

ON REPRESENTATIONS OF NATURE AND WOMEN IN CARIBBEAN LITERATURE

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The disaster that struck on 11 March, 2011 in Japan and its aftermath not only led to an irrevocable catastrophe but also highlighted the arrogance of humans in thinking that they are capable of controlling nature. It may be a far stretch to parallel what has happened at the Fukushima nuclear power plant to slavery, but these two events are equally the consequences of the workings of capitalism. Just as Fukushima is the result of Tokyo's exploitation of the countryside for cheaper electricity, slavery was established to provide cheaper products. It can be said that the dichotomy between nature and civilization is necessitated by the workings of capitalism, as are gender and racial categories. The tragedy of Fukushima forces us to reconsider the relationship between nature and civilization, and between the periphery and the centre. In this context, a reading of Caribbean literature may suggest some solutions as it offers important insights into the continuous exploitation of the periphery while unsettling the boundary between nature and civilization.

The Caribbean landscape, known for its beautiful beaches and palm trees, is actually an artificial construct. Much of its vegetation is transplanted from elsewhere, just like its slaves, to actualize the planters' dream of creating their Eden. The artificial creation of the Caribbean landscape suggests a flaw in the binary opposition of nature against civilization. Although the Western concept of nature, which portrays nature as something that can be controlled, influenced later generations of Caribbean thinkers and writers, some writers are aware of the shortcomings of this definition of nature when applied to the Caribbean landscape, and they have pondered how the idea of nature/origins has controlled people's mentalities.

In the West, there was a persistent belief that the lost Eden of the Old Testament still existed somewhere on Earth, and in the age of great adventure many competed to find that Eden, but to no avail. Instead, they resolved at last to create their own Eden in the New World:

Catholics and Protestants alike held that the first home of mankind had lain in a garden planted by God, where the climate was always mild, and the trees flowered and bore fruit continuously. Throughout the Middle Ages the Garden was believed, somehow, to have survived the Flood, and in the great age of geographical discoveries in the fifteenth century, navigators and explorers had hopes of finding it. When it turned out that neither East nor West Indies contained the Garden of Eden, men began to think, instead, in terms of bringing the scattered pieces of the creation together into a Botanic Garden, or new Garden of Eden. (Prest, 9)

The creation of 'Eden' attests to the bloody history of colonization, a history maintained through the sacrifice of slaves. The Caribbean colonies served not only the planters' idea of a new Eden but also acted as a testing ground for the breeding of a superior race since the planters believed that, by giving the natives or slaves a drop of white blood, they could

‘enlighten’ these ‘ignorant’ creatures. To facilitate their project, they created another myth, namely that—just like the Caribbean landscape—the native women and slave women were willing to be manipulated. Robert Young suggests in *Colonial Desire* (1995) that the sexual desire of white men for black women was an underlying force in the colonization of the Americas. Remote from the centre of empire, the colonies became an experimental zone for ‘miscegenation’, the white man’s experiment in making a superior race by introducing white blood (Young, 108). The project of colonization legitimized the white man’s mastery and domination, which required ‘a masochistic submission by the subordinated, objectified woman’ (Young, 108). Such attitudes produced the literature of ‘*doudouism*’, a body of writing depicting the encounter between the European and the Creole girl, an encounter which always ended with a tragic farewell. The desire for miscegenation and the eroticization of non-Western women are expressed not only in colonial discourse and travel writing but are also particularly emphasized in popular novels of exoticism. Salient examples are Pierre Loti’s *Aziyadé* (1879), *Le Mariage de Loti* (1880), and *Madame Chrysanthème* (1887), later elaborated as the opera *Madame Butterfly* (1904) by Giacomo Puccini. In these novels, whether set in Asia or the South Pacific, the male protagonists always abandon their indigenous female lovers who are then left to kill themselves. *Doudouism* is in line with this literary tradition, in which the moralization of the transgression of racial codes means that the interracial relationship within each text is doomed to end tragically. The female figures in these novels represent the ‘feminine’ as bodies ready to be exploited and penetrated even as the texts consolidate colonial masculinity.

The figure of the *doudou* was thus utilized to ‘feminize’ the islands (Edwards, 159; Antoine, 352, 379-380) and such representation can also be found in the early popular song ‘Adieu Foulards Adieu Madras’, attributed to M. de Bouille, the governor of Guadeloupe around 1769. The song portrays a Caribbean woman who is deserted by her French lover. According to Régis Antoine, the song established the stereotype and, by the late nineteenth century, the *doudou* was commonly understood both in the Antilles and in metropolitan France to be ‘any smiling, sexually available black or colored woman (usually the latter) who gives her heart, mind, and body to a visiting Frenchman (usually a soldier or colonial official)’ and is ‘left desolate when her lover abandons her to return to France, having, of course, refused to marry her though often leaving her with a child who will at least “lighten the race”’ (Edwards, 158). Antoine points out that the figure of the *doudou* became a literary trope employed to present colonial islands in an eroticized light (Edwards, 159; Antoine, 353). The image of the *doudou* presented ‘an erotic object obligingly proposed for the consumption—the textual consumption—of metropolitan readers, by Antillean writers themselves as well as by French voyagers’ (Edwards, 159; Antoine, 353). Phyllis Rose argues that the distinctive difference between French and British colonialism is that ‘the French were publicly willing to imagine themselves making love with colonial women’ (Edwards, 161; Rose 148) while the British were more reserved. Yet in the Anglophone Caribbean, African-Caribbean women were highly eroticized, too. For instance, Edward Long’s *History of Jamaica* (1774) attests to the European male’s insatiable desire for the black women in the colony:

In consequence of this practice we have not only more spinsters in comparison to the number of women among the natives. . . in this small community, than in most other parts of his majesty’s dominions, proportionately inhabited; but also, a vast addition of spurious

offsprings of different complexions: in a place where, by custom, so little restraint is laid on the passions, the Europeans . . . are too easily led aside to give a loose to every kind of sensual delight: on this account some black or yellow quasheba is sought for, by whom a tawny breed is produced. . . . Many are the men, of every rank, quality and degree here, who would much rather riot in these goatish embraces, than share the pure and lawful bliss derived from matrimonial, mutual love. (Young, 151; Long, 327-8)

Long is ambiguous as to whether English men are attracted to black women but, later, Ronald Hyam clearly exposed how, among British men, there was an explicit eroticization of black slave women: ‘British men were all prone to make unions with black women in the West Indies, not from any shortage of white women . . . but from the sexual attractiveness of black flesh (Young, 151; Hyam, 92, 203-6). Further, Bryan Edwards acknowledges that the women of colour ‘are universally maintained by white men of all ranks and conditions, as kept mistresses’ (Young, 152; Edwards, 21-2). Isaac Teale’s poem ‘The Sable Venus: An Ode’ (1765) and Aphra Behn’s description of Imoinda in *Oroonoko* (1688) also attest to the eroticization of black women. In addition, this inclination to treat black slave women in a fantastic way may have been extended to Creole women in the British West Indies, as was the case in representations of *doudou* in the French West Indies. As some proof of this, Jean Rhys testifies in her memoir that Creoles in Dominica were thought to be less respectable than the English. In *Smile Please*, Rhys remembers a white Creole girl deserted by her English lover:

In front of us sat the three Miss Porters—the small one in the middle, the other two guarding her. The small Porter had once been the heroine of a great scandal. She had become engaged to a young visiting Englishman and was very much in love with him. She showed her ring to everyone and said that after the marriage they would live in England (what bliss!). She was rather nervous about meeting family, she said, but he was such a kind man, his family was certain to be kind too. Then, Geoffrey—that was the young Englishman’s name—disappeared. Without a word of explanation to anyone he booked his passage on the Royal Mail to Southampton. At first Miss Jessie wouldn’t believe it. ‘He must have had bad news. A letter will come explaining everything.’ But weeks, then months, passed and no letter came. At first everyone sympathised. A shameful way to treat a girl, shameful! Unfortunately, men are not to be trusted. However, when it became known how she behaved when she finally gave up hope, opinions differed. She tore down Queen Victoria’s picture, broke the glass then spat on it, stamped on it, at last tore it up, using the most violent language all the time (you wouldn’t believe the words she knew, the servant said). Then she became very ill, and a bit of nuisance too, everybody said. (Rhys, *Smile Please*, 75)

The representative image of the *doudou* has lasted as a stereotypical image of the Caribbean woman. However, in an attempt to reverse the colonial hierarchy and Western concepts of black and white, the poet Aimé Césaire challenges representations of Martinique and of the women of the island in his poem ‘Cahier d’un retour au pays natal’ (1939). In his poem, Césaire sought to change the traditional European image of Martinique as an exotic place with beautiful women; indeed, the main project of the poem is to subvert that imagery as depicted in the literature of *doudouism*. The narrator expresses his anger towards the stereotypical image of women in the tropics: ‘There are still madras cloths around women’s loins, rings in their ears,

smiles on their faces, babies at their breasts, and I will spare you the rest: ENOUGH OF THIS OUTRAGE!' (Césaire, 99). Instead of following the tradition of *doudouism*, he underlines the irreparable scars created by slavery: 'So much blood in my memory! In my memory are lagoons. They are covered with death's heads. . . . On their banks no women's loin-cloths are spread out' (Césaire, 101). In a complete parting from the typical depiction of enticing native women, he delineates his mother as a central figure in his poem:

I never knew which one, lulled to nostalgic tenderness or exalted to the high flames of anger by some unpredictable witchcraft; and my mother whose legs, for our tireless hunger, pedal, pedal, both by day and by night, and I am even awakened at night by these tireless legs pedaling the night and by the Singer, bitterly biting into the soft flesh of the night as my mother pedals, pedals for our hunger every day, every night. (Césaire, 112)

This portrayal of the mother pedaling a Singer sewing machine seems to have set up a new way of representing Caribbean women, as similar portrayals can be found in texts by later generations of Caribbean writers. Nevertheless, despite the powerful image of the mother in the poem, Césaire does not offer any other images of women and, furthermore, Césaire's *négritude* is described as 'standing' (Césaire, 115), evoking a rather masculine image.

Césaire's interpretation of *négritude* as masculine is extended to his later rewriting of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, in which he has Caliban realize his dream of revenge against Prospero, although Caliban's mother Sycorax is rewritten as an Earth goddess. The link between the land and femininity is underlined in other texts of *négritude*, and women come to signify docility and passivity in many of the texts by Caribbean writers. Thus, George Lamming, who likewise rewrites *The Tempest*, claims that 'resistance and liberation are an exclusively male enterprise'. In such writings, the figures of enticing women are often replaced by mothers who are in turn often associated with nature or the domestic sphere (Lamming, 18). The identification of women with nature or motherhood is not questioned, and whether this gender relationship has been reinforced by colonialism has so far been overlooked.

How have Caribbean women writers reexamined the feminized Caribbean landscape, then? To illustrate my argument, I shall look at Jean Rhys' novels *Voyage in the Dark* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*. In *Voyage in the Dark*, Rhys presents several binary oppositions: for instance, Rhys personifies London's darkness and coldness in the protagonist Anna's stepmother, Hester, while the Caribbean landscape is personified in a black maid, Francine. Yet the difference from Césaire is that these binary oppositions are not clear-cut in Rhys' novel. For instance, after having an abortion, Anna dreams of her homeland in the Caribbean islands, but she cannot return to her island because the trees of the island are replaced with English trees:

And the ship was sailing very close to an island, which was home except that the trees were all wrong. These were English trees, their leaves trailing in the water. I tried to catch hold of a branch and step ashore, but the deck of the ship expanded. Somebody had fallen overboard.

(Rhys, *Voyages in the Dark*, 164)

This enigmatic dream scene can be interpreted as a testament to how Anna's views, influenced by colonial values, have alienated her from a real understanding of her island and its people. To put it another way, the scene presents a refusal to allow an easy dichotomy between England and the Caribbean, the city and nature, or white and black.

Another of Rhys' protagonists, Antoinette in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, also attempts to return to her native land. As in *Voyage in the Dark*, Rhys portrays Antoinette as inhabiting a world divided between black and white, darkness and shadow, and the Caribbean and England. In this divided world, the white Creole Antoinette is called a 'white cockroach' by her black peers and mocked as a 'white nigger' by English people, and is thus unable to belong to either group. Antoinette is fond of her black nurse, Christophine, and her best friend is a black girl named Tia, a situation similar to that in *Voyage*. However, Antoinette loses her estate when the emancipated blacks previously under her family's charge set fire to her house, killing her brother and causing her mother to lose her sanity. Years later, she marries an Englishman who interprets the Caribbean landscape as something strange and fearful: 'Not night or darkness as I knew it but night with blazing stars, an alien moon' (Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, 52). The Englishman's fear of the Caribbean natural world is then extended to his wife when he discovers that Antoinette's mother was insane and that she may inherit her insanity. To control his fear, just as the former colonizers renamed the island in order to appropriate it, he changes his wife's name and starts calling her Bertha. In this way, Antoinette is identified with the Caribbean natural world by her husband.

The novel seems to point out similarities of structure between colonialism and gender relations, and Antoinette's condition overlaps with that of the slaves. An example of the linking of Antoinette to the slaves is the last scene in the novel, which evokes the burning of Antoinette's husband's house, but also the earlier burning of her estate by the slaves.

I heard the parrot call as he did when he saw a stranger, Qui est la? Qui est la? and the man who hated me was calling too, Bertha, Bertha! The wind caught my hair and it streamed out like wings. It might bear me up, I thought, if I jumped to those hard stones. But when I looked over the edge I saw the pool at Coulibri. Tia was there. She beckoned to me and when I hesitated, she laughed. I heard her say, You frightened? And I heard the man's voice, Bertha! Bertha! All this I saw and heard in a fraction of a second. And sky so red. Someone screamed and I thought, Why did I scream? I called 'Tia' and jumped and woke. (Rhys, *Ibid*, 112)

This last scene ends with Antoinette crossing the corridor suggesting that her last act of burning the 'master's house' may render her reunited with her old friend Tia and return her to the Caribbean island she left behind. This scene can be read as Rhys' attempt to protest about the way women are identified with nature and repressed in numerous texts.

However, another Caribbean writer, Jamaica Kincaid, protests more directly against the linking of women with nature. Her book, *My Garden*, is a retaliation against the colonizer's act in that it makes us think how seemingly innocent botanical activities, such as naming plants and collecting them, are actually connected to colonialism. Kincaid explains the landscape of Antigua as follows:

What did the botanical life of Antigua consist of at the time another famous adventurer (Christopher Columbus) first saw it? To see a garden in Antigua now will not supply a clue. The bougainvillea (named for another restless European, the sea adventurer Louis de Bougainville, the first Frenchman to cross the Pacific) is native to tropical South America; the plumbago is from southern Africa; the croton is from Malaysia; the hibiscus is from Asia (unfringed petal) and East Africa (fringed petal); the allamanda is from Brazil; the

poinsettia (named for an American ambassador, Joseph Poinsett) is from Mexico; the bird of paradise is from southern Africa; the Bermuda lily is from Japan; the flamboyant tree is from Madagascar; the causerina comes from Australia; the Norfolk pine comes from Norfolk Island in the South Pacific; the tamarind tree is from Africa and Asia. (Kincaid, 100)

In the process of gardening, Kincaid realizes that she knows a lot of names of European plants while she knows little about her indigenous plants: ‘I do not know the names of the plants in the place I am from (Antigua). I can identify the hibiscus, but I do not know the name of a white lily that blooms in July. . .’ (Kincaid, 89). This statement attests to the grave consequences of colonialism and how it plays on the mindsets of people even after a country’s independence.

However, what is more interesting about this book is that Kincaid turns herself into a traveler and puts herself in the shoes of the colonizers. She understands the reason that the colonizers wanted to create an Eden in the Caribbean, even while resisting to do the same herself: ‘Eden is like that, so rich in comfort, it tempts me to cause discomfort; I am in a state of constant discomfort and I like this state so much I would like to share it’ (Kincaid, 177). What Kincaid expresses through her experience of gardening is a political message: that it is possible for the descendants of slaves to become colonizers. In other words, the dichotomy between colonizers and slaves can easily be overturned.

From the examples above, it may be argued that not only colonizing but also nationalistic discourses have represented women as part of the land or nature, often enclosing women into domestic space, while ensuring that men have political power in public space. Caribbean women writers such as Rhys and Kincaid seem to question the linking of nature to women, and contemporary Caribbean writers in general seem to be free of this view of nature. To conclude this paper, I shall cite a poem by the Caribbean writer Olive Senior that subverts the division between nature/civilization and domestic/public through the act of gardening:

Brief Lives

*Gardening in the Tropics, you never know
what you’ll turn up. Quite often, bones.
In some places they say when volcanoes
erupt, they spew out dense and monumental
as stones the skulls of desaparecidos—the disappeared ones.
Mine is only
a kitchen garden so I unearth
just occasional skeletons. The latest
was of a young man from the country who
lost his way and crossed the invisible
boundary into rival political territory.
I buried him again so he can carry on
growing. Our cemeteries are thriving too.
The latest addition was the drug baron
wiped out in territorial competition
who had this stunning funeral
complete with twenty-one-gun salute*

*and attended by everyone, especially
the young girls famed for the vivacity
of their dress, their short skirts and
even briefer lives.* (Senior, 85)

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