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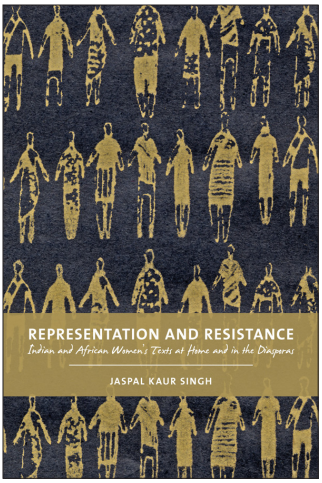

REPRESENTATION AND RESISTANCE: INDIAN AND AFRICAN WOMEN'S TEXTS AT HOME AND IN THE DIASPORAS

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ISBN 978-1-55238-662-0

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6

The Diasporic Search for Cultural Belonging in Myriam Warner-Vieyra's *Juletane*

In *Juletane*, Myriam Warner-Vieyra represents the life of a young Guadeloupean woman who lives in France and who now "returns" to Africa. The novella thus presents a woman from the African diaspora who returns to her mythical African homeland but finds herself marginalized due to her "otherness" in her "home" country. Her fragmented sense of self and her duality as a colonial subject leads to alienation, yet Warner-Vieyra, through her "mad" female character, tries to resist and subvert colonial and national discursive strategies. She may not always be successful in subverting the dominant paradigm, but she attempts to bring into sharp focus the alienation suffered by a diasporic subject in the many shifting spaces it comes to inhabit. The East/West binary provides interesting and ambiguous insights into the postcolonial condition of both the author and her representational subjects. The author herself is a Guadeloupean woman who lived in France for many years and has lived in Senegal for over forty years.

Colonialism and its persistent destructive powers in the Caribbean form the backdrop of this narrative. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and

Helen Tiffin discuss the aftermaths of colonialism in the Caribbean in *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*:

> In the Caribbean, the European imperial enterprise ensured that the worst features of colonialism throughout the globe would all be combined in the region: the virtual annihilation of the native population of Caribs and Arawaks; the plundering and internecine piracy amongst European powers; the deracination and atrocities of the slave trade and plantation slavery … (145–46)

The aftermaths of colonialism in the Caribbean proved disastrous for many, particularly those displaced and dislocated, first from Africa, then in the Caribbean, and further in Europe, never belonging, their subjectivity forever fragmented.

In this chapter, I look at some of the aftermaths of colonialism – such as the notion of "displacement," "exile," and "return" – and their personal and political implications for women from the Caribbean. As Carole Boyce Davies writes regarding Caribbean women writers, "Migration creates the desire for home, which in turn produces the writing of home" (13). For many writers from the Caribbean, the return to "home" or "nation of origin" was seen as the end of the sense of alienation that they felt. "Nostalgia is a powerful element in much Caribbean women's fiction, and usually regarded as a dangerous element in it," states Mary Condé ("Introduction" 2). Thus, for many, the return to home itself is riddled with conflict as "colonial imaginary space is split, the language of the experience of oppression at a symbolic distance from the European drawing room," posits Charlotte Sturgess (203). She adds, "Presence itself has then to be constantly mediated through discontinuity, and the strategies, diversions and subversions which attest to its complicated allegiances in post-colonial time and space render the securing of the subject in language both crucial and problematical" (Sturgess 203). Thus, subjectivity is constructed through "migrancy and loss" (Sturgess 203) for many Caribbean women writers.

Warner-Vieyra tries to expose and undermine dominant strategies of power that are manifested in forms of racism and sexism when she represents Juletane, who "returns" to her "home," the result of which remains

ambiguous, and therefore maddening. I argue that, being a diasporic subject and as a Westernized person herself, the author's ideas of what she considers sexist and oppressive are themselves problematic due to their ambiguities.

Warner-Vieyra's novella is in the form of a diary, written by the late Juletane, but is being read simultaneously by Hélène (a social worker in Africa) and the audience after Juletane's death. Juletane and Hélène never meet in the course of their lives, although they had come close to meeting, once. Dr. Monravi, a French psychiatrist, had referred Juletane to her because they were both from the Island, but they could not meet at that time. However, after Juletane's death, the doctor gives Hélène Juletane's few possessions, including a diary. She had set the diary aside, and at a significant stage in her life, while she is packing, she rediscovers it. She is in the act of reading the diary as the narrative unfolds.

Juletane, a West Indian orphan living in Paris, was born in the French Antilles. When she meets Mamadou, an African student, she falls in love with him, marries him and "returns" with him to Africa, presumably Senegal. Through a chance encounter with a compatriot on the ship, Juletane finds out that Mamadou has a first wife and a child, and cannot believe or accept she is in a polygamous marriage. However, when Mamadou promises to leave his first wife once he finds a job, Juletane tries to save her marriage by becoming pregnant. After a brief period of happiness, she has a miscarriage, and feeling dejected and unwanted, she retreats to an inner room, refusing contact with anyone, and eventually starts a journal. Then, when her husband marries a third time, Juletane's descent into madness begins.

At the beginning of the novella, Juletane is represented as thinking that returning to Africa, "the land of her forefathers" (15), will define her as an African, and even though she appears unaware that her ideas of Africa and African customs are patriarchal in terms, she is aware of Africa as a land of her forefathers. However, when Mamadou offers her the position of a junior wife within a polygamous Muslim family, she describes her role as an "intruder" in an alien land.

Warner-Vieyra provides a critique of polygamy through this text, as does Mariama Bâ in *So Long a Letter*, attacking the unfairness of the African Muslim patriarchal system. Like Bâ, she also examines the notion of romantic love. When she first meets Mamadou, Juletane realizes that she has been looking for a "prince charming" (63). She is ecstatic when

she finds out that Mamadou returns her love. She says, "I loved him with all the ardour and intensity of a first and only love.… Mamadou became my whole world" (13). Soon she finds that her ideals of romantic love are far different from those of her husband. Because of the social customs of the country, Awa, the first wife, accepts Juletane and is even kind to her in her own way. Juletane, who is unable to decipher such traditional, non-Western practices, decides to return to Paris; the only problem is lack of funds. She surmises that the only way she would fit into this household is as a mother, and when she becomes pregnant, she shares a short period of great joy and happiness with her husband.

However, after a car accident, which causes her to miscarry and leaves her sterile, her "inferior" position in the family becomes clear to her. First, she loses the dream of a romantic life with Mamadou, and then she loses all hope of being accepted as a mother. Removing herself from the social sphere and isolating herself in a tiny room, Juletane, seeing herself as useless because of her sterility and lack of romantic love, shaves her head, dons mourning clothes, and contemplates suicide. Finally, unable to separate the real from the imagined, Juletane has a nervous breakdown. Thus, Juletane's search for her identity leads her from space to alienated space: from her Island home to France and then to Africa, leading her to "choose" a tiny room, which ultimately leads into a confined space in a mental asylum. Such negations of space and speech lead to the silencing of the subject; here, the narrative and discursive structures are destabilized, leading to the disruption of narrative flow, hence read as madness.

Let us re-examine the trajectory of Juletane's journey into madness. Her resistance to patriarchy with its practice of polygamy leads her to encourage her husband's family to see her "madness." In her "madness," Juletane retreats into the inner spaces of the home, for she is unable to construct an identity in its open spaces: "I remain locked in our room without eating or drinking" (24). She looks out from her room into the inner courtyard, where, under a barren mango tree – a symbol of Juletane's existence – she views the comfortable figure of Awa with her children. Eventually, as the dominant discourses of Africa start to take over Juletane's consciousness, we see her increasingly dwelling on her barrenness.

That "madness" becomes more pronounced when Mamadou marries again. The new wife, Ndeye, too, hates Juletane and makes no effort to hide her hatred. From one of the windows facing the courtyard, Juletane surveys the first wife and her children and listens to the third

wife's gossiping with her friends, yet she refuses to learn the West African language and continues to write in French. She does not participate in the Muslim festivals nor does she take part in the baptism of Mamadou's and Awa's son. She remains separated from the community that defines the identity of each of the family members. Alienated due to her colour, which is lighter than that of women around her, Juletane remains an outsider, a "Toubabesse" (a White woman), according to Ndeye, Mamadou's third wife; here, she is not even considered a black woman.

Over the years, we see Juletane's refusal to be defined by the other members of her family in the domestic sphere. One day, when she leaves her space to go into the living room to play her favourite record, Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony*, she is slapped by Ndeye for daring to invade her space. Because Juletane had so far refused to be part of the household, Mamadou and Awa refuse when she needs and asks for their help. Juletane no longer imagines herself as mad, for she refuses to speak and has, in fact, gone for two years without speaking to her husband, nor can she communicate with the other members of her family. Due to her silence, she is no longer part of the discursive community, and her sense of self is further splintered and fragmented.

Later, when Awa's children are found dead through poisoning, Juletane writes: "Did I pour the contents of the medicine bottle into the children's drinking cup? Or did I leave the bottle where they could reach it? I don't remember anything" (74). Did she kill the children in a rage? Was she insane at that time? Juletane has been named the madwoman, "*la folle*" by Ndeye, which has effectively erased her real name from everyone's memory, leading her to question her "madness":

> Here they call me the "madwoman," not very original. What do they know about madness? What if mad people weren't mad? What if certain types of behavior which simple, ordinary people call madness, were just wisdom, a reflection of the clear-sighted hypersensitivity of a pure, upright soul plunged into a real or imaginary affective void? (2)

In this void, devoid of dominant discursive inscription, the soul, through psychic transformation, can rewrite itself and the body can transcend ideological constructions. However, reinscription, in one form or the

other, does not happen for Juletane, for she has been named by others, and although she tries resisting such naming, she has no means of transcending the Westernized cultural script. The self-imposed isolation, although painful, is not traumatic to such an extent as to alter her subjecthood and deem her mad. Her anger, however, propels her, and so she pours boiling oil on the sleeping Ndeye's face, declaring, "that slap in the face was the last drop that made my cup of passivity overflow and transformed my patience into a raging torrent" (50). Her aggression and attempt at agency confines her to a mental institution, where she dreams of going to a graveyard and seeing her own grave with no name on it. Awa kills herself by drowning in a well, and later, Mamadou dies in a car accident. Regretting that her husband died before he could read her diary, she finally stops writing, and three days later, she dies in the hospital. She couldn't conceive of a reality outside of patriarchy, be it Eastern or Western.

Although Juletane's narrative ends here, another story starts as Juletane's journal is finally read by Hélène, a Guadeloupean woman who has also lived in France, the Caribbean, and then West Africa. After reading the tragic account of Juletane's encounter with polygamy and oppressive patriarchal customs and traditions, Hélène's life is transformed due to the readings: "Juletane's diary had broken the block of ice around her heart" (79). She had been feeling like a displaced person before in Africa; now, she no longer feels "alienated," for she has found a sense of community with Juletane, even after her death. She understands Juletane's alienation, and although Juletane had refused to construct an identity for herself by redefining the traditional role of wife or mother, Hélène realizes that one can break down the binary of domestic and public.

Postcolonial African feminism's ambivalence when it comes to individual versus community identity is reflected in this novel. On the one hand, romantic individualism is privileged over communal identity, while on the other hand, individualism is not valorized if it means communal and familial identity are being denied. The text suggests that after reading Juletane's diary, Hélène – who had believed in a creed of "me first," as she considers herself "her own woman" – may now marry because she has become more "feminine," instead of marrying simply because she desired to "become a mother" (1). She used to be quite clear in what she desired in marriage:

> She had recently decided to get married for the simple reason that she wanted a child of her own. She was fond of her husband-to-be. He was ten years her junior, a handsome athletic man, six feet tall, eighty kilos, gentle as a lamb. She was his superior financially and intellectually. Too independent by nature, she could not have tolerated a husband who would dominate, make decisions, take the lead. (1)

After she reads Juletane's diary, she decides to marry for other reasons as she realizes that she does not have to choose one or the other. She remembers her childhood home, the Island, and thinks of her happy childhood as well as the good relationship that she still maintains with her family. Every month, she sends money home, "with a short letter, always promising a long one next time" (242). Although she feels she has nothing in common with her people from the Island, she starts thinking of her family kindly. Further, although Hélène had been hurt in love when her first fiancé left her for a white woman, and although she was planning to marry just for convenience's sake, she starts to transform after reading the diary. Thus, even though her role may have undergone transformation and she can marry someone of her choice while remaining financially independent, the patriarchal family and its patterns are still very much in position, although somewhat altered. Hélène's symbolic emancipation shows us an alternate reality, an alternate mythology. Even though Westernization did not bring emancipation in terms of liberty and economic independence for many women, educated women could envision change in the domestic space. Hélène's marriage to a much younger man shows that she could revise the traditional paradigm of marriage by rewriting the familiar scripts of family for personal fulfillment and empowerment.

By allowing Juletane to die, and by inserting Hélène's presence in the text, Warner-Vierya helps to redefine Hélène's identity. Initially, Juletane searches for a national identity, whereas Hélène searches for an individual identity, but national identity is not separate from communal identity, so Juletane, who is defined primarily by Western ideology of individualism, suffers when she is being interpellated by another ideology. Earlier in the narrative, it is disclosed that she may have had a miscarriage due to her transgression of an African cultural practice during pregnancy. Juletane begins to knit baby clothes for her unborn child, which is considered

inauspicious. Ultimately, her refusal or inability to be defined by the dominant paradigms of Africanness causes her to lose her sanity.

According to Michael Seidel, "an exile is someone who inhabits one place and remembers or projects the reality of another" (ix). Thus, this conflicted and hybrid psyche in exile that is Juletane even rejects her body – on which one ideology is inscribed and another one is trying to take over – in various ways. In the beginning, when Mamadou spends time away from her in the company of Awa, she bashes her head against the wall, ending up with a scarred forehead. She also rejects her body and her sexuality when she becomes anorexic and grows extremely skinny. Her act of cutting off her hair is also a rejection of her pre-scribed body image. She wants to rewrite herself anew. She steals an old notebook of one of Awa's children and begins the process of reinscription through journalling. Juletane "imagines" herself through writing, but as we have seen, her redefinition proves to be limiting.

Odile Cazenave suggests that Warner Vieyra uses the outsider's view to critique "societal standards" and to contest "traditional roles;" she posits that "with a combination of techniques and strategies, in particular, violence, humiliation, and marginalization … women writers … have subverted … the masculine paradigm … [through the] choice of the marginal character" which is the result of the "revolutionary spirit" of such writers (10). However, I argue that although Warner-Vieyra critiques traditional cultural practices such as polygamy in her text, by providing an enforced resolution she seems to reinforce patriarchal ideology. However, as a Western-educated woman, her critique is directed at Muslim polygamous practices, which she contrasts with the notion of Christian monogamous, romantic love. Although Juletane is represented as resisting oppressive patriarchal practices, it is the Muslim practice of polygamy that she is resisting. Even though she goes mad in an attempt to resist, Mamadou is still the intended audience of her diary. Once he dies, she no longer sees the need to write, for she has wanted him to know how much she suffered for his betrayal.

Therefore, while Warner-Vieyra helps to raise consciousness in terms of women's suffering in a postcolonial society, the notion of romantic love and monogamous marriage fails to critique the oppressive social and economic structures from which many oppressive social practices arise. What is of crucial importance, however, is that while Juletane could not rewrite herself within the spaces provided for by patriarchy, Hélène learns

to use the very space for rearticulation and renegotiation of female identity. Therefore, Juletane's resistance, although limiting for her, becomes empowering for Hélène because she learns to read and revise this cultural myth for her own self-empowerment through reimagining women's community. She does not give up one space for another; instead, she uses the liminal spaces of patriarchal ideology that open up for redefinition and rearticulation for self-empowerment within the given space. In the long run, such acts can be viewed as more productive and empowering than trying to recreate another hegemony within a closed structure of society, which will in the short run lead to failure and a nervous condition for the conflicted subject, or else co-optation by the dominant ideological paradigms for their own purposes. A paradigm shift accomodates only altered realities; on the other hand, subversions can occur only through complete dismantling and reconstruction, or through turning the paradigm on its head. Dismantling and reconstruction of oppressive structures only occur through revolutions or rebellions. So far, feminists have been only successful in altering realities in limited ways, and Hélène is one such example. Finally, my act of reading *Juletane* is to posit another reading, and to suggest that, perhaps, certain feminist readings can be limiting if we fail to contextualize the narrative and the writer within the larger discursive systems in postcolonial and global world spaces.