
EXAMINING THE COLONIAL LEGACIES IN STORIES FROM BLUE LATITUDES

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the ugly effects of colonial legacies on Caribbean women. It adopts the postcolonial feminist theory and textual analysis method to analyze five selected stories from *Stories from Blue Latitudes*. These stories are: Alecia McKenzie's "Firstborn", Donna Hemans' "Mother's Collections", Michelle Cliff's "Transactions", Velma Pollard's "Smile (God loves you)", and Sharon Leach's "Sugar". This manuscript demonstrates the uniqueness of the experiences of the Caribbean (Third World) woman. It states unapologetically that the harrowing conditions of excruciating poverty, brazen sexual abuse of the girl child, and the matrifocal family unit are deeply rooted in the relations between Europe, America, and the Caribbean Islands. This research submits that it is too pretentious to conclude that the brand of feminism championed by the Western woman is aimed at addressing the global challenges confronting woman. Unlike her European counterpart, the Caribbean woman believes that she has had an uneasy past that continues to trail her social, economic, and political life.

Keywords: Colonial Legacies, Caribbean women, postcolonial feminism, textual analysis.

1. INTRODUCTION

The writings of Caribbean women in English began as a response to the brutality of slavery. In her early published work entitled *The History of Mary Prince* (1831), Mary Prince narrates the brutality of her servitude and the methods she adopted to survive it (O'Brien, 2). To many contemporary Caribbean women writers, Prince's work marked a watershed in Caribbean women's literature because it began the process of claiming a voice for African-descended Caribbean women (Pyne-Timothy, 11). It asserted the right to be heard. Barely three years after Prince's publication, slavery was abolished. However, women writers in the Caribbean did not restrain from their efforts; instead, they redirected their thrust to other issues bothering their well-being: colonialism, racism, gender relations, education, unemployment, etc. (O'Brien, 1). These experiences of Caribbean women were of great interest to scholars as well as writers and were often compared with the experiences of North American women. The experiences of Caribbean women with race can likewise be compared with situations experienced by black women in the United States, as succinctly captured by O'Brien:

There is a scale of color values in [Caribbean society] in which the 'white' European is given a positive value, and the 'black' or Negro is given a negative

value, and this serves as the basis for the hierarchical rankings of persons, and groups of persons according to color characteristic ascribed to them (1-2).

O'Brien's position draws attention to the status assigned to Caribbean women of color. They are perceived simply as bad because of their color and, therefore, permanently confined to a position in society where they can only be seen but not heard. Their social status is laden with denials. Of course, black men are also subject to the effects of these color values. But Caribbean women of color experience a twofold disadvantage: generally occupying a lower position in society on account of both race and gender. This explains why resistance is such a dominant theme in the works of these writers (O'Brien, 2).

Nonetheless, there are unique aspects of the Caribbean experience. One such aspect involves the concept of a "Matrifocal family" – a family in which the lack of a significant male figure allows for the matriarch to become the focus of the family group. Feminist theorists have studied this phenomenon and its contrast to the traditional patriarchal family characteristic of western societies (Smith 79). The importance of the matrifocal family lies in the power it vests in female household leaders within Caribbean society. Rather than weakening the family unit, the absence of a father allows the mother to assume the decision-making functions and form a strong bond with her children. In contemporary Caribbean writings, this feminist phenomenon is still captured and exemplified in most stories in *Stories from Blue Latitudes*. This paper, therefore, selects five stories from this collection to critically examine the extent to which colonialism has impacted negatively on Caribbean woman. To this end, the paper adopts the theory of postcolonial feminism and textual analysis methodology to draw attention to feminist issues of matrifocal family, poverty, and sexual exploitation of the girl child.

2.LITERATURE REVIEW

This section is a review of related literature. The purpose of which is to show not only existing scholarship but also to identify the gaps which necessitate this present study. But since the text upon which the study is based is relatively new and yet to be given scholarly attention, at least to the knowledge of the researchers, the review of related literature centers largely on theoretical postulations by scholars in the field, rather than on critiques on the very text of concern.

Postcolonial Feminism

Postcolonial feminism is a wing of postcolonial feminine scholarship which originated in the 1980s (Mishra 129). This theory explores a third-world woman at the intersection of colonialism and neocolonialism with their gender, sexuality, nation, class, and race (Rajan and Park,53). While observing women, this framework calls for considering women's rights, subjectivities, work, and rights (Rajan and Park, 64). Postcolonial feminism is an umbrella term for a movement that has also been called Third World Feminism, specifically representing women in once-colonized countries.

The Major postcolonial feminist critics include Chandra Mohanty, Bell Hooks, Trinh T. Minh-ha, Aihwa Ong, Deniz Kandiyoti, and Amrita Basu, among many others. While postcolonial theorists struggle to advocate against the maiden colonial discourse that aims at misrepresenting women as inferior, the task of postcolonial feminists is far more

complicated. Accordingly, women suffer from “double colonization” as they simultaneously experience colonialism and patriarchy (Tyagi, 45). For a woman feminist, she has to resist the control of colonial power not only as a colonized subject but also as a woman. In this oppression, her colonized brother is no longer her accomplice but her oppressor. In his struggle against the colonizer, he even exploits postcolonial feminism by misrepresenting her in nationalist discourses. Not only that, but she also suffers at the hands of Western feminists from the colonizer countries who misrepresent their colonized counterparts by imposing silence on their racial, cultural, social, and political specificities, and in so doing, act as potential oppressors of their “sisters” (45).

Hence, in contrast to European and North American feminist drives for individual rights for women, postcolonial feminists argue that national and cultural sovereignty and economic enfranchisement are often more important to improving their conditions of existence (Mishra, 129). As a result, many of these thinkers emphasize the importance of “local” politics over the “universalizing” feminisms of the West. In the article "Third World Women and the Inadequacies of Western Feminism," Ethel Crowley writes about how western feminism is lacking when applied to non-western societies (44). [Chandra Talpade Mohanty](#), a principal theorist within the movement, addresses this issue in her seminal essay, "Under Western Eyes." In this essay, Mohanty asserts that Western feminists write about [Third World](#) women as a composite, singular construction that is arbitrary and limiting (Mohanty, 335). She states that these women are depicted in writings as victims of masculine control and of traditional culture without incorporating information about historical context and cultural differences between the First and Third Worlds (Mohanty, 337). This creates a dynamic where Western feminism functions as the norm against which the situation in the developing world is evaluated. Mohanty's primary initiative is to allow Third World women to have agency and voice within the feminist realm. Mohanty admits the differences that should be carefully considered in approaching the feminist concerns of women of color, yet does not show examples of how this is done or should be done in literary studies. The present research preoccupies itself with showing the unique experiences of the Caribbean woman since her study reveals some form of uneasiness with the Western feminist theoretical yardstick.

In [Audre Lorde](#)'s foundational essay, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," Lorde uses the metaphor of "the master's tools" and "the master's house" to explain that western feminism is failing to make positive change for Third World women by using the same tools used by patriarchy to oppress women (110-111). Lorde finds that western feminist literature denies differences between women and discourages embracing them. Lorde asserts that the differences between women should be used as strengths to create a community in which women use their different strengths to support each other (112). This assertion is relevant to the extent of drawing attention to the inadequacy of the western brand of feminism in accounting for the peculiarities of the black woman generally. It has failed to narrow the thesis of the discourse to the Caribbean woman who, though is categorized with the black woman as bearing similar yoke of gender biases, still retains remarkable traits, which are nonetheless addressed by postcolonial feminist theory.

In the early 1980s, several critics explored black women's difficulties in working with popular feminist discourses (Tyagi, 47). Hazel Carby explores these issues in her influential essay, "White Woman Listen! Black Feminism and the Boundaries of Sisterhood." In identifying and discussing the condition of western feminism in the 1970s, Carby explains that

black and Asian women are barely made visible within its discourse. And when they are addressed, their representation remains highly problematic (Carby qtd in Tyagi, 47).. Western feminism is chastised for its Orientalist portrayal of other races' social practices as backward and barbaric, from which black and Asian women must be rescued. According to Carby, Western feminism frequently suffers from an ethnocentric bias in assuming that the solutions advocated by white Western women to combat oppression are equally applicable to all. As a result, issues of race have been neglected, which has hindered feminists from thinking about the ways in which racism and patriarchy interact (111). Carby's argument has only succeeded in reaffirming in the theoretical basis of the postcolonial theory; no conscious efforts are directed at the Caribbean region which is the focus of this study.

The Combahee River Collective, a black feminist group in Boston whose name comes from the guerrilla action conceptualized and led by Harriet Tubman, asserts that for a black woman, the issues of race and sex are not separate from each other. Rape, for example, by white men leads to racial, sexual, as well as political oppression (365). It states:

We believe that sexual politics under patriarchy is as pervasive in Black women's lives as are the politics of class and race. We also often find it difficult to separate race from class from sex oppression because in our lives they are most often experienced simultaneously. We know that there is such a thing as racial-sexual oppression which is neither solely racial nor solely sexual, e.g., the history of rape of Black women by white men as a weapon of political repression. Although we are feminists and lesbians, we feel solidarity with progressive Black men and do not advocate the fractionalization that white women who are separatists' demand. Our situation as Black people necessitates that we have solidarity around the fact of race, which white women of course do not need to have with white men, unless it is their negative solidarity as racial oppressors. We struggle together with Black men against racism, while we also struggle with Black men about sexism (365-366).

The Combahee River Collective forcefully made arguments about the interlocking nature of race and gender. (Tyagi, 48). The collective also spoke out against feminism separatism, arguing that focusing solely on gender oppression makes no sense for Black women, who have always experienced sexual and racial oppression as intertwined and compounded by both (Tyagi, 48). Western feminists have not only failed to read gender issues at the cross sections of race and class, but they have also ignored the importance of socio-historical and cultural contexts in examining the condition of "Third World" women (Tyagi, 48). This collective, like Lorde's perspective earlier reviewed in this work, is general about the Western feminism failing to appreciate the representation of the black in literary discourse. On this ground it creates a scholarly gap which this study seeks to address by validating its position with concrete instances from our text which is drawn from the Caribbean region.

The study considers postcolonial feminist theory to be important. This is because the concern of the study is to expose the colonial tendencies captured in the selected short stories in *Stories from Blue Latitudes*. These tendencies project the postcolonial feminist's rejection of the universality of women's experience as claimed by western feminism.

3.METHODOLOGY

To enhance our understanding of the selected short stories, the process of their writing in general, and their reception in literature, this paper, being a thematic study, adopts a qualitative research method and uses textual analysis as a research technique to describe and interpret different motifs of the short stories under study. Our analytical data is the content of the selected short stories, especially the plot, action, and dialogue. The textual analytical technique here used hinges on postcolonial feminist theory. Using postcolonial feminist theory, we incorporate the socioeconomic and historical background of the selected short stories to investigate the effect of colonialism on Caribbean women.

4. TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

The Negativity of Colonial Legacies in *Stories from Blue Latitudes*

In this section, the paper has selected five short stories from the anthology: *Stories from Blue Latitudes* for analysis. These stories include Alicia McKenzie's "Firstborn," Sharon Leach's "Sugar," Donna Hemans' "Mother's Collection," Michelle Cliff's "Transactions," and Velma Pollard's "Smile (God Loves You)." The selection and order of presentation of these stories follow their depiction of the experiences of Caribbean women as products of their contact with colonial Europe. These stories are replete with issues of sexual abuse of children by adults, poverty, and matrifocal family structure. Their analyses will be closely tied to the principles of postcolonial feminism already stated in the theoretical framework.

Sexual Abuse of the Girl Child

Sexual abuse of the girl child resonates strongly in two of the selected short stories: McKenzie's "Firstborn" and Hemans' "Mother's Collection." In "Firstborn," McKenzie tells the story of a pastor who impregnates Pauline. She is driven out of her parent's home, and from there, she becomes the mother of a boy who is named Dwanyne, the biological son of pastor Simmons, and two other girls, Theresa and Shirley, whose father is not named. The circumstances surrounding Pauline's life draw attention to the condition of the Caribbean woman, which we can empathize with. Her early sexual abuse at the hands of the pastor exemplifies the patriarchal structure of Caribbean culture, which postcolonial feminists strongly oppose. McKenzie criticizes the reaction of Pauline's parents to her pregnancy. The story tells us that she is pushed out of the house by her father, and her mother supports the decision in the most callous manner, thus: "There is no place in this house for a whore"... (210). Now, while Pauline's action may not be justified, the lack of parental love shown by her parents reveals the conspiracy against women in this society. The narrator even implicates Pauline's mother, who, in spite of being aware of Pastor Simmons' immoral acts with previous girls in the same church, does nothing to save her daughter from sexual exploitation. Pastor Simmons' reaction to the news of Pauline's pregnancy is no worse than Pauline's parents. They show how patriarchy has relegated women to the background. In the end, Pauline's story demonstrates male domination in the Caribbean because even Pauline's mother, who would have prevailed on her husband to reverse the decision, fails to do so because she wants to avoid the risk of destroying her marriage. Obviously, she prioritizes her marriage over the future of her daughter – a future without a good education that guarantees self-reliance.

Donna Hemans' "Mother's Collection" also provides the raw material for the reading of postcolonial feminism. Postcolonial feminist criticism reveals the patriarchal system that stifles the woman's growth and full realization, as exemplified in the narrative. In "Mother's Collection," Hemans clearly condemns Q. George Rackham, a patriarch who changes wives and bedmates with each new pubescent girl who comes seeking shelter in his house. It is interesting to note how Mother, a twelve-year-old girl, first gains admittance into Rackham's

house and later becomes his wife after the demise of his first wife. One sees Mother (then a child) as a daughter of the Rackhams owing to their role in her upbringing. Although one may rationalize Rackham's need to remarry after his first wife's death, there is still a considerable degree of suspicion about the choice of the girl who is still residing under his roof. This suspicion comes full circle when he impregnates Princess, the last girl that is brought to the house for mentorship in music.

Hemans' protest against male chauvinism and reckless sexual appetites as represented in her story lies in Mother's expression of fury by completely distancing herself from the world of the man thus: "...Mother carefully and slowly moving her things from the master's bedroom to the maid's room off the kitchen that had been once hers. Mother shut the piano and let it to rot. She stopped calling herself Principal Rackham and simply became Mother, the definition of self-complete" (121). Mother's reaction here represents self-realization and Hemans' attempt to insulate the Caribbean woman (and women generally) from both physical and emotional dependence on man. Free from Rackham, Mother would now ease herself into life as it is lived, not as a woman who must be traumatized and assaulted, but as a living being with the knowledge of self and dignity. Beyond protest, Hemans presents a woman who believes in nurturing talents. In addition to her biological daughter, Myra, Mother gathers several children to educate them in various skills that will limit their reliance on men later in life. To Hemans, the solution to the problem is mentorship and training.

Poverty

A reading of Sharon Leach's "Sugar" as a postcolonial feminist work is a *sine qua non* for unraveling the negative effect of colonialism on the Caribbean woman. What appears glaring at the most cursory look at the story is the biting poverty that affects the totality of the life of the Caribbean woman. A new voice from Jamaica, Leach takes us into the mind of a young girl who works in a hotel in Jamaica and is being seduced by an American couple who want her to engage in sex with them for money. When the girl returns home with the badly needed extra money, her mother looks suspiciously at her but says only, "Just thank God that you get the job over there at the hotel" (178).

Now, Leach uses her story to indict the colonial and postcolonial apparatus (past and present) in Caribbean society for reducing the region to a mere geographical location, which gives pleasure to the Whiteman. Of all places, Peter and his wife, Denise, choose to spend their holiday in Jamaica, where one Yankee dollar is of great value to a poor Jamaican. The decision of the couple to visit Jamaica for their holiday is worth comparing with the Europeans' invasion of the Caribbean islands, where they exploit the human and material resources of that region for selfish interests. Therefore, as postcolonial feminist criticism argues, Sugar, the young girl whom the couple succeeds in having sex with for a few dollars, would not have yielded to this demand if she were not impoverished by the aftermath of Europe and America's penetration of the Caribbean islands. She laments her action: "Guilt makes me imagine the odor of sex radiating off my skin which is raw from scrubbing clean in the shower which I took in the maid's quarters after sneaking out of Peter and Denise's room before daylight" (177). This action reveals her repulsion toward the debasement. The narrative still reveals the poverty of the entire family who lives on the plantation, which leaves them open to exploitation. When one is poor on this plantation, one's dreams quickly evaporate. Sugar's mother is described as a woman whose happiness and beauty have been stolen by poverty, as the narrator declares: "Poverty has roughened her once-soft edges; she has forgotten how to say thanks, how to smile" (177). In the final analysis, we can say that Leach has shown differences between the

experiences of the Third world woman from that of her Western counterpart. She is therefore calling for the recognition of the differences between the experiences of the Third world woman and that of the First world woman.

In “Transactions”, Michelle Cliff chronicles the story of a three-year-old girl who is handed over to an American salesman in exchange for twenty dollars. Cliff’s portrayal of the dilemma of the little girl is informed by poverty. From the story, it is clear that the mother of the girl has so many other children. Owing to the fact that she is so poor, she could not fend for them and, as a result, she gives out the three-year-old for adoption so as to relieve herself of her responsibility and enable her to utilize the money realized on her head to cater for the other children. Though there is readiness on the part of the Caribbean woman to easily part with her child, the question that remains unanswered is why the act of child trafficking is directed at the Caribbean girl child. These are the sorts of questions that the postcolonial feminist seeks answers to.

The Matrifocal Family Structure

The matrifocal family structure, which focuses on the woman as the head of the family, runs through almost all the short stories selected for this study. In “Transactions,” for instance, the little girl’s mother gives her away without any father figure objecting to her decision. This shows she is the final authority in her home and must devise a means for the upbringing of her children. The same situation is obtainable in Leach’s “Sugar” where Sugar’s mother is left alone to cater for her children. Mama, in Pollard’s “Smile (God loves you),” literally ‘bears her cross’ as she negotiates with Miss Jonas the wellbeing of her daughter, Ayesha, one of her many children. Again she does this without consulting anybody else, including her husband. Mama’s decision to give Ayesha to Miss Jonas is motivated solely by the need to relieve her of the burden of raising her children. This decision which is of help to the entire family disturbs Ayesha by no means degree. She expresses this on the day of her departure to Miss Jonas’ house thus: “Miss Jonas ... talking like she knows us long time. All of them follow me to the car. Crying. I too shock to cry. I vex with my mother. I grudge my sisters who get to stay. I feel like the God who I say my prayers to every night betray me” (285).

It may interest one to ask: Of what bearing is colonialism on the matrifocal family structure in the Caribbean society? There are answers to this question. The first is an indictment of the era of slavery, which can hardly be divorced from a constructive discourse on colonialism. This era made it possible for slave masters to deny responsibility for the children they had produced with the slaves. The denial of father status by the slave master automatically turned the woman into the father figure in the family. Another side of the argument hinges on the premise that if colonialism is responsible for the destruction of the economic base of the Third World countries, then it follows that the very existence of these men, who should support their wives, has long been destroyed.

5.CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it is pertinent to re-establish that the concern of postcolonial feminist criticism is to respond to the mainstream feminist assertion that the experiences of women globally are the same. This position repudiates the concept of ‘sisterhood’. They rather believe in the peculiarities of the experiences of the Third world woman. They consider issues like colonialism, racism, and matrifocal family structure as distinguishing factors on which basis their story must be told. In the collection of short stories used in this work, the five selected Caribbean writers have demonstrated the uniqueness of their experiences by centering their

tales on themes of sexual abuse of children, poverty, and matrifocal family structure. These writers share the conviction that to truly understand the plight of the Caribbean woman, the story must not be divorced from the negative impact of colonialism on the lives of the West Indians.

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