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Phylon (1960-), Vol. 44, No. 1 (1st Qtr., 1983), 1-11.

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PHYLON

THE ATLANTA UNIVERSITY

Review of
RACE AND CULTURE

FIRST QUARTER (Spring) 1983

VOL. XLIV No. 1

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Women in Caribbean Literature: The African Presence

SUCH WAS THE NATURE of slavery in the New World that the African slaves were allowed little opportunity to practice overtly any aspect of their aboriginal culture. Little wonder, then, that there has developed among scholars the theory that the Middle Passage destroyed the culture of the Africans who were imported to the New World during the period from 1540 to 1807. Edward Brathwaite, however, the Barbadian poet, historian and critic disputes this theory. He claims that African culture not only crossed the Atlantic but survived and creatively adapted itself to the new environment.¹ It will be the contention of this essay that the exigencies of slavery in the New World drastically altered but did not completely annihilate the traditional role of African women in the family or in the community. Further, an examination of the literature will reveal parallels between Afro-West Indian women and their African counterparts.

In traditional Africa, religion and the family formed the nucleus around which the culture was built and the society revolved. It is no wonder, then, that in looking for African survivals and retentions in the New World, these are the two areas that usually come into focus. Outsiders sometimes express surprise at the "seeming lack of seriousness" with which Caribbean men and women enter into alliances and bear children. They wonder, too, at the fact that many of these people do not eschew legal marriage because of any penchant for promiscuity, since many older couples have lived together for years and do adhere to all the tenets of a legal marriage.² Attempting to explain this phenomenon, Melville Herskovitz states that in Africa, marriage is not

¹ Edward Brathwaite, "The African Presence in Caribbean Literature," *Daedalus*, 53, No. 2 (Spring 1974): 73.

² Melville J. Herskovitz, *The Myth of the Negro Past* (Boston, 1941), p. 171.

a matter requiring approval of the state or any religious body. The only requirements are the consent of the families concerned and the benevolent approval of the ancestors.³ With regard to children in traditional Africa, there is no such thing as an unwanted child. Janheinz Jahn explains that when a person dies, he lives on or is reborn in his descendants. Because of this reason, to leave no living heirs behind is the worst evil that can befall a man, and there is no curse more terrible than to wish a man to die childless.⁴ Marriage (in the African sense) and children have always been of the utmost importance among Africans; children have always been welcome, whether they were born within the recognized family unit or not. An examination of Caribbean literature will reveal that this situation also holds true among West Indians.

Women in Caribbean literature always seem to exist vis-a-vis a man (be he lover or husband) and, of course, children. Very often, these man/woman relationships are tension-filled, tenuous, and polygynous. Very often the man in these relationships is transient, reminiscent of the period during slavery when a man was simply a breeder of slave children for his white owner. In many of the families portrayed in these works, the man, the husband, the father simply is not there. He fathers the children and then moves on, leaving the woman solely responsible for the upbringing of the children. The female-headed family is the one most frequently found in Caribbean literature.⁵

George Lamming's *In the Castle of My Skin* (1953) offers an excellent example of the mutations that have taken place in what used to be a viable and positive family structure in traditional Africa. To begin, most of the fathers in this work are absent, including the father of the child-narrator, G. When the fathers are present, they seem to be impotent as authority figures. The mothers, then, emerge as the dominant parents throughout. This point is highlighted early in the work when the child-narrator muses, "My father who had only fathered the idea of me had left me the sole liability of my mother who really fathered."⁶ Nor is G alone in his "fatherless" state. It is always the women who "have" the children. Thus we read that "Miss Foster had six children, three by a butcher, two by a baker, and one whose father had never been mentioned. Bob's mother had two and [G's]mother one."⁷ In attempting to explain this phenomenon, Merle Hodge, the Trinidadian critic and novelist, states:

³ Ibid. p. 172.

⁴ Janheinz Jahn, *Muntu: An Outline of the New African Culture* (New York, 1960), p. 109.

⁵ In addition to the works examined here, this family structure is found in V. S. Naipaul, *Miguel Street* (London, 1959); H. Orlando Patterson, *The Children of Sisyphus* (London, 1964); and Michael Anthony, *The Year in San Fernando* (London, 1965), among others.

⁶ George Lamming, *In the Castle of My Skin* (1953; rpt. New York, 1975), p. 3.

⁷ Ibid. p. 18.

[In the New World] the function of fatherhood was limited to fertilizing the female. Gone was the status of head of family, for there was no family, no living in a unit with wife and children. A man might not even know who his children were, at any rate they did not belong to him in any sense; he was unable to provide for them. . . . The black man had no authority over his children, but the woman did. The children's mothers, or female child-rearers, were responsible for the upbringing of the race. Women became mother and father to the race.⁸

The absence of the father in the lives of these children leads naturally to a rather close and somewhat stifling relationship between mother and child. Thus, when the mother's pumpkin vine and fence are accidentally torn down, the child-narrator reflects:

My mother on such occasions looked pitiful beyond words. I had often seen her angry or frustrated and in tears, but there were other states of emotion she experienced for which tears were simply inadequate. Seized by the thought of being left alone, she would become filled with an overwhelming ambition for her child, and an even greater defiance of the odds against her. . . . She would talk about pulling through; whatever happened she would come through, and 'she' meant her child.⁹

When G, now on the threshold of manhood, is about to leave home to work on another island, the mother is reluctant to let him go. He has been the sole purpose of her life and now is made to feel guilty for leaving. In the confrontation between them, the mother says to the son:

If you grow to one hundred you're my child . . . and when you see the others playing man, an' doing as they please, just tell them you sorry, 'tis different with you, 'cause your mother ain't that sort o' woman. Let them know I don't play, an' that a child is a child for me. Nothing more or nothing less.¹⁰

Scholars are in disagreement as to the origin of the so-called matriarchal family in the New World. E. Franklin Frazier subscribes to the theory that the female-headed black family can be attributed to the nature of slavery. He does concede, however, that the situation in the West Indies might have been different from that in North America. He claims that unlike the United States, where slaves were scattered in relatively small numbers on plantations and farms over a large area, in the West Indies large numbers of African slaves were concentrated on vast plantations for the production of sugar. Under such conditions it was possible for the slaves to reestablish their African ways of life and keep alive their traditions.¹¹ Herskovitz, on the other hand, who is

⁸ Merle Hodge, "The Shadow of the Whip: A Comment on Male-Female Relations in the Caribbean," in *Is Massa Day Dead? Black Moods in the Caribbean*, ed. Orde Coombs (New York, 1974), p. 115.

⁹ Lamming, pp. 10-11.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 295.

¹¹ E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro in the Untied States* (New York, 1949), pp. 6-7.

one of the chief proponents of the theory of African cultural survivals in the New World, sees the matriarchal family as primarily an example of an African cultural retention. He states that in polygynous unions in West Africa, the woman always has been the visible head of the household. In the compound, the husband and father lived in his separate quarters; each wife and her children had their own dwelling. The wives took turns cooking for the husband and sleeping with him. Naturally the children of each household spent more time with their mother than with their father, and there developed a closer bond between mother and child than between father and child.¹² Perhaps in assessing the situation in the Caribbean, it would be realistic to assume that the preponderance of the matriarchal family is the result of a synthesis of an African cultural survival with the realities of slavery in the area.

One might well ask whether the apparently irresponsible behavior of the Caribbean man who casually fathers children with a variety of women and then moves on is in any way related to the custom of traditional African polygynous unions. If so, it is a custom gone awry, for the role of the man in the traditional African family was one of responsibility and importance; in the traditional African family a man's economic success was measured by the number of wives he could afford, for, in the words of Jomo Kenyatta, "the... customary law of marriage provides that a man may have as many wives as he can support, and... the larger one's family, the better it is for him and the tribe."¹³ It becomes clear, then, as pointed out earlier by Hodge, that somewhere along the way, the roles of men and women of African descent in the Caribbean have changed, while at the same time retaining a flavor that is African.

The fact that a husband and children always have been of utmost importance to African women and their Caribbean counterparts has never meant that black women have been passive or powerless within West Indian society. Admittedly, as Orlando Patterson, the Jamaican sociologist and novelist notes, women in the West Indian society have always had a narrower range of occupations to choose from than their male counterparts.¹⁴ The literature reveals, though, that black women in the Caribbean have proven, in spite of economic and social constraints, to be quite innovative in making a livelihood for themselves as well as their families. The point is, however, that they have never been encouraged to take pride or credit for any other function but that of wife and mother. It is a fact that many a young woman in the Caribbean has deliberately stifled any pretensions to a career, lest in so doing she outshine her male counterpart and thereby end up an "old

¹² Herskovitz, pp. 179-180.

¹³ Jomo Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya* (New York, 1965), p. 129.

¹⁴ H. Orlando Patterson, *The Sociology of Slavery* (London, 1967), p. 61.

maid." Thus, with very few exceptions there are no women writers; with very few exceptions there are no women calypsonians. The portrait of women that is revealed to the world in the written and oral literature is that given them by men. Yet to reiterate, women in the Caribbean like women in Africa are not passive, nor are they powerless in the sense that they are dependent on men to provide for them. Often they are self supporting, married or unmarried; often they are the sole support of their households, whether there is a man present or not. However, they are not considered "complete" women unless there is a man in their lives. As Hodge sees it, "the unmarried, . . . or childless woman, say, in her forties, is projected as a stock joke — frustrated, nagging, disagreeable, withering away for the want of a man to rule her or offspring to prove her fecundity."¹⁵

The similarities between the plight of women in the Caribbean and that of women in Africa is highlighted in the novel *Efuru* written by the Nigerian, Flora Nwapa in 1966. *Efuru*, the central character in the work, is a tragic as well as a heroic figure. *Efuru's* tragedy lies in the fact that she cannot "hold on to a man." She is married twice and is deserted by both her husbands. In addition, her only child dies. With the death of her daughter her failure as a woman is complete. It does not matter that *Efuru* is an asset economically to the men in her life, that she is a successful trader and a prosperous businesswoman, that she is self-supporting and independent. Ultimately, she is judged on her success as a wife and mother. A relative at the funeral of *Efuru's* daughter sums up *Efuru's* dilemma when she asks, "*Efuru*, in what ways have you offended our ancestors? . . . You were married and for a long time you did not have a child. Then the gods and our ancestors opened your womb and you had a baby girl. . . . A girl is something though we would have preferred a boy. . . . And now, that only child is dead. . . . As if all this is not enough. . . . I hear your husband has run away with that worthless woman."¹⁶

The women in Merle Hodge's novel *Crick Crack Monkey* (1970) are examples of women who are self-assertive and self-sufficient. First, there is Tantie, a woman of strength in her own right, who has no permanent man in her life and no children of her own. Tantie adopts her godson, Mickey, and when her sister-in-law dies and her brother leaves for England, she becomes surrogate mother to his two children, 'Tee and Toddan. By the time Mickey leaves for America, and 'Tee and Toddan are on their way to their father in England, Tantie has already taken in one of Mickey's sisters, two of Ma's children, and Doolarie, the daughter

¹⁵ Merle Hodge, "Young Women and the Development of Stable Family Life in the Caribbean," *Savacou* (Kingston, 1977), p. 42.

¹⁶ Flora Nwapa, *Efuru* (London, 1966), pp. 87-8.

of a disabled neighbor. Tantie, with no husband and no visible means of livelihood, is, nevertheless, a mother in every sense of the word to her brood.

And then there is Ma, of matriarchal African proportions. Like Nwapa's Efuru and so many of her counterparts in Africa, Ma is a market woman, selling her jellies, jams, and sweets in the village marketplace. During the August holidays, Ma has a multitude of her grandchildren (those related to her by blood and those not) come down from all parts of the island to spend their vacation with her. Ma, reminiscent of the women in Nwapa's West African village, would gather her brood on the steps on a full-moon night and tell them 'Nancy stories. In traditional African fashion, Ma attempts to inculcate in 'Tee, the child narrator, a sense of tradition and identity. Thus we read:

Ma said I was her grandmother come back again. She said her grandmother was a tall straight proud woman who lived to an old age. . . . The people gave her the name Euphemia or Euph — something, but when they called her that she used to toss her head like a horse and refuse to answer so they'd had to give up in the end and call her by her true-true name. . . . She couldn't remember her grandmother's true-true name. But 'Tee was growing into her grandmother again, her spirit was in me.¹⁷

Even the child narrator 'Tee is no exception to the independent and spirited women we meet in this work. 'Tee becomes Cynthia as she grows into young womanhood and rejects the folkways of Tantie and Ma for the middle-class mores of the urban Trinidad society in which she finds herself. It is no easy achievement for Cynthia to be accepted into this new society, for she is dark-skinned and does not blend easily into the color-conscious, light-skinned middle-class society of Trinidad. Tantie, however, is sensitive enough to know what ails Cynthia, and concealing her own pain at the young woman's rejection of her, she arranges for Cynthia and Toddan to join their father in England.

The women in C. L. R James' *Minty Alley* (1936) are further examples of women of strength and determination who, in the face of a harsh and indifferent environment, remain in control of their destinies and are thus able to survive. Mrs. Rouse is one such woman. Like Nwapa's Efuru, Mrs. Rouse is in one sense a victim, but Mrs. Rouse is also a woman of compassion and of strength, a survivor and a heroic figure. Like Efuru, children and a husband are important to Mrs. Rouse, but she is a widow and has never had any children of her own. She circumvents these problems by "adopting" her niece, Maisie, and entering into a common law marriage with the despicable Benoit. Mrs. Rouse makes a living for herself, her husband, and her niece by baking and

¹⁷ Merle Hodge, *Crick Crack Monkey* (London, 1970), p. 32.

selling breads and cakes. She is unfortunate, though, in her relationship with both husband and niece. After several years of marriage, during which time Mrs. Rouse virtually supported him, Benoit deserts her to marry the near-white nurse. The marriage, however, is short lived. When Benoit becomes sick, the nurse abandons him. When he dies in the pauper ward in the local hospital, it is Mrs. Rouse who claims the body and buries him. Explaining to Haynes, the narrator, her feelings for Benoit after all that he has put her through, Mrs. Rouse declares, "God put this fiery love in my heart for Mr. Benoit. . . . I try to root it out, but it wouldn't come out. God plant it there for his own purpose."¹⁸ Though the people at No. 2 Minty Alley laugh at Mrs. Rouse because she "cannot hold on to a man," she emerges as a woman of strength and character, a survivor.

There is also Maisie. Maisie, about fifteen years old, has had the minimum of education and is trained for nothing. Like many West Indian children Maisie does not live with her parents. Indeed, we are never told any thing of either her mother or her father. Maisie is the bane of Mrs. Rouse's life. When Mrs. Rouse finds out that Maisie has been a co-conspirator of Benoit and the nurse, her anger knows no bounds. She bewails to Haynes, "[Maisie] brings back all my wrongs when I see her. . . . She knew everything Mr. Haynes. . . . The girl betray my honour for vanilla ice cream and sugarcake" (p. 126).¹⁹ Eventually, there is a violent confrontation between aunt and niece, and Maisie is forced to leave her aunt's home with only the clothes on her back. But the indomitable Maisie does not accept defeat. She chooses not to surrender to the limitations of her world. Soon after she leaves Mrs. Rouse's home, she and Haynes meet. She explains to him that she has paid twenty dollars to a stewardess who works on one of the ships that go to New York. Acting as a "procuress," the stewardess will provide passage for black girls because the white officers like them. When Haynes reacts with shock to this information, Maisie responds:

"Mr. Haynes, I want a job and I am going to get it. The captain and the whole crew can't get anything from me unless I want to give them. But when that boat hit New York and I put my foot on shore, if it wait for me before it leave, it's going to wait a damned long time."²⁰

As can be seen, none of these women is passive or powerless. In the face of all odds, they emerge as self-assertive women who, in the final analysis, are in control of their lives. Of significance too is the fact that James' Maisie like Hodge's Cynthia comes to terms with her environment paradoxically by escaping it. Maisie's achievement, though, is greater than Cynthia's. For unlike Hodge who shows us Cynthia

¹⁸ C. L. R. James, *Minty Alley* (1936; rpt. London, 1971), p. 238.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* p. 126.

²⁰ *Ibid.* p. 226.

evolving in a rural world of love and cultural richness before being introduced into the middle-class Trinidad society, James places Maisie in the urban slums of Trinidad. Yet Maisie too overcomes the obstacles of her environment. Both she and Cynthia, for better or for worse, decide not to settle for the lives of their elders. Faced by a society that offers very few choices, they decide to create their own choices. That they both choose a departure is both ironic and revealing.

Again, one might ask what happens to these young women once they have departed their island home. Do their roles change? Do they function independently as women in their own rights? Or are their identities still defined through their roles as wives and mothers? Claude McKay, in his characterization of Bitá Plant in *Banana Bottom* (1938), does attempt to supply an answer to such questions. Through Bitá, McKay portrays the evolution into womanhood of a West Indian child who has been exposed to European culture and who then returns to the Caribbean setting. Bitá does not, like Hodge's Cynthia, become alienated from her roots. After eight years of education in Europe, she returns to her rural village and fits rights back into place. To culminate her unique history, Bitá eventually falls in love with and marries the uneducated but hardworking and dependable Jubban. Bitá spurns the superficialities of the so-called middle-class society of Jamaica for the simpler and almost idyllic life of the folk peasants that McKay depicts.

With Bitá, then, we have an example of a woman who unlike most of the women we meet in the literature has been given a real choice—a choice to be truly independent, to define herself through her own achievements, to pursue a career for her own satisfaction. However, in analyzing the role McKay has Bitá play, one must remember one important fact: McKay, when he wrote *Banana Bottom*, had been away from his native Jamaica for almost two decades. McKay, therefore, is writing with a certain degree of nostalgia. Consequently, his portrayal of Bitá and the folk peasants of rural Jamaica, on the whole, tends to be romantic and somewhat unrealistic. In contrast the message that Merle Hodge has for the women in the Caribbean is pragmatic and forward-moving:

The term "career woman" has been turned into a dirty suggestion. It has associations of selfishness, abnormality and coldness on the part of the woman. The myth will have to be shattered. What we need is more and more pioneers of so-called career women, women who do not rush into starting families at eighteen, before they know themselves, and whose children, if they decide to have any, will have the full benefit of their mother's maturity and self-fulfillment; women who will never come to blame their children for getting in their way.²¹

²¹ Hodge, *Savacou*, p. 44.

Another role that Caribbean women play in the literature, and one that might also be related to the African cultural heritage is that of religious leaders in the community. The traditional role of the female diviner in Africa is well known. John Mbiti writes that in some West African cultures, God calls a would-be diviner, usually a young woman in her adolescence. She wanders about in the woods, and after several days returns with the power to divine. The community then erects a shrine for her, which is referred to as the "hut of God," while the diviners are called "children of God."²² This phenomenon has, of course, undergone many changes and reinterpretations in the Caribbean. Maureen Warner Lewis in an article entitled "The Nkuyu: Spirit Messengers of the Kumina" writes a revealing and factual account of Miss Queenie, a full-time diviner and religious leader of a small following in lower Kingston. Miss Queenie, who at the time she was interviewed by the author was forty-five years old, can be viewed on one level as a symbol of the synthesis that came about between the culture of the Old World and that of the New. Miss Queenie's maternal grandparents had arrived from Kongo as indentured laborers in Jamaica after the abolition of slavery in 1834. As a young girl Miss Queenie had had her first mystical experience which lasted for a period of twenty-one days and paralleled that of female diviners in Africa. She went on to achieve all the mystical powers peculiar to female African diviners, at the same time gaining the respect of her faithful followers.²³

Not surprisingly, the female religious leaders we find in the fiction usually inherit this position on the death of their husbands. Examples can be found in Sylvia Wynter's *The Hills of Hebron* (1962) and Andrew Salkey's *A Quality of Violence* (1959). The women who people Wynter's work, followers of a Christian God, are in search of a dream, in search of some meaning for their meaningless lives. Prostitutes, stonebreakers, grass-weeders, cane-cutters, they have been exploited all their lives in the outside world by an indifferent society and at home by their men who have fared no better than they. When their leader Prophet Moses fails to fly to heaven on their behalf, he has himself tied to a cross and left to die. On his death, his widow, Miss Gatha, becomes the *de facto* leader. Miss Gatha is the only one among them who has any money, and with the drought that compounds the existing poverty, it becomes apparent that the Hebronites are more in need of physical than spiritual salvation. Miss Gatha rises to the occasion. She suffers Aloysius and then Obadiah to temporarily lead the New Believers, all the while with her eyes on the leadership for her own son, Isaac, when he comes of age. But Isaac

²² John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (New York, 1970), p. 89.

²³ Maureen Warner Lewis, "The Nkuyu: Spirit Messengers of the Kumina," *Savacou*, op. cit.), pp. 57-8.

betrays his mother, for, like Cynthia in *Crick Crack Monkey*, once Isaac has experienced life outside of his rural setting, he no longer wants any part of his former life. He secretly returns to Hebron, rapes Obadiah's young wife, Rose, and steals his mother's money. Rose is able eventually to vindicate herself and save her marriage. With the birth of Isaac's and Rose's son there is renewed hope for Miss Gatha and the Hebronites. For as her new-born grandson is put in her arms, the rain begins to fall, the long drought is over, and there is renewed life in the hills of Hebron. Hence, although Miss Gatha does not function as a successful religious leader, it is through her tenacity and determination that the people of Hebron continue.

The religion practiced in Salkey's *A Quality of Violence* is Pocomania, which, according to Jahn, is a fusion of various African and Christian rites.²⁴ Mother Johnson takes over the leadership on the death of her husband, Dada Johnson. In this work, there is an obvious struggle between African religious practices and Christianity. The intent of the work seems to be to demonstrate that the rites of Pocomania are based on ignorance and evil doing. In the beginning, when the followers are under Mother Johnson's influence, they accept their link with Africa and acknowledge that Mother Johnson has some special spiritual power. However, when Mother Johnson fails to save the life of a sick child, and Brother Parkins, who is the spokesman for the educated and Christian section of the community, tells the people "[Mother Johnson] is a common obeah woman: Black magic and a lot of nastiness are the things she thinks important . . .,"²⁵ they soon turn against her. Eventually Mother Johnson is deserted by all of her followers. Good has triumphed over evil. As she is being led to her death, one of her erstwhile followers comments, "We going to learn her a lesson . . . We going to learn her what it means to lead people into darkness. Must be back to Africa she must be want to lead we."²⁶ There is very little that is subtle in the portrayal of the African presence in this work. The African retentions as evidenced in Mother Johnson and her followers are absolutely rejected and explicitly denigrated. Mother Johnson is depicted as a complete failure as a religious leader.

It is obvious, therefore, that in spite of the transmutations and reinterpretations that various aspects of traditional African culture have undergone in the New World, there still exist among Caribbean people some survivals of Africanism. These survivals surface in a variety of areas, religious as well as secular. As has been shown, there are several

²⁴ Jahn, p. 60.

²⁵ Andrew Salkey, *A Quality of Violence* (London, 1959), p. 137.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 158.

analogies that can be drawn between Caribbean women as they appear in the literature and their African counterparts. The most significant analogy that the literature reveals is that women in the Caribbean like their counterparts in Africa are ultimately assessed on their success as wives and mothers, and that traditionally they have not been taken seriously as a viable force in either the religious or secular workings of the community, even though, as we have seen, their contributions in both areas are anything but negligible.

