume the basic functions that the traditional family used to fulfil.

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