

Women, Violence and Witchcraft in Maryse Condé's Célanire cou-coupé and Gisèle Pineau's

Chair Piment

The Caribbean is the product of violence. It is, therefore, not surprising that Caribbean writers who rely heavily on real Caribbean sociology, anthropology, politics, and above all, history to weave their fictitious stories accord an important place to this theme in their writings. Indeed, physical and psychological violence is at the core of many Caribbean narratives. More interestingly, women writers tend to articulate acts of physical violence perpetrated by women on other women more frequently than their male counterparts. This may well underline their commitment to interpret, as Fanon would say, the archipelago's "âme locale" and to project fictionally the reality of the region in a direct, stark and realistic manner that will sensitize people and bring about positive changes. The physical and psychological frailty generally attributed to European women do not always apply to Caribbean women whose psychology, values, codes of behavior and customs are derived, in many respects, from a history based on violence. History records that they were more numerous than men in sugar cane field work where the task was the harshest (Victor Schœlcher, *Des colonies françaises*, Fort-de-France, 1976).

The two leading French Caribbean female writers, Maryse Condé and Gisèle Pineau, offer the reader two excellent examples of violence perpetrated by women in *Célanire Cou-coupé* and *Chair Piment* respectively. These are to date the best novels of the fantastic ever written by these two authors. Maryse Condé's *Célanire cou-coupé* was inspired by a true story she read in the Guadeloupean newspaper that had shocked the entire country. A very young baby had been found over a pile of trash with her throat slit. The mother was suspected of committing infanticide.

In her narrative, Maryse Condé imagines that the baby whom she names Célanire Pingeau has been saved by a doctor. As an adult, Célanire devotes her life to finding her parents, and in particular, her father. In so doing, she commits many cruel and eerie crimes and is regarded by her community as a witch.

Chair Piment is the story of Suzon Mignard who at age sixteen falls in love with Melchior. Unfortunately, Melchior inexplicably turns away from her. Suzon dedicates her entire life to reconquering him and commits numerous bizarre crimes to achieve her goal. She is also considered to be a witch by her community. Suzon's crimes primarily concern several women, whereas Célanire's most violent misdeed is directed against one woman.

By using violence as a theme in their novels and women as the direct agents of crimes, Maryse Condé and Gisèle Pineau both highlight one of the main characteristics of Caribbean history. The region was developed out of unspeakable violence brought about by colonization and slavery. Alluding to this violence in *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (1983), Aimé Césaire, one of the main poets of the archipelago, exclaims: "I have but blood in my memory! (...) I can only see blood. I remember nothing but corpses!" (*Que de sang dans ma mémoire!. (...) Ma mémoire est entourée de sang. Ma mémoire a sa ceinture de cadavres !*) (All subsequent translations are mine).

This historical heritage together with poor socio-economic opportunities is a favorable terrain for violence that can be ascertained at various degrees in all contemporary Caribbean societies. Such an emphasis therefore in the texts is meant to denounce violence and above all to suggest a better alternative for the region's future. In addition, using female characters who normally symbolize virtue and moderation as agents of exaggerated violence evokes the widespread nature of this historical violence and the urgency of the current situation. By providing a positive conclusion to these women's stories and making them denounce and renounce the horror they endured, the writers indicate the way towards a promising future for the region.

In fact, Célanire and Suzon are the region. They are indeed a trope that symbolizes the Caribbean Region at large. It is suggested that their eventual sensitization and understanding of their situation and the positive outcome to their miseries open up a path that should be followed. At the same time, their experience brings that of the region to mind. Indeed, despite an indescribable violence from the outset,

beauty as well as a culture common to all did emerge. Finally, the authors use two forceful historical and anthropological factors that characterize the region, namely violence and witchcraft, to articulate a committed and political discourse, the aim of which is to do away with this particular aspect of the past and urge today's Caribbean people to embrace their future in a more holistic manner. Like Aimé Césaire, their cry of revolt and denunciation is probably the following: "We have had enough of these disgusting corpses!" (*Assez de ce goût de cadavre fade !*) (*Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*). History in itself is extremely important as the characters must revisit their own 'histories' to uncover the truth about their identity. Violence and witchcraft have left their mark on Caribbean history and psyche as both are intertwined with power and the unbalanced relationship of dominating-dominated between masters and slaves.

It is worth giving examples of this violence in which the region developed to demonstrate its widespread nature and the fact that Maryse Condé and Gisèle Pineau make their characters reproduce the Caribbean historical experience with the same intensity. As Simonne Henry-Valmore asserts, masters and slaves are, from the outset, "In the heart of this theater of violences..." (Simonne Henry-Valmore, "Une figure de l'imaginaire antillais: le quimboiseur", 1988, 29).

The Europeans' arrival in the Caribbean space resulted in the immediate eradication of the indigenous people and the brutal dehumanization of the African slaves deported to satisfy their quest for power and enrichment. In her *Santé et société esclavagiste à la Martinique*, (1998) Geneviève Leti points that, "When one studies the society of that time, the main impression is that violence and all sorts of extreme behavior often governed not only class relations but also relations within a given social class" (*Quand on étudie la société de cette époque, l'impression dominante est que la violence et les excès de toutes sortes régissent le plus souvent les relations interclasses mais aussi les relations à l'intérieur des catégories sociales*) (Geneviève Leti, *Santé et société esclavagiste à la Martinique*, 1998, 37).

Such a society based on injustice could have generated no other attitude than one that established violence as its principle. Acts of violence were observed at all levels and among all social classes including that of the ruling class. Geneviève Leti notes that “This violence is widespread and affects all social classes. (...) ...this violence is so ingrained in this society that it is often never questioned” (*Cette violence est générale et touche toutes les catégories sociales.(...) cette violence est tellement inhérente à la société que souvent elle n’est pas remise en question*) (38-45). First, it was regarded as justifiable for white planters to use violence on slaves as noted in the following excerpt:

“But what more often characterizes this society is that because of slavery, many relationships are sadistic since the masters exercise their right to punish their slaves more or less brutally (...) All slaves whatever their position are subject to their master’s justice. Children are treated no better than the elderly, the sick or pregnant women...” (43-45)

(Mais ce qui caractérise le plus cette société c’est que, sur les habitations, du fait de l’esclavage, beaucoup de relations relevant du sadisme, les maîtres exerçant plus ou moins brutalement leur droit de punition sur les esclaves(...))Tous les esclaves, quelle que soit leur position dans l’habitation sont passibles de la justice du maître. Les enfants ne sont pas plus épargnés que les vieux, les maladies ou les femmes enceintes...).

Second, the planters do not hesitate to use violence against one another:

“The white Creoles are very sensitive to provocations and do not always have the patience to wait to settle their differences by fighting a duel. Some of them walk around with small canes fitted with daggers, swordsticks or even pistols so they settle their disagreements on the spot” (*Les Blancs créoles sont sensibles aux provocations et ils n’ont pas toujours le temps d’attendre pour régler*

leurs différends en duels. Certains se promènent avec de petites cannes armées de poignards, des cannes-épées ou même des pistolets, réglant leurs comptes sur le champs.) (40-41).

Their wives were not spared their wrath as the following indicates: “ The planters’ wives are also victims of violence and there are cases of women who have been frequently battered...” (*Les femmes de colons ne sont pas à l’abri de la violence et on trouve des cas de femmes battues fréquemment...*) (41).

Third, fighting among slaves often ends with the death of one of the participants: According to Rufz, “ In their brawls, the negroes seldom use offensive weapons although they always have their cutlasses. They resort to using fists or charge head first at one another, head first just like rams” (*Selon Rufz, “les nègres dans leurs rixes se servent peu d’armes offensives, quoiqu’ils marchent constamment avec leurs coutelas. Ils ont recours à leur poings ou s’élancent les uns contre les autres la tête en avant à la façon de beliers)* (42).

Finally, women also show their aptitude in the area. French abolitionist, Victor Schœlcher, reminds us of the influence violence has on white women who are in a position to perpetuate it: “Influenced by the system of slavery, even ladies who are by nature so kind and so compassionate become cruel. They premeditatedly either have their servants whipped or whip them themselves showing no mercy” (*Les dames mêmes, naturellement si douces, si compatissantes, deviennent cruelles sous la manifeste influence du régime servile. Elles entendent fouetter, font fouetter ou fouettent sans pitié leurs domestiques)* (Victor Shoelcher, *Histoire de l’esclavage, pendant les deux dernières années*, Emile Désormeaux réédition, Fort-de-France, 1973, 287).

Geneviève Leti gives a vivid example of their cruelty and asserts that the planter’s wives can ill-treat their slaves in the worst manner:

“Some women show a taste for cruelty, even sadism (...) Acts of cruelty are more often perpetrated by men but women can also commit them: Marie-Anne Auguste Genet who is 40 years old and lives in Saint-Pierre burned the throat and the arm of her slave Lucette with a hot knife. She also crushed a hot pepper on her private parts” (*Certaines femmes font aussi preuve d’un raffinement de cruauté, voire de sadisme (...) Les affaires de sévices mettent surtout en cause des hommes mais les femmes savent, elles aussi, user de cruauté: Marie-Anne Augustine Genet, 40 ans, à Saint-Pierre a brûlé son esclave Lucette au cou et au bras à l’aide d’un couteau chauffé au feu et lui a écrasé un piment sur les parties sexuelles*) (Geneviève Leti, 43-45).

It has been reported that female slaves also poisoned their masters, the latter’s wives as well as their own children to prevent separation. They also performed self-abortion to protect their unborn child from slavery. In a chapter entitled “Les femmes esclaves face à la violence” Gilbert Pago concludes:

“One is always on the alert, whether one is a lady owning slaves or whether one is a slave who will never be free. Violence is used to impose one’s authority and maintain one’s prerogatives but the slaves themselves sometimes commit suicide to avoid punishment from their extremely cruel masters or mistresses” (*On vit donc sur le qui-vive, que l’on soit demoiselle propriétaire d’esclaves, ou esclave soi-même désespérant de voir un jour la liberté. On pratique la violence en croyant imposer son autorité et maintenir sa suprématie, mais on la pratique quelquefois soi-même en tant qu’esclave en se suicidant pour échapper aux châtiments de maîtres ou des maîtresses trop cruels*) (*Les femmes et la liquidation du système esclavagiste à la Martinique: 1848-1852, 1998, 45*).

Owing to their power or jealousy, violence among women was primarily carried out by white women who beat their female slaves with impunity. Many planters had extramarital affairs with their female slaves with whom they had children. Punishing these female slaves physically was a way for these white women to soothe their humiliation and psychological pain: "...adulterous affairs between white men and black and mixed women are commonplace..." (*...les relations adultères d'hommes blancs à femmes mulâtres et noires sont généralisées...*) (Pago, 52).

Many female slaves were accused of casting spells on their mistresses out of jealousy as typified in Zabette's case:

"Zabette, a slave who is her master's mistress is accused of having poisoned her master's fiancée by putting arsenic in the latter's coffee and tea...Zabette is sentenced to death. The next day she is found dead in her dungeon. This is presumed to be a simple case of jealousy. But the matter becomes more complicated when one realizes that she is a witch: ..."
(L'esclave Zabette, maîtresse du maître, est accusée d'avoir empoisonné la fiancée de ce dernier avec de l'arsenic placé dans le café et dans la tisane qu'on lui administrait...Zabette est condamné à la peine capitale. Le lendemain on la trouve morte dans son cachot. On est donc à priori dans le cas banal d'un drame de jalousie; mais cela se complique car on apprend que c'est une socière:..) (Leti, 52).

It is clear that at the end of the slavery system Caribbean societies experienced a long period of fragmentation filled with extreme and unquestioned violence that is quite likely to endure into the subsequent age. Women inflict violence on one another, irrespective of their social status, either to assert their power or to assuage their jealousy. As Gilbert Pago points out, their common gender does not instill any common goal or sense of solidarity among women.

“Women share the same legal status as men of their station and experience segregation at different levels according to their social class and skin color. Being a woman does not bring about any harmonization of their “feminine condition”. They either think of themselves, or are seen, as white, women of color or black slaves. This social structure does not promote any kind of female solidarity nor does it create the feeling of belonging to a specific class” (*Les femmes partagent le statut juridique des hommes de leur condition et vivent donc la ségrégation à différents niveaux, selon leur position sociale et la couleur de leur peau. Le fait d’être femme ne crée nullement une homogénéisation de leur “condition féminine”; elles se vivent et sont vécues comme blanches, libres de couleur, ou esclaves noires. Cette structuration sociale ne favorise pas la solidarité entre les femmes ni ne crée le sentiment de constituer une catégorie spécifique.*) (Gilbert Pago, 1998, 22).

The other distinctive feature the authors use in their respective narratives is the element of the supernatural. This dates back to the slavery period when it was considered that slaves systematically used witchcraft to satisfy their desires. Geneviève Leti notes that even scientists believed in this tale: “Even men who conducted scientific studies cannot help thinking that the African Negroes in particular can do anything by resorting to the supernatural” (*Même des hommes, ayant mené des études scientifiques, n’arrivent pas à se défaire de l’idée que les nègres africains, en particulier, sont capables de tout, en ayant recours au surnaturel*) (Leti, 53).

Thus, Célanire and Suzon combine witchcraft with violence to fulfill their ideals. This enhances the gothic nature of their psyche. At first glance, their evil nature seems to be triggered by a simple Freudian envy, passion and obsession for a man they claim to love. There is a slight difference between Célanire’s and Suzon’s case. The former wants to be reunited with her father while the latter seeks to regain her former lover’s attention. However, upon closer examination, it appears that their motivations are by far more complex and are rationalized by a set of decisive circumstances. Their true desire is ultimately to be

part of a stable and secure whole in which they would be the protective element. To correct the abnormality of their destiny, they long for a simpler, normal, more conventional life. They both want to be mothers and nurture their own family. This biblical concept of the woman as a nurturing mother contradicts the reality of their life governed by mischief and demonology. In any case, both women are in the midst of two primitive and contradictory values, which are: violence on the one hand and women destined for motherhood on the other. Their desire in itself is highly symbolic since it represents the reconstitution of the family concept that was sacrificed during the slavery period. A. Gautier notes in her doctoral dissertation that, “The slave’s family is only acknowledged if it is dependent on the master’s” (*La famille de l’esclave n’est reconnue que comme partie dépendante de celle du maître*) (A. Gautier, *Les sœurs de solitude- Histoire des femmes aux Antilles françaises, 1635-1848*, 1982). Célianire and Suzon are sacrificed to circumstances and this consequently rehabilitates the figure of the woman to whom is symbolically restored the prerogatives of motherhood. What they wish for is to belong to a group in which the mother and the child play crucial roles. Marie-Michelle Hilaire states in her sociological survey, *Martinique: Familles, enfants et société*, that according to the African family structure after which Caribbean families are partly patterned, “The mother passes on the laws of the group and the child belongs primarily to the group” (*La mère transmet la loi du groupe et l’enfant appartient d’abord au groupe*) (34). The characters also want to establish their identity by determining who their parents were. Given the complexity of the region’s population development, the issue of identity is a common theme in Caribbean literature and a current concern among Caribbean people. Consequently, these two characters truly epitomize the region.

In both texts, the two women are at the age of innocence and at the prime of their life when the first violent act is committed against them. Indeed, Célianire is only a baby while Suzon is a very young adolescent ready to embrace the promises of a life based on a shared love when they become victims of physical and moral violence. Célianire’s parents are said to be *jan gagé* and have sold their daughter’s soul to the devil even though she had not yet been born, hence her decapitation at birth. According to Jean-Luc

Bonniol, the word *jan gagé* is derived from the term “engagé”, used to describe indentured servants who came to the Caribbean on a thirty-six month contract to work for planters on a temporary basis. The word then had another connotation and was used to describe those who made a permanent pact with the devil to gain power. The word is thus intimately linked to power and to any dominating-dominated relationship (Franck Degoul, *Le commerce diabolique*, 2000, 11-12). Agénor, who took part in this evil business, reminds Célanire who the real culprits are and asks for a fair rendering of justice: “...You’d better turn against your own parents. They are the ones who knowingly hurt you by giving you away to Madeska whom you killed, but who was only doing his job” (...*Tu ferais mieux de te retourner contre tes parents. Ceux-là t’ont sciemment fait du mal en te livrant à Madeska que tu as tué, mais qui ne faisait que son travail.* (Célanire, 265).

Suzon is a victim of betrayal at sixteen when her lover suddenly and silently put a definite end to their burgeoning and reciprocal idyll: “He’d committed himself to me. And then he inexplicably turned away from me like someone who had seen the devil himself come down on earth in his black cloak” (*Il m’avait promis. Et puis, mystère...Il s’est détourné de moi comme un qu’aurait vu le grand Belzébuth descendre sur terre dans sa cape noire...*) (*Chaire Piment*, 297). Therefore, both women suffer from complete betrayal and they are, like the region, the product of violence. The vengeance they exact matches the wrongs committed all the more for their unquestionable patience. Célanire assures Agénor that she will seek implacable revenge: “-Célanire replied, Vengeance is a dish best served cold... Believe me, they won’t get off lightly when I get hold of them” (*-La vengeance, ripostait Célanire, est un plat qui se mange froid. ...Crois-moi, ils ne perdent rien pour attendre*) (Célanire, 265). Suzon admits that she was determined to take the necessary time to exterminate Mina’s entire family (*Chair Piment*, 300).

The violence of both protagonists is triggered by violence and by desire, which itself is fueled by an uncontrolled and unattainable love. They want to understand the reason why they were sacrificed. They also want to have access to knowledge that is jealously hidden. It is a truth that is the key to their identity.

The latter is coated with mystery that enhances the eerie and malevolent nature of their personality and the situation. Questions about Célanire's identity are constantly asked by others who wonder whether she is in fact human. This creates the women's *mal-être* all the more so since others seem to have knowledge of this truth. Célanire is determined to know who her parents were and why they attempted to murder her:

“She did not know who her real parents were and she was only an adopted child. Oh, she had nothing against those who had taken care of her, especially her father. But it was hard not knowing who her biological parents were” (*Elle ne connaissait pas ses véritables parents et n'était qu'une enfant adoptive. Oh, elle n'avait rien à reprocher à ceux qui l'avaient recueillie, à son papa surtout. Mais c'était dur de ne connaître ni le sperme dont elle était issue ni le ventre qui l'avaient portée*) (*Célanire cou-coupé*, 45).

Suzon wants to know and understand why Melchior had suddenly abandoned their promising relationship and why he had rejected her, as she confides in Mina. “After your mammy's death, I went to offer myself to Melchior. It was the last time.... I asked him why he would not take me back. He declared that he could not say anything, that things were this way and that was all. It was our parents' fault” (*Après la mort de ta maman, je suis allée m'offrir à Melchior. La dernière fois...Je lui ai demandé pourquoi il voulait pas de moi. Il a déclaré qu'il pouvait rien dire que c'était ainsi. La faute à ceux d'avant*) (*Chair Piment*, 297).

Moreover, Célanire and Suzon both lack their mother's care, love, protection and attention. Célanire is an orphan and lacks her mother's warmth. Suzon, on the other hand, lives alone with her mother who seems to hide her own past and secrets and addresses her daughter only to humiliate her. When Suzon shows despair after Melchior's treachery, she does not support her and instead insults her: “Didn't I warn

you, you beast! You should have had nothing to do with that mountain nigger! You are nothing but a bitch in heat!” (*Qu’est-ce que je t’avais dit, sacrée bête? T’avais rien à foutre avec ce nègre des mornes! T’es qu’une chienne en chaleur!*) (*Chair Piment*, 163).

So, from the outset, the figure of the woman as mother is tainted and the characters are deprived of all forms of protection for themselves and their humanity. They lack love, their identity and a family—all the components necessary for guaranteeing a happy life. Their wounds are undoubtedly inflicted by emotional deprivation and lack of love that is embodied by the mother who is identified by psychologists as the most critical individual in a child’s life. Marie-Michelle Hilaire reminds us that, “She is socially regarded as the one who nurtures, assists and protects her child.” (*Martinique: Familles, enfants et société*, 1997, 15). The French Caribbean is in the habit of crystallizing womanhood and a mother’s strength and power by the use of metaphoric Creole expressions such as *Fanm sé chatenn*, *nonm sé friapen dou* or *Fanm sé poto mitan*. They mean respectively that “women are chestnuts while men are spoiled breadfruits” and “women are central pillars”. Though both fruits look alike, the breadfruit has no seeds whereas the chestnut does. The *poto mitan* refers to the central pillar that holds voodoo temples together. Similarly, Hilaire emphasizes the fact that in these societies the woman and the mother are said to be matchless and perfect in their ability to protect their children (Hilaire, 79). It is clear that in Condé’s and Pineau’s texts, their behavior fails to support this belief. Subsequently, the characters’ search for the saving truth is also logically accompanied by a morbid and tacit will to seek vindictive revenge. In fact, in light of their ordeal, the acts of violence committed are the manifestation of a strange journey. They undoubtedly represent a deep psychological turmoil and above all a quest for, and an inquest into, the mystery surrounding their misfortunes and identity. To make their misdeeds more poignant and to rationalize their fate, Célianire and Suzon systematically resort to irrational witchery that, according to socio-anthropologists, is another Caribbean peculiarity. In addition to their being given cold psychological traits ordinarily attributed to men, the use of witchcraft underscores the unpleasantness, evil determination and desperation of the women. Commonly

labeled as the *sexe faible* by nature, in these texts their weakness is an acquired characteristic—namely, their violence. However, it is interesting to note that they never perform the acts of violence themselves. Célianire is only believed to have committed the murders through her sorcery whereas Suzon pays sorcerers to commit them. This lessens their evil nature and makes them appear pathetic but redeemable.

In both novels, women's violence is presented as a fatal and logical consequence of injustice. In these women's eyes, it is the sole tool for justice. Regarded as the only way to ward off misfortune and redress a grievance, their triggered but limitless acts of violence are premeditated, targeted and carefully structured with an ascending hierarchy. To achieve their goal, the women must display their ability to deceive and manipulate. Indeed, Célianire is very manipulative and brings her lover Thomas to protect Tanella who has murdered her rapist: "He did not understand how he had managed to let Célianire convince him and had approved of her project. It could be said that she had bewitched him" (*Il ne comprenait pas par quelle folie il s'était laissé convaincre par Célianire et avait approuvé son projet. On aurait dit que sa maîtresse l'ensorcellait*) (50). She was a young adolescent when in Guadeloupe, she tried to force her adoptive father, Doctor Pinceau, to have intercourse with her. Later on, to seek revenge for his refusal, she accused him of rape that led to his conviction (169-170).

While everyone whispers that Célianire is guilty of all of the deaths around her and Suzon is responsible for Melchior's family misfortunes, no one can prove it. Both women are examples of virtue. Célianire cares for the sick, women and children. She creates spaces where women can freely express and emancipate themselves. She is a driving force for the feminist movement and is very defiant toward social and racial conformism. Thanks to her, women do not hesitate to display their feminism and above all their lesbianism openly in these African and Caribbean societies where women suffer from extreme patriarchy and constraints. Suzon takes care of Melchior's children when their parents die and shows much kindness to them during their childhood. She makes a point of giving them sweets and money when she sees them (*Chair Piment*, 177). However, people seem to be aware of the evil nature of the women and there are

constant rumors about their being *djablès*, *jan gagé* or *soukougnan*. By insisting on hearsay, the narrative mode chosen by the people to express their opinions about the two women, Maryse Condé and Gisèle Pineau unveil an important aspect of Caribbean anthropology. According to anthropologist Franck Degoul, witchcraft is the “ethnology of ‘one says’”. Declaring that “one says this and that is true” shows that the speaker is a ‘collective being’ (Franck Degoul, *Le commerce diabolique*, 2000, 37). So, Célianire, who is responsible for countless fiendish infamies in the community of Bougainville in Côte d’Ivoire, is singled out by people.

“People believed she was guilty. Why is this so? If the Europeans refrained from believing in superstition, it was quite the opposite in the Africans’ huts. It was a certainty: “Célianire was a “horse.” One could count the mysterious deaths around her. M. Desrussie: one. Alix Pol-Roger: two. And now, Charlotte de Brabant. They were watching for the next victim” (*Car l’opinion la tenait pour coupable. Comment cela? Si les Européens s’efforçaient de résister à la superstition, dans les cases des Africains, on n’avait pas pareil problème. C’était une certitude: Célianire était un “cheval”. On comptait les morts mystérieuses accumulées autour d’elle. M. Desrussie: un. Alix Pol-Roger: deux. A présent, Charlotte de Brabant. On attendait la prochaine victime*) (Célianire, 85).

While most of her attempts are made against men, Célianire’s most diabolical act is committed against Charlotte de Brabant, an innocent and defenseless woman which renders her mysterious death even more infamous. Célianire, who is her husband’s mistress, has no mercy for Charlotte’s frailness and gender. Célianire is not even jealous of Charlotte since the latter represents no threat to her affair with Thomas. She eliminates Charlotte simply to assert her power and exert total control over her lover.

“Finally, Charlotte’s body was found in the semi-obscurity of the forest, not far from the village of Tiégaba. Smooth and straight, an acajou tree was looking over her. One wonders how she could have walked so many kilometers without a guide or a *tipoye* in this impenetrable thickness, filled with monkeys, panthers and tiger cats... The scene was horrible. One had the impression that beasts, eaters of human flesh and drinkers of fresh blood, had done this to her. Trenches had been dug up around the body” (*Finalement, on retrouva le corps de Charlotte dans la demi-obscurité de la forêt, non loin du village de Tiégaba. Lisse et droit, un acajou de Bassam veillait sur elle. On pouvait se demander comment elle avait fait pour parcourir tant de kilomètres sans guide ni tipoye dans cette touffeur impenetrable, habitée de singes, de panthers et de chats tigres....Le spectacle était terrible. On aurait dit que des fauves, mangeurs de chair humaine et buveurs de sang frais, avaient eu affaire à elle. Aux alentours du corps, la terre était labourée en tranchées*)(83).

It is true that Célanire interferes in everyone’s life as she pleases and is determined to use people to serve her desires. In that respect, she tries to force Hakim, a homosexual, to have sex with her. He, in defending himself against her, discovers her viciousness. Célanire has a horrible scar on her neck that reinforces the impression that she is a monster. It is said that Célanire is committed to the devil and as a *jan gagé* must bear a sign that indicates this. Franck Degoul concludes in his anthropological study about witchcraft in Martinique that there is a “semiology of commitment to the devil” (Degoul, 113). Consequently, what Hakim uncovers is

“A monstrous scar.

A purplish, healed and marked tourniquet was tightly wrapped tightly around her throat. One had the impression that the latter’s throat had been cut in two equal pieces and then more or less patched up. The flesh had been forcefully put together and granulated chaotically” (*Une monstrueuse*

cicatrice. Un garrot de caoutchouc violacé, ravaudé, tavelé, enserrait le cou. On aurait dit que celui-ci avait été coupé en deux parties égales, puis rafistolé tant bien que mal, les chairs rapprochées par force et bourgeonnant dans tous les sens comme elles le voulaient) (97).

Her vengeance for this affront is terrible and Célanire causes Hakim's conviction for Kwame Aniedo's murder. He is deported to Guyana. Célanire is also considered to be a witch by Betti Bouah, Hakim's boss who speaks his mind about her: " Betti Bouah explained that he had not at all been smitten by Célanire. (...) and again this ribbon that is always tied around her neck frightened him just as if he were a little child. There was no doubt. This was the spot where she hid the mark that she was the "horse" of dangerous *aawabo*" (*Betti Bouah expliquait qu'il n'avait pas été ébloui par Célanire. (...) Et puis ce ruban toujours amarré autour de son cou le terrifiait comme un petit enfant. Pas de doute, c'est là qu'elle cachait la marque qu'elle était le "cheval" de dangereux aawabo) (63).*

In her birth country of Guadeloupe where ironically enough she used to be called "pitit à Bon Dyé" which means "child of god", and to which she returns in 1906, she is considered a witch. Even Amarante, one of her female lovers, is uncertain about her true identity. She is even said to be worse than the traditional *soukougnan*.

"She remembered what the Wayanas used to whisper. Célanire was the child of an evil spirit and spread misfortune around her. She was worse than a *soukougnan*, a *jan gagé* that lurked around by night looking for victims till dawn and gorging itself with fresh blood" (*Elle se rappela ce que chuchotaient les Wayanas. Célanire était l'enfant de mauvais esprits et semait le malheur autour d'elle. C'était pire qu'un soukougnan, un jan gagé qui rode à la recherche de victimes jusqu'au devant-jour et se gorge de sang frais) (212).*

Célanire herself admits to Elissa, another one of her female lovers, that she believes in the devil: “Célanire believed firmly, not really in God and his saints, but in the devil, in evil. In the spirits” (...*Célanire croyait fermement non pas tellement au Bon Dieu et à ses saints, mais à Satan, au mal. Aux esprits*) (277). Finally, the last act of violence she commits is the murder of her own father whom she finds in South America. She discovers that, unbeknownst to her mother, he made the decision to commit her soul to the devil for pecuniary reasons. Since such a commitment follows a pattern of “give, receive and give back” (Degoul, 95), Célanire kills her father in cold blood, thereby completing her quest and inquest.

“Yang Ting’s bedroom was a vision from hell! A furious battle seemed to have taken place there. The floor, the walls were all red with blood. The bed covers and sheets were in shreds. Yang Ting’s body was naked, covered with bites, deep cuts, scratches and bruises. Yet, the most gruesome aspect of this crime was that his penis had been cut off and placed like a cigar in his mouth” (*Dans la chambre de Yang Ting, c’était une vision d’enfer! A croire qu’une bataille furieuse s’était livrée. Le plancher, les cloisons étaient rouges de sang. Les couvertures, les draps du lit étaient en charpie. Le corps de Yang Ting était nu, couvert de morsures, de profondes entailles, de griffures, de contusions. Pourtant, le détail qui portait l’horreur à son comble, c’était que le sexe avait été arraché et placé, tel un cigare, dans la bouche entrouverte*) (Célanire, 313-314).

Célanire also discovers her mother’s identity. Soumathi-Tonine is actually not guilty of infanticide but has instead been the victim of her manipulative lover, Yang Ting (Célanire, 275-291). She is a virtuous and religious woman and Célanire decides to sanctify her. Together with her mother’s virtuousness, this gesture redeems Célanire and nullifies her violence. The mother figure as well as the associated notion of the virtuous woman is re-established. Both women are victims of the same man: “Yang Ting had committed a terrible crime against the two women. It was a nameless crime” (*Le jeune Yang Ting avait*

commis à l'encontre de deux femmes un terrible forfait. Un crime sans nom) (315). So, as J. André indicates in “Tuer sa femme”, “the father’s insignificance beatifies the mother” (*la nullité du père béatifie la mère*) (J. André, “Tuer sa femme”, in *L’homme*, 1982, 69-86). After having accomplished her mission, Célianire undergoes a positive transformation that belies the macabre acts she performed from 1901 to 1910.

“From that day on, Célianire’s personality changed radically. Up to that point she had been an energetic and active happy-go-lucky individual. She became lethargic, more reflective and languid. Her eyes lost their spark and were filled with mysteries. She let others talk and even listened to them. She started to repeat that she needed a new goal in life, a new reason to live” (*A dater de cette époque, le caractère de Célianire changea radicalement. Jusqu’alors, elle avait été un boute-en-train, énergique, toujours en mouvement....Elle devint plus lente, réfléchie, languide. Ses yeux perdirent leur éclat et s’approfondirent de mystère. Elle laissa s’exprimer les autres, les écouta....Elle se mit à répéter qu’il lui fallait se fixer un nouveau but pour continuer son existence, une nouvelle raison de vivre*) (334-335).

The wrongs she had suffered and the pain she had inflicted on others can only be fully redressed if she herself becomes a mother and creates the family she never had. Given her personal story, Célianire was always skeptical about motherhood and never entertained the idea of becoming a mother. This echoes the historical fact that many female slaves resented bearing children and committed abortion to protect their offspring from slavery (Marie-Michelle Hilaire, *Martinique: Familles, enfants et société*, 39). With the end of her servitude to violence, Célianire has found her new mission as she asks her husband for a child and states her determination to be a good mother. The concept of family is thus salvaged: “I want a child! Please! This is all I can be now: a good mother” (*Je veux un enfant! S’il te plaît! C’est tout ce que je peux être à présent: une bonne mère*) (341). Finally, thanks to the wisdom and relief her quest brought about, Célianire is ready to start a new life filled with goodness and hope.

Suzon's neighbors are also aware of her manipulative nature and hatred. They all have their ideas about her identity and machiavellism. They too consider her a witch. When Mina, Melchior's daughter, returns from France after being away for twenty-one years, a neighbor warns her about Suzon: " – Do not trust Suzon Mignard, Silène said, as she got up from her rocking chair" (- *Méfie-toi de la Mignard, recommanda silène en abandonnant sa berceuse*) (*Chair Piment*, 257). Like Célanire, she perpetrates several acts of vindictive violence but against women of the same family. At twenty-nine years old, she starts by ordering the death by drowning of Marie-Perle, Melchior's first wife. She commits a second crime at forty-eight years old and pays a sorcerer to kill Médée, Melchior's second wife: "Trident lived up to his reputation and brilliantly showed that he truly was from the new generation. He delegated a truck for the mission and over two days used his powers to tamper with the brakes. On the afternoon of the third day, the Titan crossed Médée's path" (*Trident ne faillit pas à sa réputation et montra avec maestria qu'il était bien de la nouvelle génération. Il délégua un camion qu'il rongea aux freins et par l'esprit pendant deux jours. L'après-midi du troisième jour, le Titan croisa la route de Médée*) (180).

Additionally, Suzon made a point of bewitching Olga and Mina, Melchior's older and second daughters, respectively. While Olga could not bear children, Mina had an uncontrollable urge for sex. Suzon avows to Mina: "I did not want you to experience love at all ...I had asked for twenty years of misfortune for you...Twenty years...(Toi, je voulais pas que tu connaisses l'amour, que t'en sois privée...Vingt ans de malédiction que j'avais demandés pour toi...Vingt ans...)" (301). She also causes the immolation of Rosalia, Melchior's youngest daughter, after having tried to prevent her birth. As a result, Rosalia was born retarded (301). Suzon's great tragedy is enhanced with the implacable passage of time. At forty-eight years old, she attempts for the last time to seduce Melchior – to no avail. Since time and the nature of the mission are critical, she goes so far as to use herself as bait and drinks a potion her sorcerer

gives her. This results in her unfortunate metamorphosis into animals and ultimately in bitter failure. She becomes a *soukougnan* that acts as a mirror to reflect her vain life.

“Suzon mewed for a minute and a half. Then without even understanding what was happening to her she was transformed into less kind animals: snakes, tigers, *mabouyas*, mongooses, spiders, elephants....the poor woman did not even have the time to curse Serpicon who had sold her a dubious potion. The seven essences of love, my foot! It was more like the seven essences of Apocalypse. Suzon could recognize herself in each animal. Her life was unfolding like a nightmare” (*Suzon miaula pendant une minute et demie. Puis, sans bien comprendre ce qui lui arrivait, elle fut jetée dans la peau d'autres bêtes bien moins doucines: serpent, tigre, mabouya, mangouste, araignée, éléphant... La pauvre n'eut pas même le temps de maudire Serpicon qui lui avait vendu un breuvage frelaté. Les sept essences de l'amour, tu parles! Plutôt les sept trompettes de l'Apocalypse...Suzon se reconnaissait en chaque animal. Sa vie défilait comme un cauchemar*) (185).

Finally, her obsession verging on madness, her failure to conquer his heart again brings her to a last attempt that completes her ordeal. It is committed against Melchior himself and “...three months later, Melchior was found dead in the middle of his banana plantation” (*Trois mois plus tard, on retrouvait Melchior terrassé au mitan de sa bananeraie*) (*Chair Piment*, 188). Like Célianire, Suzon discovers the truth about her parents and in particular about her mother Lucinda. They committed a hidden sin that brought about her despair and misery. Melchior had discovered before her that they were brother and sister and could not be lovers. It is his mother who unveils the mystery of Suzon's identity.

“When Gabriel told him, it was already too late. Melchior stopped seeing his sister. But the wrong had been done and the poison was in the fruit. That bitch Lucinda is now dead....She died with her lies. She never told her daughter, here is the truth. She had waited for the two

youngsters to make love to each other” (*Quand Gabriel lui a dit, c’était déjà trop tard. Melchior a plus péché avec sa soeur. Mais le mal était consommé et le poison dans le fruit. Elle est morte aujourd’hui, la chienne, la Lucinda...Elle est morte avec ses mensonges. Elle avait pas parlé à sa fille, voilà la vérité. Elle avait attendu que les deux emmêlent leurs corps*) (355).

Despite her evildoings throughout her life, one understands that Suzon too was a victim of fate. She was also the victim of her mother’s lie and easy virtue. This underscores the deep pathos of her situation as, contrary to Célanière, she can no longer bear children. Her strong desire was to create a family and be the mother of Melchior’s children. This remained a fantasy and she even fabricated eighteen little dolls that represented the eighteen children she would have wanted: “In the first box, laid closely one next to the other, were eighteen black dolls. Nine of them were dressed in blue and placed on the left side. On the right side, the other nine were dressed in pink” (*Dans la première boîte, couchées en rang serré, se trouvaient dix-huit petites poupées noires. Neuf d’entre elles étaient emmaillottées de bleu et placées sur la gauche. Disposée à droite, l’autre moitié était vêtue de rose*) (294).

However pathetic she is, she is no less redeemable since she acknowledges her misdeeds and shows remorse. She recognizes the vain nature of her life. Her desperate battle lasted forty years and her life remained in the womb, just like that of her fictitious children: “Jealousy is all I gave birth to” (*La jalousie, c’est tout ce que j’ai pu enfanter*) (*Chair Piment*, 297). Furthermore, at seventy-two years old, she asks Mina for forgiveness: “Forgive me.....I regret that I did not foresee any suffering Mina, ... Only the fulfillment of my dreams and the solemn promises your father had made me...”(-*Pardon. Je regrette, (...)Je voyais pas venir la douleur, Mina...Seulement la réalisation de mes rêves et les serments que ton papa m’avait faits fleur....*) (296). Another sign of her possible redemption is her realism, honesty and serenity about this long and wasteful battle she had led. “I rendered justice myself... I am not very proud of it... Now that I am blind, I can finally see clearly ...” (*J’ai fait justice. J’en suis peu fière.(...) Aujourd’hui*

que je suis aveugle, je vois clair enfin.) (298). Suzon's humility salvages the figure of woman and motherhood that was tainted by her own mother's dishonesty. Subsequently, her life, the harshness of which has ultimately brought goodness and wisdom, draws to an end.

It is noteworthy that although the two women do not find happiness through their crimes, they ultimately find peace and serenity. Violence was not their end nor was it their main aim in life. It was a mere means to the goal of leading a life based on a shared love. Knowing the whole truth about their 'histories' was crucial to their leading a happy life. Célanire finds her mother and sanctifies her, while Suzon asks for forgiveness and acknowledges her evil and vain nature. In both cases, violence is abandoned and overcome by love. These optimistic endings after a life mired in terrible violence acted out by women may well be a way for Maryse Condé and Gisèle Pineau to cast out the sad reality of history and call for an awareness of the future. In *Les armes miraculeuses*, Aimé Césaire had already established womankind as a fruit and receptacle for humanity's potential: "You are a calabash tree and a profusion of *couis*" (*Tu es un calebassier, et tu n'es qu'un peuplement de couis....*). Maryse Condé and Gisèle Pineau reinforce this vision of woman who figuratively bears the seeds of hope. Women are chestnuts whose seeds grow again and allow hope to have an infinite regeneration and renewal.

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