

The black woman's burden: Postcolonial gender relations in Caribbean women's writing

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RESUMO

Este artigo examina varios contos das autoras xamaicanas Velma Pollard e Hazel Campbell e mais unha novela de Micheline Dusseck (Haití), para analizar o tratamento que se lles dá nos textos ás relacións de xénero na sociedade caribeña poscolonial. Estas son, como en todas as sociedades patriarcais, relacións de poder establecidas conforme a un patrón xerárquico de dominación masculina e subordinación feminina, no que a posición das mulleres está determinada en grande medida por cuestións económicas e de xénero. Os textos analizados amosan cómo o poder dos homes se adoita manifestar na manipulación da sexualidade e da dependencia económica das mulleres, e cómo a violencia constitúe con frecuencia a expresión última dese poder. Os textos poñen, ademais, de relevo a importancia do legado histórico do colonialismo e mais da escravitude na configuración das relacións de xénero contemporáneas e, asemade, suxiren a necesidade das mulleres transcenderen dito legado e redefiniren a súa posición como suxeitos na sociedade.

Gender relations are a major concern in Caribbean women's writing. One of the works that best illustrates the assumptions about maleness and femaleness in the Caribbean region is *Lionheart Gal*, a collection of autobiographical life stories of Jamaican women put together by the Sistren Theatre Collective. In her foreword to the collection, the editor, Honor Ford-Smith, reflects on the hierarchical character of male/female relationships: "[S]exual relationships between men and women are often characterised by the tedious playing out of a power struggle ritualised by trade-offs of money and sex. The first word in male power is violence and the last word in female leverage is sexuality" (Sistren 5). Ford-Smith's words articulate one of the basic premises of feminism, namely, that the relation between men and women is essentially a power relation in which, in most societies, women have less power than men, the term "power" being a slippery one which should here be understood as men's "ability to shape women's lives and to oblige women to adapt their lives so as to

accommodate men's personal projects" (Young 102). In her groundbreaking book *Sexual Politics*, Kate Millett argued that

a disinterested examination of our system of sexual relationships must point out that the situation between the sexes now, and throughout history, is a case of ... a relationship of dominance and subordination. What goes largely unexamined, often even unacknowledged (yet is institutionalized nonetheless) in our social order, is the birthright priority whereby males rule females. This is so because our society, like all other historical civilizations, is a patriarchy. (Millett 33)

Men's power, Millet argues, is sustained by a process of socialisation beginning in the family which is later sanctioned by social institutions (education, religion, literature), and it also lies on economic exploitation, state power and, ultimately, force (specially sexual violence and rape).

Allowing for the cultural differences between the Western (Euro-American) and Caribbean postcolonial societies, it seems clear that Millett's observation holds as far as the relationships between Caribbean men and women are concerned. In her wide-ranging study of the lives of Caribbean women, *Working Miracles*, Olive Senior observes that the relationships between men and women in the Caribbean are characterised by deep ambiguities and contradictions, which can be broadly summarised by the idea that despite the negative perceptions that women generally have of men's behaviour (including infidelities, physical violence, humiliation, financial irresponsibility, desertion, etc.), rarely do they reject men absolutely but rather choose to adopt an attitude of "cynicism or resignation about the man's behaviour" (Senior 166). She considers that these ambiguities express "the dichotomy of their cultural inheritance, where the stereotypes are European (protected/dominated female) but the role models and role performance are West African (woman as independent actor)" (180). Senior also remarks the importance of economic issues in shaping men's and women's mutual perceptions. Caribbean neocolonial economies do not favour female independence, and economic hardship often leads women into dependency relationships with men. This situation provokes a distortion in male-female relationships, since women have a strong economic motivation for seeking and maintaining a relationship while this reinforces the male image of woman as manipulator (181).

Caribbean women's writing recurrently portrays sexual politics in terms of dominance and subordination between the sexes, where men's power is very often manifested in the manipulation of female sexuality and economic dependence in order to dominate, and where violence, both physical and emotional, is frequently the ultimate expression of that power. This article examines narrative works by three Caribbean women writers, the Jamaicans Velma Pollard and Hazel D. Campbell, and the Haitian Micheline Dusseck,¹ in order to expose this interplay of sexual and economic affairs as one of the main strategies in the subordination of Jamaican and Haitian women to their male partners, as well as to analyse women writers' presentation of the subject in a specifically Caribbean patriarchal order.

Despite their linguistic and cultural differences, the fiction of these three writers presents a whole range of similarities as far as the portrayal of gender relations is concerned. This is a consequence of the common historical processes of colonisation and slavery which both Jamaica and Haiti went through, and which have shaped many aspects of social life throughout the Caribbean region, regardless of the European power involved in the colonising process or the date of decolonisation.² None of these writers has an explicit feminist approach; nevertheless they all show a deep concern about the sexual politics at work in their societies and try to give some answer to the problem of the continuing oppression of women in heterosexual relationships. Both Campbell's and Pollard's short stories present predominantly female protagonists who are involved in relationships which span the whole range of Caribbean institutionalised forms of male-female union: visiting unions, common-law unions³ and marriage. The choice is largely determined by economic and social factors, marriage being more frequent in the middle and upper classes with a Euro-Christian bias, while the others are more often found in the lower classes. It is also a matter of age, since young women often seem to prefer the greater freedom that a visiting union affords them. The legal status of each of the three unions is different, and there is a general hierarchical preference where marriage is at the top and visiting unions at the bottom. For the purposes of my analysis, however, the kind of union in which the women of the stories are involved does not seem relevant, since all the stories examined here present either common-law or married couples in which the power relations do not seem to be affected by the difference in status, but rather respond to very similar definitions of gender roles.

As regards Micheline Dusseck's novel, *Ecos del Caribe* (1996), it presents a female saga developed through three generations. The central characters, whose life stories take up most of the three sections of the novel, are Simone, the grandmother and matriarch, Lamerchie, her youngest daughter, and Erzulie, the granddaughter. These three women belong to a much larger female community made up of aunts, cousins, sisters and friends, weaved into a female network through which the novelist analyses a whole range of aspects of contemporary Haiti. The emphasis of Dusseck's narrative is set on the little ordinary details of everyday life as it is shaped by the greater events in society; thus, Simone's youth runs parallel to the U.S. occupation of Haiti in the first decades of the twentieth century, while Erzulie's is largely determined by the long dictatorship of Papa Doc (François Duvalier) and the terror regime enforced by his *tonton macoutes*.

Both the short stories and the novel explore the power relations between the sexes and the various strategies through which women's subordination is carried out, as well as the various responses of the women themselves. On the whole, Caribbean men—whether Jamaican or Haitian—appear as selfish and exploitative, and even though class and economic issues are determining factors in shaping men's attitudes, the sex/gender hierarchy operates effectively across class boundaries, as the analysis of the texts will reveal.

In the three Pollard stories grouped together under the title "Cages", included in the collection *Considering Woman* (1989), male dominance lurks under the appearance of middle-class domestic bliss. In "Cage I", Hugh's satisfactory fulfilment of his breadwinner role, translated into a life of material comfort which conforms to the traditional standards associated with marriage, is to his eye more than enough to allow him to claim his right to an obliging, undemanding wife who will not feel hurt by his emotional neglect and who will avert her eyes from his eventual wanderings from the home: "In any case he had given her everything she ever asked for. Look at their home, so elegant! the children so pretty and well behaved. And of course himself, a professional man of some standing" (Pollard 1989: 14). In "Cage III" the pattern is even extended to Hugh's extramarital love affair with Joy, whose space and freedom becomes increasingly restricted by her lover as the relationship progresses. The metaphor of marriage as a cage stands for the dissatisfaction that women feel in their domestic confinement, as Jean complains in "Cage II" after five years of marriage:

Well, imagine a large stone at the cave mouth and imagine yourself inside with the children and the washing and the cooking; and the original cave-man coming home every night and moving the stone a little so you just glimpse the light of day and grunting, changing and leaving again, putting the stone back into place! Now watch that three hundred and sixty-five times multiplied by five! (1989:15)

Similarly, in Campbell's "Don't Colour Me" (*Singerman*, 1991), Clifton, a self-made man, extremely proud of himself, expects female submission and acquiescence in exchange for material comfort. The ostentatious mansion he offers his wife (significantly named Clifton House) turns into a suffocating prison for Sara, relegated to the role of "the angel in the house", since he forbids her to have a job and even her activity at home is very limited by their numerous servants. Both this story and the "Cages" series belie the general female belief that marriage represents a superior status. Although many Caribbean women associate marriage with a limitation or loss of freedom, it still seems to constitute an aspiration for most. The low rate of marriages found among Afro-Caribbean peoples has a historical explanation: slavery relegated the male slave to a marginal role, with the prohibition of legal marriage and the white master's usurpation of the black man's functions as protector and provider — additionally, the mother was the only recognised parent. After the abolition of slavery, however, the situation has not changed much:

Even though slavery in the Caribbean was abolished over 150 years ago, economic conditions have continued to reinforce marginality of the black male since he is often unable to carry out his principal economic role, that of provider ... Only males in the upper income groups are able to perform these functions and are therefore able to establish stable family units. Given the correlation between race and income, family instability is frequently described as a black lower-class phenomenon. (Senior 95)

In Dussek's novel, as in Pollard's and Campbell's stories, most couples are engaged in common-law relationships, as corresponds to their lower-class background. Marriage, however, enjoys a most favourable consideration among most women. While Erzulie quite naïvely regards it as the antidote for black men's traditional sexual attraction to white women, for Vincent's aunt it represents "el único desagravio posible a las

vergüenzas y las privaciones soportadas con resignación cristiana” (Dusseck 254), by which she refers to her husband’s continuous infidelities. The connection between marriage and social status is most evident in the character of Zette, Simone’s beautiful sister-in-law. Zette’s romanticised image of marriage as women’s ideal destiny has been shaped by her internalisation of the Western system of values, through both the French colonial inheritance and the American neo-colonial influence, here illustrated through the attractive catalogues of American department stores portraying elegant (white) brides and grooms. Lacking a good dowry with which to fulfill her obsessive youth dream, the only chance that she stands of acquiring a rich husband is to use her sexual powers. Thus she voluntarily commodifies herself and engages in a lawful exchange of sex for money sanctioned by the marriage institution: “Él es rico ... y yo quiero ser una dama” (49). The irony of marriage as a dream is expressed through Zette’s own choice of a husband: old almost to the point of infirmity, Boss Antoine falls very short of the standards of a Prince Charming.

Some of the relationships portrayed by these authors explore the tensions derived from the interaction of class and race issues in a postcolonial society where the European norm still prevails. Thus, in the above mentioned “Don’t Colour Me”, by Campbell, Clifton’s success is measured not only in terms of the material wealth that he has acquired, but mainly by his ability to get himself a white wife in England, since, in a racist society, the body of a white woman becomes the signifier of the black man’s social triumph, as Fanon pointed out in *Black Skin, White Masks*: “I marry white culture, white beauty, white whiteness. When my restless hands caress those white breasts, they grasp white civilization and dignity and make them mine” (Fanon 63). *Ecos del Caribe* presents a similar case through the couple Poupée-André: André, a self-made black businessman in search of social sanction, finds in an upper-class and fair-skinned Poupée the access to the fashionable Frenchified circles of Haitian society, while she obtains from him “esa oportunidad para salvarse del desastre” (Dusseck 155), that is, the material comfort put at risk by the sudden death of her father. This exchange of status for wealth turns the couple into a travesty of the one in the Big House: Poupée — and the nickname speaks for itself —, like the slavemaster’s chaste wife, behaves as an exquisite French lady who follows the standards of Parisian fashion, while her husband keeps inflicting sexual abuse on their black servants.

The class/colour allegiance operates in the opposite direction and with rather different results in the couple Zette-Francisco. The commodification of the woman's body acquires another dimension here: if the white woman's body represents the ultimate status prize for the black man, the black woman's body has traditionally been associated with the ancestral sensuality of the African woman, constructed in the colonialist discourse as the sensual, feminine and seductive Other. This gave rise to the controlling image⁴ of jezebel, the myth of the sexually promiscuous black woman that served, among other functions, as an ideological justification of the sexual violence forced on black women during slavery and afterwards (Davis 1981; Collins 2000). It is this mythical black woman that survives in the minds of many western men who take part in the so-called sexual tourism all over the Caribbean, as represented by Dusseck in the couple Zette-Francisco.

Zette's romanticised idea of love, necessarily unfulfilled in her marriage to Boss Antoine, is strengthened when she meets Francisco, the Spanish tourist who, unlike her husband, does conform to her American-catalogue expectations. Her mythical sensuality makes her appear before his eyes as "a black mermaid" (Dusseck 98), "a black swan" (100, my translation). His attraction to the place, which he perceives as strange and bewitching (97), is based on the persisting colonial construction of the Caribbean as an exotic land, and he is proud to point out to Zette that he comes from a land of conquerors (101). This statement, and Zette's declaration that "tú eres mi dios" (101), identifies him with the white coloniser setting his foot on a female "New World" awaiting his conquest. Francisco's attitude shows the perpetuation of one of the oldest and most harmful metaphorical uses of the female body as a symbol of the conquered land. As Ania Loomba points out, "gender and sexuality are central to the conceptualisation, expression and enactment of colonial relations" (215). In patriarchal discourse both woman and land are conceived as territories open to occupation, passive, awaiting, as only through man's action can they attain any worth at all (Martín Lucas 163). Francisco perceives the native woman and her body in terms of the promise and the fear of the colonial land, available for possession and conquest, thus exposing the colonial nostalgia of the contemporary white European man.

When Francisco refuses to acknowledge his responsibility in Zette's pregnancy and crushes her illusory expectations of a romantic getaway, his attitude is finally exposed as the firmly rooted Western conception of black women as very good to have sex with but not good enough to marry:

“‘Yo no soy racista’, decía él, ‘pero las negras con los negros y las blancas con los blancos. Me refiero al matrimonio por supuesto, porque en la cama ¡menuda pareja formamos!’” (105). The power relation here is obvious: he is the one who can go away to his former life with total impunity while she is left behind to suffer public shame and an eventual tragic death at the hands of her husband. Nevertheless, in one of the frequent ironic turns of the novel, Afro-Haitian lore—which is always associated to women—enables Zette to get a posthumous revenge on her lover by darkening his skin and thus turning him into the very object of his contempt.

Some of the texts illustrate the deterioration of a happy and loving relationship into one where the woman becomes humiliated and deprived of her freedom simply through the male desire to assert his dominance. In Campbell’s “The Thursday Wife” (*Woman’s Tongue*, 1985), Bertie and Mary enjoy conjugal happiness in the first years while he has a live-in job in a white family’s house; the fact that Bertie is at home only on Thursdays allows Mary to develop a life of her own with no male interference in her church-going activities or social life. When Bertie changes his job and goes back home permanently the pattern is broken: Mary’s happiness at having her husband with her again is very soon turned into uneasiness when she feels her former freedom thwarted and her space violated. The traditional gender hierarchy is then established: Bertie’s freedom to go around with his friends—and even to keep an outside family—contrasts sharply with the restrictions he imposes on his compliant wife, whom he jealously cuts off from social life. Worst of all, he claims his marital rights to her body and Mary, silent and dutiful, “accommodates” him. Gradually Mary grows not to love her husband and through her sewing work she also becomes financially independent. However, this does not lead her to take the decision of leaving Bertie; she rather expects this change to come from him. Her passive attitude contrasts with that of Bertie’s outside woman, who makes demands on him when he starts failing to perform his duties as a father. Mary’s final thoughts, therefore, while suggesting an attempt on her part to alter this state of affairs, do not sound totally convincing, especially since Bertie himself is reconsidering the situation:

The best thing to do, perhaps, was to come back to his wife Mary. He was getting tired of those other demanding women. “Cho! Mary,” he said, turning around suddenly and startling her. “Turn off the light no, and come to bed.”

Mary, dutiful as ever, sighed. She hoped he had no amorous thoughts. That night more than ever she would not be able to accommodate him.

Perhaps she wouldn't ever be able to accommodate him again. (42)

Pollard's "Betsy Hyde" (*Karl and Other Stories*, 1994) presents a similar situation of male dominance and female acquiescence. In this case the protagonist's submission to a demanding and restricting husband, who had initially been a kind and dutiful boyfriend, is the price she willingly pays for the social respectability that marriage offers her, and which a common-law union would not: "In a sense it didn't really matter what Jed did or didn't do. Nobody could take away what he had given her. She was Mrs Jed Hyde ... Marriage was what real people had. The others had come-by-chance children with patchwork names and thank God she was out of that" (120-21). This obsession, derived from her shame at having been a teenage single mother, leads her to uncomplainingly accept Jed's manipulations and restrictions on her life, and even his appropriation of her role as mother in the education of her own daughter. Betsy's character is, as Mary's in "The Thursday Wife", textualised through silence, and it is only at the end of her life, when her husband is already dead, that she allows herself to articulate—in thoughts but not in words—the possibility that her life might have been different:

And what would she herself have been like if she hadn't had to jump at the behest of that someone all those years, and later hadn't had to Not go to church some Sundays and Not do so many other things she had wanted to do because he needed her to do ordinary services he wouldn't allow anyone else to perform? (131).

By contrast, Dorlene, the protagonist of "A Night's Tale", in the same collection, described at the beginning as "a woman of substance in every sense" (Pollard 1994:75), refuses to comply with the victim role when her marriage with Jacob is broken because of his adultery. The situation here is different and it shows how economic affairs are crucial in shaping women's lives: Dorlene is a self-made, hard-struggling woman who is able to give her man a start in business. The inversion of the traditional roles—she is originally the only breadwinner and then helps him set up as a taxi driver, and she is older than him—is no drawback for their happiness for a number of years. A change in the narrative voice, from the third person to

Dorlene's first, signals a change in the course of events: Jacob's lover settles as a guest in the house and becomes a creditor to Dorlene's confidence until the whole affair is uncovered. Dorlene's reaction at her husband's adultery has nothing to do with Mary's silent compliance in "The Thursday Wife": instead, she takes quick decisions invoking her pride and rejecting the victim role: "I decide that I wouldn't give a soul the chance to laugh at me or feel sorry for me" (85). However, the moral strength she shows in putting her husband out of her house is somewhat undermined by the final statement that, after five years, she has not taken another man, which appears to be a gloomy suggestion that women's choice has to be limited to that between loneliness and the acceptance of men's unfaithfulness.

Nevertheless, this also seems the conclusion to be drawn from Dusseck's account of Simone's relationships with both Joseph and Jesner. Joseph, albeit much kinder, shares the same kind of attitude as Bertie in Campbell's "The Thursday Wife", and like him he leads a double life, keeping an outside family and going back to Simone for comfort: "En la cabaña de Simone, encontraba un oasis tras la dura jomada, un poco de felicidad. ¿Qué hombre renunciaría a eso?" (Dusseck 70). But unlike Bertie's Mary, Simone does not hesitate to throw him out: while she is happy enough to have a partner who provides some company and affection and also a complement to her insufficient income, she is quite unprepared to tolerate her man's unfaithfulness, even if it means facing the responsibility of feeding her children on her own. In her following relationship, however, she seems to have become more tolerant and to have accepted Jesner's justification for his infidelity—"Soy un hombre..." (128)—, which illustrates the assumptions about maleness prevailing in Haitian—as in Jamaican—society. The eventual failure of this turbulent relationship will rather be determined by economic issues, since Jesner's failure to fulfill his role as breadwinner will cause her to send her children away as live-in servants. What eventually leads her to change the situation is her love for her children and the reassuring knowledge that she can rely on the support of the female community, one of the recurrent issues in the novel. This puts forward another general assumption about Caribbean women, namely, the fact that motherhood is regarded as the fundamental basis of a woman's identity, and the maternal role as far more important than the conjugal, as Senior points out: "Childbearing is one of the few areas in the lives of Caribbean women that is not surrounded by ambivalences. There is an

almost universal impulse to mothering” (66). Furthermore, as Dusseck’s novel shows, motherhood is not only a female personal experience but a collective one involving the femalē as a whole. The novel presents numerous instances of the community taking upon itself the responsibility of mothering motherless children (Zette’s daughter) or supporting mothers going through economic hardship (Charité’s help to Simone).⁵

The texts also explore the dominance/subordinance pattern of gender relations in its more extreme manifestations as sexual exploitation and physical violence. In Campbell’s “Miss Girlie”, Ivan does not hesitate to let his woman prostitute herself as a way to realise his ambition of buying a fishing boat. Girlie is surprised and hurt that her childhood sweetheart, who “had always treated her as if she was special” (Campbell 1985:48), will now start to behave like the rest of men in the tourist resort, where prostitution is a way of life. Nevertheless, she realises that he needs the money for whatever purpose and, while refusing to prostitute herself, she is ready to sacrifice her reputation and her pride, accepting money for talking with the white American tourist and letting everybody —Ivan included— believe that she is having sex with him. Girlie’s position becomes especially dramatic when she realises Ivan’s arrangement to have her own sister as a substitute, since “[w]hile she was fucking the white man he couldn’t go to her. He wasn’t getting into any white man muck” (51). Girlie’s acquiescence is encouraged by the general social acceptance — indeed by women’s acceptance— of this situation, as expressed by her friend Miss Winsome, who encourages her to engage in the sex business and keep part of the money for herself:

“Cho, Missis! You too fenky fenky. Since Ivan want you fi go sell pussy, well, go sell pussy! Plenty hungry touris round the place. An mek me tell you somethin,” the older woman advised in a softer voice. “You don’t even have fi gi Ivan all the money wha you mek. After all, a fi you pussy” (47).

Girlie’s way of coping with this situation is definitely poor, since she decides to comply with her man’s wishes without even demanding an explanation. Her inner, therefore silent, articulation of her new role shows that male authority is never questioned, not even when it implies an irrational self-sacrifice: “she wouldn’t cry, never again as easily as she used to. Her

name was woman. She would have to be strong. No more weeping. She would do the things her man wanted her to do. Help him to get the things he wanted even though it meant heartache for her. This was her birthright. Her time had come” (55-56). Girlie’s thoughts illustrate Collins’s point that “[a]bused women, particularly those bearing the invisible scars of emotional abuse, are often silenced by the image of the “superstrong” Black woman” (159). Girlie seems to have internalised the myth of the all-enduring black woman who can cope with anything and is therefore liable to be exploited and abused. Her self-deceiving strength is thus, in fact, her weakness, since her response to this unfair situation will obviously not lead her to change it.

Campbell’s “The Rag Doll” (*The Rag Doll and Other Stories*, 1978) shows a particularly dramatic aspect of women’s acquiescence with male dominance, which is the acceptance of men’s institutionalised “right” to exert physical violence on women. Dessie bears with resignation the brutal weekly beatings she receives from Johnson as a punishment for her obstinate insistence on going to church on Wednesday evenings and leaving him a cold dinner. The passivity and even amusement of her neighbours about the violent ritual of every Thursday morning is only one proof of the wide social acceptance of this practice: “Somebody turned up a radio. Sparrow was singing a calypso... *Black up she eye, bruise up she knee/Then she will love you eternally*” (8). Dessie’s economic dependence on Johnson makes it difficult for her to leave him, but in any case, her attitude reveals a deep ambiguity which characterises many Caribbean women who have internalised this *status quo*, as if violence, or any other kind of submission, were the price to be paid for keeping a relationship: “[God] had to be thanked for a steady man who took good care of her” (6). This is no doubt one of the most problematic and contradictory aspects of Caribbean women’s attitudes towards men, since, as Senior observes, “[e]ven women with life-histories filled with tales of male rejection, ill-treatment and ultimate abandonment continue to affirm the power of male-female relationships in their lives” (Senior 166).⁶

When Dessie loses the baby she is expecting—and the possibility of ever getting pregnant again—as a result of one of Johnson’s beatings, she suffers a nervous breakdown. Her mental degradation is textualised into a fragmented and disorderly narrative where Dessie’s voice unfolds into two voices in permanent, schizophrenic dialogue. Her awareness that

she is now unable to fulfill her female role as it is socially defined, that is, in terms of childbearing, develops into an obsession with childlessness and further mental degradation, heightened by her fear that Johnson might be led to find another woman, since many Caribbean men assert their masculine identity through their reproductive capacity. These fears prove to be totally justified when Johnson takes another woman and has a child by her while Dessie is still at the mental hospital obsessively making rag dolls as a substitute for her impossible baby. When a mentally weak Dessie finally leaves the hospital, the point of view of the narrative changes in order to show Johnson's state of mind:

He didn't know what he was going to do with Dessie. Nobody wanted a mad woman in their house. Not even him. Perhaps he would keep her locked in the back bedroom. The woman and the baby would have to move in with him. He couldn't abandon Dessie, neither would he be deprived of his son. It was hard on him. (Campbell 1978:17)

These thoughts, full of self-pity but with no regard for Dessie's feelings or ruined life, constitute an ironical indictment of patriarchy's appropriation of woman's body and reproductive rights.

As for *Ecos del Caribe*, gender violence acquires a wider dimension, since "domestic" violence is imbricated with the all-pervading political and social violence of twentieth-century Haiti. Violence within the household is often associated with economic issues: thus, when Francilia dares to question her husband's capacity to fulfill his role as breadwinner, Boss François smacks her to assert his patriarchal authority: "Dio un paso hacia ella y de un manotazo la hizo voltear como una peonza. —A mí no me grita nadie. Soy el amo en mi casa" (Dussek 38). On the other hand, Zette's murder by her own husband, the most extreme manifestation of physical violence against women in the novel, serves to illustrate the double standards that rule male and female behaviour. The reason why Boss Antoine murders his pregnant wife is not so much her adultery with the Spanish tourist and subsequent pregnancy, which he resents but is even able to forgive, as the fact that her unfaithfulness has become a public issue: "algún resto de su orgullo de macho le hacía conservar la esperanza de que su desgracia no había traspasado las cuatro paredes de su casa, salvando así las apariencias" (107). Since Boss Antoine is himself

the father of numberless children by different women, a fact that he has never bothered to conceal, we can only conclude that Zette has committed one of the worst sins possible in a patriarchal society where women are commodities to possess and not to be shared, while men are free to roam around fathering —as opposed to parenting— children as a means of asserting their masculinity.

Rape recurs through the three generations spanned in the novel, and each of the aggressions —to Simone, Lamercie and Erzulie— is used by Dusseck to illustrate one particular aspect of the same underlying issue. As a specific form of sexual violence against women, rape appears embedded in a system where race, gender and class oppression interact to shape women's lives. Rape links sexuality and violence and is a most effective subjugating device since it deprives the victim of her will to resist, rendering her passive and submissive to the will of the rapist. The fact that Boss Antoine chooses sexual abuse to take his disproportionate revenge on Simone, who humiliated him when she called him “old man” in front of his young bride, confirms that rape is the ultimate assertion of the masculine authority over women. On the other hand, Erzulie's initial rape and subsequent subjection to sexual commerce by the *tonton macoutes*, illustrates how rape is often turned into an institutionalised weapon of domination and repression, used by the oppressors as an effective subjugation strategy (cf. Davis 23); thus, when the *tonton macoutes* terrorise the village, no one dares rebel: “Bien sabían el peligro que corría la población. Bien sabían que había que doblegarse ante la voluntad del más fuerte para seguir vivo” (Dusseck 279). Finally, the repeated sexual abuse that Lamercie is inflicted on by her boss puts forward the interaction of class and gender issues to secure women's domination: “le hacía mucho daño, aunque aguantaba sin quejarse lo más mínimo, como buena campesina” (174). Furthermore, the characters of André —as the rich and powerful inhabitant of the Big House— and Lamercie —as the poor and powerless domestic servant— echo the figures of the slavemaster and the female slave, thus tracing the origin of the institutionalised sexual abuse of black women back to the patterns established by the white slavemasters which were later internalised and perpetuated by the black men (cf. Collins 71).

In general terms, both Campbell's and Pollard's short stories and Dusseck's novel portray a rather desolate state of affairs in the sexual politics at work in the Caribbean. The nature of the politics of dominance may vary, from extreme manifestations of violence and sexual abuse to

more subtle forms which nevertheless respond to the same codes of conduct, since in both cases women are taken for granted and their passivity and subordination is traded off for material comfort. Both the short stories and the novel suggest that these forces at work respond to economic issues as well as to the patterns established by the historical processes of colonisation and slavery, which seriously distorted male/female relationships by depriving men of their position within the household while casting on women the conflict between their West African role models of independent women and the European stereotype of the dependent and dominated female.

This situation results in the rather common representation of female characters as passive and impotent in Caribbean literature. As Françoise Lyonnnet remarks:

The female subject, whose consciousness bears the double burden —material and ideological— of colonial and patriarchal society, has difficulty conceiving of herself as a subject who controls knowledge and, hence, as a subject endowed with either agency or power. The characters created ... suffer the fate of victims because in that tradition there is not yet a literary model which allows the female subject genuinely to conceive of herself as both a speaking and an acting subject. (97)

Many of the female characters in the texts examined here certainly seem to act in complicity with men in the perpetuation of the patriarchal social order, since almost none of them appears to challenge a situation that is perceived as unfair, while they rather seem to comply with the unproductive and dangerous role of the enduring victim. Few self-assertive attempts at independence may be found in the narratives which are translated into positive actions that may lead to a change, and in every case they are carried out either by women whose economic independence guarantees their survival and that of their children —Dorlene in Pollard's "A Night's Tale"— or by women who can rely on the support of their kin and friendship networks —Simone in Dusseck's *Ecos del Caribe*.

However, at a deeper level, these texts do have a feminist perspective which should be found not so much in their exaltation of women's strength under hardship, but in their pointing out the high price paid by women

who adopt a submissive role in their interaction with men. The women in these narratives should, therefore, be taken as models *not* to be followed. In that sense, while they describe a *status quo* which is far from being what it ought to, Campbell's, Pollard's and Dusseck's contribution to the indictment of Caribbean gender relations may be said to lie in the angry questioning of the situation that is left in the reader after going through their texts. By making visible the pain and the frustration that the women feel, these narratives constitute a challenge to the alleged rationality of a social system that is based upon the oppression of one half of its members, and by portraying the blind alley that passive compliance with patriarchy leads to, they also proclaim the urgent need for women—for society as a whole—to transcend the historical inheritance of slavery and colonialism, and to reassess their position towards a more positive and self-confident definition of their role in Caribbean social life.

NOTES

¹ Born and raised in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, Micheline Dusseck (b. 1946) has lived and worked in Spain for over thirty years. For *Ecos del Caribe* (1996), her only novel so far, she chose the Spanish language instead of her native Creole or French.

² Initially colonised by Spain, Jamaica was handed over to Britain in 1670. It was decolonised in 1962. Haiti, a French colony, was the first Caribbean territory to become independent in 1804, under the leadership of Toussaint L'Ouverture.

³ In visiting unions men and women get together for social and sexual intercourse but they live in separate houses. The man's duties are not clearly established but he is expected to contribute financially to the upkeep of the home and of the children of the couple. On the other hand, a common-law union is generally more consolidated: the man and the woman live together and while the woman assumes the housewife role, the man is expected to support the household. For more information see Senior 82-87.

⁴ Controlling images, as defined by Patricia Hill Collins, are externally defined, stereotypical images of black womanhood created by the elite groups exercising power in society, with the aim of making racism, sexism, poverty and other forms of social injustice appear to be natural, normal and inevitable parts of everyday life (Collins 69). Collins

identifies several controlling images in the context of the United States, all designed to perpetuate the social hierarchy that rests upon the objectification of black women and the control of their sexuality and fertility: the mammy (the faithful, obedient domestic servant in the white home), the black matriarch (the “bad” mother figure in black homes), the welfare mother (the unwed mother unable to keep her too many children) and the jezebel (the sexually aggressive woman). For a detailed analysis of these images, see Collins, chapter 4.

⁵ Motherhood as a collective experience constitutes a survival strategy for many Caribbean women who face economic and social oppression, and is articulated in the kin and friendship support networks, where mothering of children is assumed by both the biological mothers and other members of the female community (othermothers) who do not necessarily have blood ties (Senior 139-142)). This communal conception of motherhood goes back to the African tradition, but it is also a functional adaptation to the race and gender oppression that black women have gone through since they were transported to America as slaves. For an analysis of motherhood in other communities of the African diaspora, see Collins on “Black Women and Motherhood” (173-199).

⁶ Cf. Patricia Hill Collins’s analysis of the sexual politics within the African-American community and the “love and trouble” tradition in black women’s relationships with men. Collins argues that in spite of the strong attachment that black women feel for their men, their relationships are characterised by violence and tension, as a result of the distortion of gender roles brought about by slavery (151-160).

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