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**‘UNDER CARIBBEAN EYES’: A POSTCOLONIAL FEMINIST STUDY  
OF EDWIDGE DANTICAT’S *BREATH, EYES, MEMORY***

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**Abstract**

Like any other Caribbean author, Edwidge Danticat focuses on political issues in her fiction. Being an immigrant to the United States, her work is enhanced with a keen insight of a woman who faced the trauma and predicaments in her own native country, Haiti. Her fiction, generally speaking, handles issues of abused women in one way or another and protests injustice and oppression. This kind of oppression extends the traditional one depicted in novels written by white female writers, who call for equal rights with men and reject the traditional roles that confine them to the home. This study deals with Danticat’s novel *Breath, Eyes, Memory* and its representation of the nightmarish consequences of the political struggle on the life of the female characters in postcolonial times. It sheds light on the traumatic experience of these women and their inability to come to terms with their wounding past even after they escaped the abuse and violence in their native country.

**Keywords:** memory, political violence, Postcolonial feminism, trauma, women.

“[To] the brave women of Haiti...on this shore and other shores. We have stumbled but we will not fall”. (Danticat’s dedication/ *Breath, Eyes, Memory*)

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## **Introduction: Postcolonial Feminism**

As a term that came into popularity in the 1980s, ‘postcolonial feminism’ was coined by non-Western feminists as a response to the Eurocentric discourse in mainstream feminism which emphasizes the experience of white women in Western cultures. Its main concern is the difficult life of non-white women in postcolonial times. It transcends the issues of equality between men and women to focus on other serious subjects, like violence, racism, ethnic identity, and traumatic maternity.

Postcolonial-feminist critics, like Audra Lorde, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Hazel V. Carby, Suki Ali, and Ethel Crowley, agree that women in colonized countries have been suffering from long-lasting racial, economic, and political hardships even after their countries achieved independence from colonial rule (Lewis & Mills 2003). They also debated the misrepresentation of these non-white women whose suffering is undermined and oversimplified by mainstream feminists who view it as merely echoing the same sexist oppression they endure in Western patriarchal cultures (Bulbeck 1998).

Women of color are, thus, depicted according to their gender, overlooking their ethnicity and the socio-cultural effects of colonialism which intensify their suffering. They are double oppressed by both domestic and political powers (Petersen and Rutherford 1986). As a result, postcolonial women writers focus not only on gender equality and the sexist power struggles, but they also endeavor to speak for non-white women and to give them a voice within the feminist realm (McEwan 2001).

Audra Lorde goes further in her criticism of mainstream feminism to say that the negligence non-white women suffer marginalizes them as the “other” and reveals the racial prejudice of Western feminists (1984: 114). In this sense, their suffering is not only double oppression, but it tends to be triple oppression. Hazel V. Carby argues that this triple oppression renders these women’s lives into an “invisible” existence: “The fact that black women are subject to the simultaneous oppression of patriarchy, class and ‘race’ is the prime reason for not employing parallels that render their position and experience not only marginal but also invisible” (1997: 46). By focusing on the hard experience of these non-white women, postcolonial female writers seek to expose this misrepresentation and to make the world acknowledge the status of these women and their relationship to the dominant culture (Kramarae & Spender 2000).

## **Literature Review**

Most of the studies of Danticat’s *Breath, Eyes, Memory* center on her political themes, her use of Haitian folklore, and her interest in the lives of her native people in their new adopted countries. In her fiction, Danticat, as Susana Vega Gonzalez points out, focuses on the lives of ordinary Haitians, depicting their suffering from personal and political problems at home under

tyrannical systems, especially the atrocities done by the Tonton Macoutes, the sponsored guerillas of the authoritarian government (2007: 182).

Like many Haitian intellectuals, Danticat and her family were forced to leave their native country and to join the increasing diaspora in the United States. Like them, she devotes her writings to depict the suffering of the Haitian people, speaking in the breath of those who suffer from displacement. Marie-Jose N'Zengou-Tayo examines the author's portrayal of her native Haitian culture, praising her for creating "new myths for new spaces and new ways of living" (2000:137). According to Yalanda Pierce, *Breath, Eyes, Memory* is about "restless spirits, attempting to negotiate African, Caribbean, and American spiritual beliefs and languages, as well dealing with the triple stigma of being Black, female, and outsider" (2010: 69). The current study, unlike any other, aims at analyzing Danticat's novel as a Postcolonial-feminist text, emphasizing the author's interest in unearthing the trauma these women of color experience both in their native country and as immigrants fighting to define a new identity for themselves.

## Out of the Hell of Political Violence

As a country beset by colonization, dictatorship, and political and economic corruption, Haiti has a long history of violence and remains a gothic place for its people. Centuries of Spanish, French, and even American colonial rules left the country poor and politically divided. It was then controlled by blood-thirsty tyrants. The members of the civil militia (the Tonton Macoutes that formed the arm of the authoritarian state) terrorized and killed the people to maintain power and to silence and crush all opponents to their rule. They also sexually assaulted helpless women. The traumatic memory of this political violence stuck in the memory of the victims and led to the immigration of a large portion of the population who sought asylum and better opportunities in the United States. Women have been double-oppressed both by the patriarchal culture and by the political system that made them targets of rape, torture, and even murder. Those who are forced to leave the country struggle to assimilate within the new culture that also oppresses them, treating them as a non-white minority (Abbott 1988: 133).

Postcolonial-feminist critic Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1988) emphasizes the significance of such historical and cultural contexts in defining the lives and identities of non-white women. Set in Haiti in the 1980s, a period of intense suffering from the tyrannical policies of the dictator Jean-Claude "Boy Doc" Duvalier (1951-2014), the novel chronicles the traumatic experience of the protagonist/narrator, Sophie, and her mother, Martine. The latter immigrated to Brooklyn, New York, after being raped by one of the Tonton Macoutes. It is early revealed that Sophie is an illegitimate child, the offspring of this traumatic experience of rape. Though she is devoted to her daughter, her departure to New York is also triggered by her desire to escape this painful memory.

Danticat, like many other Postcolonial-feminist authors, presents the trauma that both mother and daughter experience due to the political violence they endure. Sophie grows up under the care of a surrogate mother, aunt Tante Atie, and tolerates the emotional pain caused by her separation from her mother. She knows her mother only through photographs that her aunt gives her. Still, she defines the image of her biological mother, viewing her as being similar to "the

lavish Virgin Mother...Even though she was far away, she was always with me. I could always count on her, like one counts on the sun coming out at dawn” (*Breath, Eyes, Memory* 1998:59). But when her mother sends for her to join her in Brooklyn, Sophie is not certain whether her reunion with her mother would bring her any solace.

The novel mirrors the novelist’s own experience; yet, it is not totally autobiographical. Like Sophie, Danticat herself was left by her parents who immigrated to America, leaving her to the custody of her uncle only to join them at the age of twelve. As a result, she felt estranged by the new environment, both familial and social, as she once confessed in an interview with Mallay Charters of the *Publisher Weekly*:

My primary feeling the whole first year was one of loss. Loss of my childhood, and of the people I’d left behind – and also of being lost. It was like being a baby – learning everything for the first time. (Quoted in Constantakis 2011:136)

Sophie desires to stay with her surrogate mother, but has no choice. Her aunt ensures her that her only means of success is not in Haiti but in the United States, where she can have a good education and better chances than those available in her native home: “Your schooling is the only thing that will make people respect you. If you make something of yourself, we will all succeed” (*Breath, Eyes, Memory* 1998:43).

As a Postcolonial-female writer, Danticat depicts the hostile political environment and its effects on her female characters. The last thing that Sophie sees in Haiti before departing to Brooklyn are scenes of horrific violence as the authorities rebuff a demonstration by local students. She sees how the female demonstrators are inhumanely treated by the army:

Some of the students fell and rolled down the hill. They screamed at the soldiers that they were once again betraying the people. One girl rushed down the hill and grabbed one of the soldiers by the arm. He raised his pistol and pounded it on top of her head. She fell to the ground, her face covered with her own blood. (*Breath, Eyes, Memory* 1998:34)

Besides, she is accompanied by a boy in the airplane who has lost his father and everything during the protest. These violent scenes helps young Sophie see the reality of the dystopian system that controls her country.

## Learning of the Mother's Traumatic Past

Feminist critic Ethel Crowley (1991: 44) criticizes Western feminists for their inability to see that their search for freedom and equality is different from that non-white women strive to achieve. Like any other Post-colonial feminist novel, *Breath, Eyes, Memory* highlights the experience of female immigrants and their inability to forget the wounding memories of the past, especially those they endured in their native country. For Danticat's characters, freedom extends to their struggle to break free from the confines of the past of the political violence they experienced and the post-traumatic stress disorder that ensued.

Being in the United States (near her mother) does not bridge the rift between Sophie and Martine. The latter is still disturbed by her daughter's arrival mainly because Sophie's face resembles her father's, the abuser who sexually attacked Martine years ago. When Martine first unfolds the story of the rape to Sophie, she says with bitterness that she does not see his face: "I never saw his face. He had it covered when he did this to me. But now when I look at your face I think it is true what they say. A child out of wedlock always looks like its father" (*Breath, Eyes, Memory* 1998:61). Later, she discovers the vicious experience her mother has gone through:

My father might have been a Macoute. He was a stranger who, when my mother was sixteen years old, grabbed her on her way back from school. He dragged her into the cane fields, and pinned her down on the ground. He had a black bandanna over his face so she never saw anything but his hair, which was the color of eggplants. He kept pounding her until she was too stunned to make a sound. When he was done, he made her keep her face in the dirt, threatening to shoot her if she looked up. (*Breath, Eyes, Memory* 1998:139)

The atrocities committed by the Macoutes which Sophie hears from her mother transcend any violent act white women are liable to in Western culture. These are stories of violence and vicious acts of sexual assaults:

When they [the Macoutes] entered a house, they asked to be fed, demanded the woman of the house, and forced her into her own bedroom. Then all you heard was screams until it was daughter's turn. If a mother refused, they would make her sleep with her son and brother or even her own father. (*Breath, Eyes, Memory* 1998:139)

Marsha B. Jean-Charles indicates that Danticat's novel gives voice to oppressed Haitian women in order to show the atrocities that go unspoken. She adds that the evil doings haunt the characters in both their memories and their dreams (2011: 47). The humiliation and degradation Martine has felt is unimaginable. It always comes as nightmares at sleepless nights even after all these years:

Whenever my mother was home, I would stay up all night just waiting for her to have a nightmare. Shortly after she fell asleep, I would hear her screaming for someone to leave her alone. I would run over and shake her as she thrashed about... ‘Sophie, you’ve saved my life.’ (*Breath, Eyes, Memory* 1998:81)

However, Sophie’s arrival at her mother’s home only increases her sense of estrangement, preventing her from having the company she needs in this foreign place, where she is looked down upon by her schoolmates because of being a Haitian immigrant. She does not have friends to play with and is totally isolated from the world around her. She finds it difficult to assimilate in this white-dominated culture. Danticat suffered from the same experience when she arrived in the United States. She informs Megan Rooney in an interview for the *Brown Daily Herald*: “It was a big culture shock. I didn’t speak English. I was clueless in school. I was getting readjusted to being with my family. And all of this happened when I was on the verge of adolescence” (Quoted in Constantakis 2011:146).

## **Forced into Sharing the Mother’s Trauma**

Donna Seaman states that “Danticat’s masterful depiction of the emotional and spiritual reverberations of tyranny and displacement reveals the intricate mesh of relationships that defines every life, and the burden of traumatic inheritances: the crimes and tragedies that one generation barely survives, the next must reconcile” (Quoted in Milne 2009:87). Sophie discovers many heartbreaking things about her mother. Being a victim of sexual abuse, Martine suffers both mental and spiritual pain. Unable to deal with the painful memory of her experience, she becomes so protective of Sophie. She wants to isolate her from any contact with men. Even when she is eighteen years old, Sophie does not know how to control her emotions and to choose a fiancé who is her age. This is mainly because she is unable to bring herself closer to her traumatized mother.

Sophie endeavors to escape her loneliness in this foreign country through a love affair with Joseph, who is her mother’s age. She ruminates: “Men were as mysterious to me as white people, who in Haiti we had only known as missionaries” (*Breath, Eyes, Memory* 1998:67). Martine objects to her daughter’s relationship with Joseph and she keeps testing her daughter’s virginity to make sure that she does not succumb to Joseph’s desires. She threateningly informs Sophie: “There are secrets you cannot keep” (*Breath, Eyes, Memory* 1998:85). She suffers from the same humiliating virginity test in Haiti before she is forced to lose her virginity by her rapist. Nevertheless, she insists on applying this primitive tradition on her daughter.

In an interview with *Writers Online*, Danticat opines that she hopes “that the extraordinary female story tellers I grew up with – the ones that have passed on – will choose to tell their story through my voice....for those who have a voice must speak to the present and the past. For we may very well have to be Haiti’s last surviving breath, eyes, and memory” (Quoted in Casey 525-26). Mary Mackay further illustrates Danticat’s main motif in her writing, saying: “The burden of being a woman in Haiti, where purity and chastity are a matter of family honor, and where ‘nightmares are passed on through generations like heirlooms’ is Danticat’s theme” (1994:39). Thus, the traumatic past haunts both the new and old generations of Haitian women, as Sophie

explains in the novel: "I come from a place where breath, eyes, and memory are one....a place where you carry your past like the hair on your head" (*Breath, Eyes, Memory* 1998:234).

*Breath, Eyes, Memory* is rich with episodes from Haitian folklore, depicting the violence Haitian women tolerate in this parochial place, especially acts these women are subjected to just to ensure their virginity. One such story is that of an extremely rich man who married a poor black girl. He had chosen her out of hundreds of pretty girls because she was untouched. For the wedding night, he bought her the whitest sheets and nightgowns. For himself, he bought a can of thick goat milk to drink with a drop of her hymen blood. Then in their wedding night, she did not bleed. In order to defend his honor, he cut between her legs to get some drops of blood to show the next morning. But, the blood kept flowing till it drained. The girl died as a result. "At the grave site, her husband drank his blood-spotted goat milk" (*Breath, Eyes, Memory* 1998:155).

Because of the fact that these women have been always reminded of their bodies in this man-dominated culture, they have the feeling of being entrapped in their bodies. This becomes the source of their suffering, both physical and emotional. Danticat relates the story of a woman who walked around with her blood sprung from her unbroken skin. She wanted to get rid of the suffering; therefore, she went to Erzulie (a Haitian goddess) to find a solution. Erzulie told her if she wanted to stop the bleeding, she would have to give up her right to be a human. Erzulie could transform her into anything. She was tired of bleeding, thus she thought of all the animals she had seen, the small and the big:

'Make me a butterfly,' she told Erzulie. 'Make me a butterfly.'

'A butterfly you shall be,' said Erzulie.

The woman was transformed and never bled again.

(*Breath, Eyes, Memory* 1998:88).

The virginity test has catastrophic consequences on Sophie who initially reacts passively, but later defiantly breaks her virginity to put an end to this humiliating activity that makes her deeply shameful and confused. She remembers the fear she experiences when her mother tests her for the last time: "My body was quivering when my mother walked into my room to *test* me. My legs were limp when she drew them aside. I ached so hard I could hardly move. Finally I failed the test" (*Breath, Eyes, Memory* 1998:88). This further distances her from her mother as the latter abandons her, feeling betrayed by her daughter.

Sophie's marriage to Joseph, who is more a father figure than a husband, does not bring her peace of mind, though she has a baby by him. She is haunted by the emotional scar caused by her mother's testing of her virginity and is unable to end her traumatic memories. She becomes uncomfortable with her body and her sexuality and develops a phobia that prevents her from

having a normal emotional bond with her husband, whom she now abhors and views as an abuser. She even has the feeling that her husband is similar to the Haitian militia man who once abused her mother. She contemplates suicide and succumbs to terrible nightmares: “[My mother’s] nightmares had somehow become my own, so much that I would wake up some morning if we hadn’t both spent the night dreaming about the same thing: a man with no face, ponding a life into a helpless young girl” (*Breath, Eyes, Memory* 1998:193).

## **Back into Haiti: Confrontation and Reconciliation**

Florence Ramond Jurney argues that Danticat’s female characters can be seen both as border crossers and as inhabitants of the borderland. This is a fact hardly surprising for this Haitian-American author who experienced early the implications of border-crossing as she was moved geographically (from Haiti to the United States). Moreover, her characters must allow this new identity to emerge through an exploration of their lost origins and specifically the loss of the mother/land (2003:2). Sophie ultimately deserts her husband, heading to Haiti with her baby. She refuses all her aunt and grandmother’s attempts to convince her to go back to her husband. She unfolds her horrible experience to her grandmother, telling her about the emotional pain she still suffers from because of the humiliating act of virginity tests: “I hate the tests. It is the most horrible thing that ever happened to me. When my husband is with me now, it gives me such nightmares that I have to bite my tongue to do it again” (*Breath, Eyes, Memory* 1998:156). Through her conversation with her grandmother, she realizes that this act is traditionally maintained for the wellbeing of the daughter and her family. In Haiti, it is the mother’s duty to guarantee her daughter’s chastity and honor since they live in a tribal culture in which virginity is highly valued. “If a child dies, you do not die. But if your child is disgraced, you are disgraced,” her grandmother adds (*Breath, Eyes, Memory* 1998:156). A sexually violated woman is, thus, a source of shame to her family and tribe, and it is a stigma that can ruin an entire family:

From the time a girl begins to menstruate to the time you turn her over to her husband, the mother is responsible for her purity. If I give a soiled daughter to her husband, he can shame my family, speak evil of me, even bring her back to me. (*Breath, Eyes, Memory* 1998:156)

In addition, in Haitian society, as Sophie’s grandmother states, the ten-finger duties women are brought up to remember by heart are “Mothering. Boiling. Loving. Baking. Nursing. Frying. Healing. Washing. Ironing. Scrubbing” (*Breath, Eyes, Memory* 1998:151). These traditional roles are maintained since early childhood. The grandmother tells Sophie that when a Haitian mother gives birth to a male baby, a lantern is put outside the shack to celebrate this occasion and the father will be responsible for caring for the baby, staying all night by his boy. She further explains, “If it is a girl, the midwife will cut the child’s cord and go home. Only the mother will be left in the darkness to hold her child. There will be no lamps, no candles no more light” (*Breath, Eyes, Memory* 1998:146). All these revelations by the grandmother make Sophie aware of the marginal role women have in her native country. It helps her understand her mother’s overprotective acts and view them in a different light.



The final confrontation Sophie had with her mother demonstrates her mother's inner feelings of shame and pain that result from virginity tests and rape. Martine tells her daughter that she tested her virginity "because my mother did it to me. I have no greater excuse. I realize standing here that the two greatest pains of my life are very much related. The one good thing about being raped was that it made the testing stop. The testing and the rape. I live both everyday" (*Breath, Eyes, Memory* 1998:170). She assures Sophie that "the love between mother and daughter is deeper than the sea," despite the tension in their relationship (*Breath, Eyes, Memory* 1998:85). This confrontation leads to Sophie's reconciliation not only with her mother, but also with her husband. The latter she achieves through the sexual phobia therapy she joins to help her overcome her fears of having a normal marital life with her husband. The therapist, Rena, advises her to confront her trauma and not to succumb to her painful memories like her mother. She notices that Sophie's mother chooses not to remember and to force herself to reimagine the image of her abuser in order to be able to move beyond this memory and heal:

Your mother never gave him a face. That's why he's a shadow. That's why he can control her....You will never be able to connect with your husband until you say good-bye to your father. (*Breath, Eyes, Memory* 1998:209)

Typical of the Postcolonial female victim, Martine has a traumatized maternal experience that lasts long until she reveals her suffering to her daughter. She tells Sophie about her attempts to abort her when she was pregnant because she reminds her of her gothic experience of rape, drinking "all kinds of herbs, vervain, quinine, and verbena, baby poisons. I tried beating my stomach with wooden spoons. I tried to destroy you, but you wouldn't go away" (*Breath, Eyes, Memory* 1998:190). However, all the traumatic memories and the nightmares of the past are reawakened by her new pregnancy in New York. She even hears the fetus calling her names:

It has a man's voice, so now I know it's not a girl. I am going to get it out of me. I am going to get it out of me, as the stars are my witness'. 'Don't do anything rash'. 'Everywhere I go, I hear it. I hear him saying things to me... He calls me a filthy whore. I never want to see this child's face....This child I will never look into its face. (*Breath, Eyes, Memory* 1998:217)

The trauma intensifies until Martine finally commits suicide, stabbing herself with a knife. She is unable to come to terms with her nightmarish memories of rape and pregnancy.

This tragic vision is typical of Postcolonial fiction by women. The pain of losing her mother is manifested when in the funeral Sophie ravages through the cane field the site of her mother's sexual abuse, destroying the cane in an attempt to overcome the memory of her mother's rape. Her grandmother tries to help her overcome her pain, saying:

There is always a place where, if you listen closely in the night, you will hear your mother telling a story and at the end of the tale, she will ask you this question....'Are you free, my daughter?...Now, you will know how to answer'. (*Breath, Eyes, Memory* 1998:234)

Ultimately, Sophie voices her admiration of her mother's character, something she has been unable to do before her death: "My mother was as brave as stars at dawn" (*Breath, Eyes, Memory* 1998:234).

Sophie's coming-of-age journey comes full circle at the end, something that characterizes many female characters in other Post-colonial novels written by women. She is able to move beyond the past and learn how to help her daughter avoid a similar fate: "It was up to me to avoid my turn in the fire. It was up to me to make sure that my daughter never slept with ghosts, never lived with nightmares...and maybe, would never become a frightened insomniac like my mother and me" (*Breath, Eyes, Memory* 1998:203). She liberates herself from the ghosts of the past and chooses to live a normal life with her family.

## Conclusion

As a Postcolonial-feminist writer, Edwidge Danticat focuses on the experience of Haitian women, living as immigrants in the United States and the problems they carry with them from their homeland. She portrays the painful experience of these women, who endure marginalization and political violence. She expresses her anguish and protests injustice, aiming at raising women's awareness of their oppression. The problems her female characters tolerate are different from the ones mainstream feminists endeavor to overcome.

In *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, both the mother and daughter are overwhelmed by their painful memories, sexual phobia, and guilt. Their trauma, caused by political violence, mirrors on their lives in the present and ruins their maternal and marital relations. Even immigration could not provide them with the solace they need to erase their devastating emotional traumas. Moreover, a Haitian woman cannot dispense with the heritage of her own culture and has to tolerate primitive and humiliating practices like virginity tests. Martine's new environment does not change the way she thinks. This is mainly because the brutal act of rape developed to an intensity and made her so protective of her daughter. These issues make Danticat's novel typical of Postcolonial female texts.

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