

Shenaz PATEL

From the novel *Le silence des Chagos*

This is an extract from *Le silence des Chagos*, novel published in 2005 by Editions de L'Olivier-Le Seuil, France.

In this novel, Shenaz Patel gives voice to the story of the Chagossians, a small population deported from its native archipelago of the Chagos, in the Indian Ocean, in the years 1960-70's, in the wake of British decolonization.

Formerly, the Chagos were part of the Mauritian territory. But when Mauritius, British colony since 1810, asks for its independence from Britain, the latter decides to retain the Chagos archipelago. To rent its main island, Diego Garcia, to the US who want to establish a military base there. In fact, given its strategic position in the Indian Ocean, Diego Garcia will become one of America's main military bases, offering control over the Middle East. And it's from there that will fly the B52 planes that will bombard Afghanistan in 2001 and Irak in 2003.

The Americans asking for a virgin island, the British will "get rid" of its population, cynically described in an official note as "a few Tarzans and men Friday." That population, never informed of what was happening, was consequently taken away from its archipelago in two waves: the first one consisted in encouraging them to go to Mauritius for holidays or healthcare, and preventing them from going back. The second one took the form of a boat on which were embarked by force the remaining inhabitants.

The Chagossians were dumped in Mauritius with barely a thing, and still nowadays live in difficult conditions and fight for the right to go back to their birthplace. *Le silence des Chagos* tells their quelled story.

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Mauritius, 1968

The sky shook on that day. A drum's skin hit from the inside by a strong and invisible hand. Yet the air was pure, just a few clouds tattooed on the infinitely blue canvas. But Charlesia was ready to believe in thunder. Here, nothing made sense. Everything was so different from there. Even the sun seemed misplaced. It always appeared late, over the row of roofs, and disappeared behind the mountain early in the afternoon, shadows rising from the earth, like a muffled murmur that numbed the light. You forgot its existence well before it set. She had a persistent impression of dusk in full noon, since she was here. Only the heat, suffocating, imposed the conscience of daylight.

- Listen! Listen! The cannon!

The surrounding housing estate had started bristling with an intensity more pronounced than usual. With her cap of pink and blue curlers on her head, her generous bosom threatening anytime to burst open the buttons of her faded dress, Miselaine had appeared on her doorstep.

- You heard, you heard Charlesia? The independence cannon...

Yes, Charlesia heard the cannon, and so what?

In the dry and dusty yard, the children, like bickering birds, strung out their high-pitched refrain: Mau-ri-tius inde-pen-dence! Mau-ri-tius inde-pen-dence!

No way to escape from the noise. Here, anyway, you could never be in peace. Such a silly idea to build an estate against the hillside! The compact basalt bulk concentrates and reverberates everything, the coarse sun of this scorching midday, the overbearing shouts of the children, the hollow shots of the cannon, threatening in the still atmosphere.

She searches for her own children, among this cloud of grasshoppers who bounce about on their skinny legs, waving small red-blue-yellow-green flags. Marco and Kolo are there, screaming like the others, even a little higher than the others, throwing pebbles against the rusted metal sheets that shield the last houses from the muddy canal running down the mountain.

Mimose is sitting a little further down, against the wall. The clanging of the pebbles must be shattering her spine with its metallic reverberation. But she doesn't move. She keeps her head lowered, forehead stubborn, and looks at them from below, a cutting edge of defiance and reproach in her black pupils. She's been like that since they arrived here. And nobody seems to be able to brighten her up.

Here she just shut down, like these oil lamps which swallow their flame on a brief turn of screw. She kept to herself, closed up, Charlesia tried to no avail to rub her back, like they did over there with recalcitrant tortoises, nothing could make her take out her head which she kept obstinately retracted between her shoulders. She looked at them, from afar, not even indifferent, on the contrary, with an attention nearly unbearable, that they felt weighing on their back, a borer which drilled through their skin, causing an embarrassment to leak out, for which they resented her and kept her even more at a distance.

Charlesia looks at her. She senses, behind her twisted gaze, the souvenirs which hop away in her little head. She must convince her to eat, she's become so skinny, but what will she give her? The heat has turned rancid the remains of yesterday's meal. She herself shouldn't have eaten it. She now feels bloated and full of acidity. Over there, they had fresh food in abundance, they never ate the same meal overnight. They had choice. And they didn't need money to eat.

Over there they had the sea. It was everywhere. In their back, under their eyes, the inside sea, the outside sea, harmonizing their caressing rhythms to protect and cradle the horseshoe that made up their land.

- You heard Charlesia? Come listen! The independence cannon!

They insist, these busybodies. Of course she hears! Who could escape in this enclosure where all the sounds rebound in a reversed echo, which resounds crescendo. She feels like she has her head in a drum on which they bang, bang, bang, unendingly, the taut skin absorbing the blows and diffracting them, exploding them in short waves which force their way upon the membranes of her tympanums to smash against the walls of her skull.

Charlesia straightens up. There's too much noise here. The air is too thick in this estate. All this mass of corrugated steel which imprisons and solidifies the heat, this shrill music overflowing round the clock from insomniac radios, these trafficked mopeds that crackle and backfire like asthmatic hens, sputtering vapors that cramp the lungs, the overbearing heat that chases sleep, this promiscuity which makes you feel like you have the whole development under your roof.

She walks into her small cabin, seizes her red scarf lying on the bed, ties it in a rapid move around her frizzy hair which retains the sweat. With her foot, she searches for her worn out sandal under the cupboard, goes out without closing the door.

Miselaine has seen her sail through, has opened her mouth to ask her where she was going, then thought best of it, struck by her sleepwalker appearance. She watched her go by till she reached the slope at the other edge of the estate, then turned around, shrugging.

- Huh, always queer this one.

She refrains from saying so too loud. She knows best than to confront this tongue which can be raspy and chafe even sharper than hers.

Charlesia walks slowly. The overheated bitumen sticks to her soles in a black mash. She walks, straight on, nose on the alert, waiting for it to inform her, to guide her towards this sea she needs to see. But her compass doesn't work here. Too many smells as many obstacles, the overcooked oil of the seller of

fritters on this street corner, the heavy whiffs of rubber and fuel coming out of the mechanical workshop a little further down.

Nothing is right here. Streets with daft bends, blind alleys that cut you short in your descent. Over there, eyes closed, she just fitted her feet in the natural inclination of the sand, the inside sea, the outside sea, calm and beautiful, to caress their land and make it shiver like a languid body reclining in the warmth of an amorous body.

Charlesia walks. She'll have to find it. She's starting to feel it, vague, muffled. It must still be very far. But she's ready to look for it all day if need be.

She receives it as a shock, round the contour of a big gray building. It's here, so near, here, on the other side of this long road where cars flash by, leaving metallic lines of color in their wake. She must cross. She looks to the right, to the left, to the right again, everything's going too fast, the canons explode against the walls of her skull. She closes her eyes, takes a step. A loud screeching of brakes, the harsh smell of rubber and bitumen that assaults her nostrils, a horn, a hail of abuse. She opens her eyes. Behind her, the cars have resumed their race. There still is a metal fence to get over, and a large concrete span.

- Eh, where are you going?

She didn't stop to answer the man who flew out the sentry box. She hurries up. She must reach the end of this wharf. The end of this wharf. Her boat must be there. Should have been there. It's there that it disappeared, suddenly, a year ago. Without trace. Shattering the mirror. Sinking hope.

He barely had time to react when she went through the fence. Had he lowered a bit his transistor's volume, he'd have heard her coming. But he didn't want to miss the smallest piece of what they were saying on the radio, about the ceremony nearby, at the Champ de Mars. *"This is an historical moment on this 12th of March 1968, when our island of Mauritius is becoming independent"*, the speaker was saying in a slightly trembling voice.

The emotion was very strong, the moment solemn. They are here, the last British governor, Sir John Shaw Rennie, and the new Mauritian Prime minister, Seewoosagur Ramgoolam, who side by side watch the Union Jack come down, and the Mauritian flag being hoisted up. An exceptional moment. And here thunders the cannon, one shot, two, ten, the mountain surrounding Port Louis ricochets each salute down to the harbor, and the combined sounds well up inside his sentry box, yes, he's there, at the heart of History, he's in it, part of it. He couldn't be blamed for that. Who would have thought someone would show up here today? She had taken him completely by surprise. The emotion, all that, you understand, he wasn't prepared. He saw her go over the fence, walk towards the edge of the wharf. Sure, he should have stopped her. Who knows why he didn't. Something prevented him.

The scarf. The red scarf on her head. He knows her. He recognizes this silhouette. Or is he seeing things? It's so hot in his box, under the March sun, he's kept asking them for an electric fan, in the summer months he feels like a leaking goatskin bottle, the water just oozes out of his skin, trickles down his forehead and along his neck, straight down his back to his waistband, in the hollows of his bent knees where rash erupts, that he tries to calm by twitching nervously against his chair.

It can't be her. This dragging gait, these bent shoulders. The other one had an alert bearing, a real character, she imprinted her feet firmly in the ground. She has made such an impression on him that he thinks about her often. Perhaps that's why he believes he's seeing her, right now, with the emotion of the day and all that.

Yet, it's her. This red scarf tied in the nape of the strong neck. It's her, her that he has seen right here, a year ago.

He remembers vividly this morning of 1967. His first working day at the harbor. He had barely slept, in case the alarm clock stopped in the middle of the night, or that he slept too soundly to hear it ringing. Miss a first day after having looked for a job for so long, he wouldn't forgive himself.

The work seemed quite cool. He had been posted in a sentry box, near the entry reserved for pedestrians, aside the main entrance through which slumped lorries came and went, topped by big containers and heavy load. You couldn't say they were many, the pedestrians, just some brokers not yet wealthy who sped up to the moment when they could afford one of those utility vehicles in which their colleagues showed off.

In the middle of this man's world, he remembers perfectly his surprise at seeing her approach rapidly. A red scarf on her head, a flowery dress buttoned tight on her full bosom, she had stopped short of the sentry box, put down her basket, blew briefly on her fingers scorched by the handles, then lifted back her load using the other hand, arching her body to keep her balance. He had to spring from the sentry box to stop her.

- Hey there, where are you going?

She had looked him down, vaguely surprised and annoyed, with the air of those who are never asked where they are going.

- You don't know? she had retaliated.

No, he didn't. Even if, obviously, he should have. He was new here. He didn't yet know everyone. He was supposed to note down the comings and goings, nothing more, that was his job.

- Rogers Bureau, I'm going to Rogers Bureau, she finally spat out, in a condescending and hurried tone.

Oh yes, the Rogers Bureau. He was about to show her where it was located, just there on the left, but then thought better of it, seeing her exceeded look. She went straight towards the bureau that she obviously knew very well.

Charlesia was really getting fed up with all these Mauritians purporting to restrain her. At the hospital, the doctor had said quite a while ago that her husband was completely cured, that they could go back. It was obvious he was cured, in fact she was sure they could have treated him back there, in Diego. Just a few days of filao seed infusion to bring down the blood pressure, and some fresh coconut milk to clean up the system, and all his illness would have been gone. But the male nurse, over there, had been alarmist.

-You must go to Mauritius, he can't be treated here, you must go to the hospital in Mauritius.

He didn't stop repeating that to Charlesia.

The administrator, too, had prompted her to go.

- Come on, you must go, he'll be better treated in Mauritius, and you can take advantage of it, you've worked a lot, you can afford to take a little vacation, take the children along with you, enjoy, don't worry.

She had finally relented. Packed some fruit and vegetable pickles, a few straw mats as gifts for the acquaintances that would host them in Mauritius. And there they went, with the next shipment of the *Mauritius*. They had disembarked there, at the end of this wharf opening on the noisy and dusty city of Port Louis.

That was nearly one month ago, her husband was cured, and it was high time to go home. Staying too long at other people's place with her six children, it wouldn't be long before going sour, she sensed it. And she was eager to be back to her place, free to come and go, free of her own time, without having to adapt continuously to the ways and manias of others. They had strange living habits here, always in a hurry, crammed in overheated and noisy developments. The children were getting impatient, they needed space, their space.

This time, they would have to give her an answer, at the Rogers Bureau. She had already come twice to ask the date of departure of the next boat for the Chagos. She saw herself on board, turning her back on this gray harbor circled by too high mountains, the sea filling her lungs, a calm week sailing up north, then, one morning, in the oblique light of dawn, their rosary of islands, sprinkled on the water as soft prayers murmured, fulfilled.

Charlesia takes off a handkerchief from her bosom, mops her brow. She goes into the bureau where some ceiling fans wheeze heavily, their fly-specked blades squeaking limply. A number of men, their sleeves rolled up, are seated behind green formica desks laden with files and dirty cups. Charlesia goes up to the one nearer to the door. He raises his head, gives her a brief look.

- Hey, look who's there!

A short snigger runs through the room. Charlesia stands upright.

- I wanna know when the boat's gonna leave.

What she's asking is easy as pie. She just wants to know when is scheduled the next boat for the Chagos, for her place. The fans squeak louder.

- I wanna know...

- Go on, tell her.

The voice has come from the back of the room, near the glass door which sees through another room, more spacious, with solid wood furniture and air conditioning. Between two rows of files, another man looks at her, with something fickle in his eyes. But his voice is firm.

- She must be told.

A huge silence descends upon Charlesia's head. It alights abruptly, on her chest, which tenses without her being able to control it. Another voice rises near her.

- Just tell her yourself.

The man hesitates. He fiddles with his pen between his thick fingers with square nails.

- I'll go ask the boss.

His chair scrapes on the floor. He gives a discreet knock on the glass door, listens briefly, then turns the copper handle and goes in the office, carefully closing the door behind him.

Charlesia sees him, he has barely moved forward in the room. Sweat has drawn brown waves at the back of his beige shirt. He speaks for a while, turning around to indicate the place where she is standing. Charlesia waits. The others have resumed work, leafing through big files, rattling away on their typewriters. The man raises his hand again, slips it in his collar, mechanically rubs his neck. Then he waves it in front of him, he seems to be insisting, finally he nods, turns back, bends upon the handle, opens the door, closes it again cautiously.

He goes back to his desk. Sits down. His nearest colleague questions him without raising his head from the column of figures he follows meticulously with the tip of his pencil.

- So?

- So he told me to tell her.
- Hmm. Perhaps you should take her outside. She seems quite high tempered, this one! he says, chuckling.

Charlesia feels they're getting on her nerves. Are they talking about her? What's all this bickering? She goes up to the man.

- You have something to tell me?

He barely looks at her. Yes, he has something to tell her. Better get it done. It will soon be midday and he'll have to hurry up if he doesn't want to find a crowd clumped in the shop of the sandwich maker. The day before, he'd had to make do with a cold and rubbery omelette sandwich, the chicken liver fried with onions, his first choice, being already sold out. After all, this story is none of his business.

- You won't have a boat back.

He drops his sentence while snapping shut the metallic rings of the file open on his desk. Charlesia doesn't move. She has feared for an instant that he got his fingers clamped between the fluted spikes, she already saw the sanguinolent pulp flapping frenetically to free itself from the steel arch that the febrile left hand couldn't seem to reopen. The sound of the metallic file echoes in her head. The rings that snap, the smash of the drawer. He has said something to her, but she hasn't caught it. She looks at him to have him repeat, but he goes on tidying his desk. The others stand up around him.

Charlesia doesn't move. She stares at the man, waiting for him to repeat his phrase.

- There won't be any return boat. You'll have to stay here. The island is closed.

He has spoken in a dry tone, then bent his head and put away his remaining things in a drawer that he carefully locks. Charlesia hears the flaps of the fan stirring the air, chopping it in pieces, and throwing back his last words. *The-is-land-is-closed, the-is-land-is-closed.*

She blinks. The man comes up to her. Around them, the office is deserted. He puts his hand firmly on her shoulder, swivels her towards the exit. She's out. He disappears.

Over there, the sea is calling her. Against the human stream flowing towards the exit, she moves forward, step by step, towards the edge of the wharf where she stops dead. From the sentry box, the attendant looks at her, mesmerized by this silhouette whose red scarf stands out against the turquoise background of the glittering sea. He looks at this woman who seems transfixed in waiting. Waiting for what?

A boat. Or rather its absence, imprinted on the retina of a lookout woman. Charlesia stays there, upright, without moving. Without even this light quivering that betrays breathing. A statue, flawed, shoulders sagging, one drooping towards the slumped basket at her feet.

She probes the blue expanse, infinitely blue, with all the intensity she's able to muster and unearth from the tiniest fibre of her body. Two sharp pupils, fiery, unblinking, which measure up to the blazing heat of this midday in Port Louis, which begin to shimmer, which blur in the blinding heat haze. As much as she tries, she can't open the curtain, no gap releases what her whole being is calling for. The sea remains obstinately empty. There's no boat, there's no more boat for her.

That's what they just told her. Yet another of their stupid jokes to kill time.

No more boat. That doesn't make sense. This sentence doesn't make sense. They should keep it shut instead of uttering such nonsense.

"Island closed". That's it, yes, island closed. Her island closed. Does that mean something? What do they think, that bunch of idiots! That it's a restaurant? Or something like their fucking office? Something with a schedule written on doors that open at nine in the morning and close at four in the afternoon? The sun's really beating down, no?

This has lasted long enough. Her children and husband are waiting for her to tell them when they'll be able to take the next boat home. The next one. They want to go back. There are so many things that she left on hold there, when they had to leave for Mauritius. They must go back. See their family, their friends, resume their life where they left it, taste again the softness of sunsets.

What if she took the plunge, would the too early boat come back to take her, save her, bring her back home, on the other side of the sea? Charlesia glides up to the edge of the wharf. The oily waters flock heavily against the parapet. Over there, the horizon shines bright. The boat has already gone through. Without her. And she wonders from where comes this wave that rocks, suddenly, inside her head.

From his sentry box, Tony watches her. She is standing exactly at the same place where she stood a year ago, in stately stillness, the threadbare fabric of her gray dress lightly lapping her calves, the red scarf, tightly knotted.

He's ready to spring, should she sway. Last time, she scared him, he thought she was about to throw herself in the water, she'd had a slight oscillation, suddenly, backwards then forward, like a pendulum regaining swing in the womb of a long-stopped clock, he had feared she would fall, headlong, without even taking a step. Then she had stood transfixed again. He had kept on watching, not daring to approach her. Something in her prevented it. Her back was bristling, he could sense it, but he didn't understand why, it was too bright, too hot, to be scared, or cold.

Everybody was gone, he would have to shut the gate. The horizon diluted the sun. He had to leave too, he couldn't stay indefinitely.

She had finally turned around, rapidly gone through the gate, without a look for him. He'd never seen her again. Till today. But he had often thought about her, each time the sun beat the water to dizziness, each time a boat berthed, at the end of this wharf where she had left her silhouette watermarked.

A great emotion here, says a voice. He hears the cannon thundering again. The radio goes briefly silent, before airing the first notes of the national anthem. A brass ensemble launches off heavily and ascends in a momentum that knots the stomach and speeds up the heart.

Tony lifts up his eyes. Looks at the silhouette at the end of the dock. One year, one year has elapsed, and she seems to have shrunk, sagged. He'd like to go towards her, touch her shoulder, talk to her. He's not allowed to leave his box.

That red scarf against that blue sky, looks like a painting.

He's just behind her. He holds out his hand, she swivels abruptly. He takes full blow her two eyes, a black abyss that doesn't reflect him, filled to the rim with a green and blue light that undulates into infinity.

