

PATRICIA DONATIEN-YSSA

Patricia Donatien-Yssa is from Martinique and is Assistant Professor in the Department of English at the Universite des Antilles et de la Guyane. She works on literature and civilisation of the English speaking West Indies and West Africa.

The Society For Caribbean Studies Annual Conference Papers
 edited by Sandra Courtman
 Vol.5 2004 ISSN 1471-2024
<http://www.scsonline.freemove.co.uk/olvol5.html>

Sexuality, Sensuality and Seduction: A comparative Analysis of Jamaica Kincaid's *The autobiography of my mother* and Zee Edgel's *Beka Lamb*

Patricia Donatien-Yssa

Writing sex, translating desire and the meeting of bodies in images and words is one of the challenges of many contemporaneous writers. These writers affirm and show their high level of originality, avoid the gap and trap of vulgarity and pornography by maintaining their writing in a standard of excellence. They know how to deal with sex, how to tell it, how to textualize it, how to sexualize narration, characters, even space and atmospheres. They know how to unveil and put forward pleasure, how to give words a carnal density while remaining creative. They have the advantage of being up to date but they also expose their desire to be naturalist creators and to reject hypocrisy.

The sexual and sexualized discourse is neither the only nor the main discourse of recent writings but it belongs to a discursive strategy enhanced by them.

The narration of sex: telling and visualizing sex, from poetic metaphor to shameless and sensual declamation

The sexual discourse does not oppose itself to sensual discourse, not even to poetic discourse, it is their prolongation. Sexuality as well as sensuality and seduction are social acts, meetings between men and women or between two persons of the same sex where body and spirit are implicated. They lay on an implication of the body, the expression of a face, a look, an attitude, a perfume, clothes, and gestures, but also on the implication of the

spirit through words and silences. Sensuality and seduction are ways to sexuality, all of these behaviours being the result of natural attraction between human beings and a mean of communication. Those unavoidable social practices find their echoes in literature and quite evidently words become then the main support.

The chroniclers, missionaries and other settlers have always described the Caribbean islands as places of turpitude and lust where the warmth and the lushness of nature cast everyone in unbridled sexuality. Nevertheless Caribbean literature as a whole and more specifically the feminine English speaking one, though being extremely sensual remains relatively chaste. Sex scenes are rather exceptional, and sexuality is evoked and approached, except in a few novels (men's novel generally), with a high sense of decency and through the prism of a metaphoric set which prevents the author herself and her public from being shocked. Zee Edgel and Jamaica Kincaid's works correspond more or less to this approach, in spite of the sensuality of the speech and narration which insinuating in the matrixes and components of the novels gives them a quasi fleshy dimension, a deep realism and a powerful emotional strength.

So very often, and this is particularly perceptible in Zee Edgel's works as well as in Jamaica Kincaid's early novels, sensuality and the discourse of seduction dominate and even replace sexuality. Sensuality is above all revealed through the presence and perception of the senses. The five senses are permanently present in those novels giving them a density and a realism which prevent those texts from being understood and received as mere fiction. The narration is full of a profusion of noises, perfumes, images, colours and tastes that allows a true perception of the countries and the people. We must not nevertheless conceive this sensuality as a kind of never-ending exoticism stuck to the Caribbean. The perceptions, images and sensations that are offered to the readers are not automatically positive, rejoicing for the eyes, ears and nose. Nature, towns, bodies, elements, smells and sounds are sometimes of an extreme violence. In those novels, the exploration of the societies and the human relations resulting from the heavy and tormented history of the West Indies is not purely intellectual but also physical. The colours, the sounds and the smells also traduce the harshness, the bitterness, the poverty, the sadness of an often contradictory and chaotic society, but are the translation of mere life. "Men, women and children, of all colours, shapes and sizes, stood two deep at the three counters in Gordillo's Grocery and Dry Good Store gossiping, laughing, banging coins on the counter, and complaining aloud at the length of time it was getting to get

service. The smell of kerosene, onions, cheese and briny pigtails made the shop stink.”
(BL. P 38)

Nevertheless the theme of sexuality has quite recently been developed under a new form in the Caribbean literature and is very fashionable particularly among the South American and Cuban writers such as Zoé Valdes and Pedro Juan Gutierrez who are very crude in their narration and expression.

Jamaica Kincaid's *The autobiography of my mother* is close to this late tendency, and totally escapes the rules of decency. The central character, Zuela, who is also the narrator, reveals and tells in every details, without being embarrassed or veiled, her unsettled and rich sexuality, from her first complex and violent relationship at the age of fifteen to her experiences, desires and pleasures as a mature woman. In this novel Jamaica Kincaid succeeds the feat of strength of allying sensuality and sexuality and writes a highly sexualized fiction which escapes triviality.

‘Telling the feminine body’ is the privileged space where sensuality, seduction and sexuality meet. Clothed or bare, the feminine body has been filling literature for a long time, but the way women writers conceive and describe those bodies is quite different from men’s vision. Zee Edgel and Jamaica Kincaid, as well as their colleague female writers, have an internal and more real perception of the female body. Their descriptions and approaches speak of beauty, of round shapes and captivating faces but they also speak of pain, of metamorphosis, of ugliness and filth. All the feminine characters who haunt the page of both authors are not attractive young ladies whose bodies are a hymn to love and pleasure. The old women, and the poor distorted ones are numerous in *Beka Lamb* and *The Autobiography of My Mother*. Beka’s grand mothers have wrinkled skin and must lean on a stick to walk, Miss Ivy limps on “fat varicose-veined legs” and the women who live in Cashew Street the place where Beka dwells are deformed by successive pregnancies. In Jamaica Kincaid’s novel, *Ma Eunice*, the woman who takes care of Zuela in her early childhood is described in these words: “with her dress of a thin, badly woven cotton, the bodice of a colour and pattern contrary to the skirt, her hair, uncombed, unwashed for many month, wrapped in a piece of old cloth that had been unwashed for longer than her hair” (TAOMM.P10). Neither Zuela’s step mother, nor her half sister, nor Lise Labatte and Moira Bailey are beautiful women. Their attraction is the attraction of death, of violence, of sadness. Even the wonderful Zuela shares her part of ugliness when she

distorts herself in the suffering of her abortion, and when she renounces to her womanhood by cutting her hair and putting on the clothes of a dead man.

Nevertheless feminine beauty, charm and seduction are present in the two novels through the characters of Zuela and Toycie who will open themselves to love in a very opposite way. Both are at the beginning of each novel very young and pretty ladies, conscious of their impact on men. Zee Edgel describes Toycie's body with a certain reserve, speaking of her face, hair and fingers: "[Beka looked into]...Toycie's eyes, black as the seed of a mamey apple; noticing how thick eyebrows touched over her nose, watching pink lips trembling over the rich brownness of her skin. Mama Lilla always said Toycie's fingers were made for music they were so tapered and strong."(BL. P99). It is by the means of the metaphor of the guitar that the author evokes the more sensual and physical side of the young girl: "Toycie's guitar was a beautiful, highly glossed instrument [...] Toycie brought it to over to Beka's house, and together they sat on Beka's bed stroking and admiring the look, feel and sound of the instrument."(BL.P35). Contrary to that vision, Kincaid's description of Zuela's body is very physical, sensual and provocative. Zuela truly adorns her own body and gives herself to masturbation touching every intimate part of her: "I began to worship myself. My black eyes, the shape of half-moons, were alluring to me, my nose, half flat, half not, as if painstakingly made that way, I found so beautiful that I saw in it a standard... I loved my mouth, my own face was a comfort to me..."(TAOMM.P100), she speaks of "the hair between her legs" of "her smell" of her breasts of her belly recurrently. She does not feel any kind of shame and expose her own intimacy.

It is in the precise field of the evocation of the sex scenes that the two authors oppose themselves; Zee Edgel is obviously reluctant to tackle with sex whereas Kincaid, at least in *The autobiography of My Mother*, penetrates the subject without any reluctance, and offers a luxury of details to our imagination.

To avoid the direct vision of any sex scene, Zee Edgel creates a real set of metaphoric images particularly around the sea and the seaside to evoke physical love between Toycie and Emilio her boyfriend. She speaks many times of waves, dampness, shells, of the inner and out movement of the water, for example at the first rendezvous described in the novel, the accent is put on conches laying on the beach: "At the bottom a conch sucked into the sand, while another was on his back exposing the deep pink pearliness of its

shell.”(BL.P48). Sea and its dangers are associated with sexuality. Its pressure, dampness and deepness, frightens the wise Beka whereas it attracts Toycie, and Emilio is presented as a child of the sea.

As for Kincaid, she gives us a precise report of several love making scenes between Zuela and all the men she will know in her life that is to say: Jack Labatte, the subrogate father who initiates her in a rape-like relationship at the age of fifteen. Joseph Packet, her future step brother, Phillip Bailey, the doctor she will marry later, and above all Roland the only man she will love. Moreover, as I said already Zuela is in a constant search of a self-satisfaction, and there are many occurrences of this solitary pleasure in the novel : “I was running the fingers of my left hand through the small patch of hair between my legs [...] I removed my fingers from between my legs and brought them up to my face, ...” (TAOMM.P70). It is that scene that will provoke Mr Labatte’s lust and desire and her first sexual relation. During this relation she discovers the male body and the reaction she has at the sight of this unveiled virility: “But when I first saw him, [...], Not yet inside me, not yet bringing the small rising that were my breasts toward his mouth, [...], The hardening flesh between his legs, I was surprised at how beautiful he was all by himself, just standing there; it was anticipation that was the thrill, it was anticipation that kept me entralled.” (TAOMM.P71). Zuela narrates and explains very openly and clearly how she appreciates love making - that is to say very hot scenes narrated in a rather surprising cold tone. She speaks of penetration, of the sensations on her flesh and in her flesh, she speaks of sweat running down her skin, of saliva, sperm and blood, of biting, kissing, licking, in the same way she has described two persons cooking with simple words without being overwhelmed by an invading emotion. In a way, this appearance of simplicity, this profusion of details without using any words whose aim would be sexual excitement allows the author to trouble and upset the reader in a very subtle manner.

Sex and sexuality are integral components of the narrative process and even constitute one of its main attractions and a driving force for the progression of the plot. Readers are thirsty for sex and sex scenes but do not admit it. But sensuality and sexuality attract people. This is a means of communication and it becomes a tool for author to seduce the readers through words and moreover to make the characters and the story livelier. Good literature has for a long time claimed itself as void of sex and the academy has also condemned too licentious fiction, classifying it as pornographic writing. But today morality does not weigh with so much heaviness on creation and some authors whose

writing marries excellence, originality and boldness, introduce sex and even incisive, aggressive and perverse versions of sexuality as one of their main themes.

Sexuality in the colonial and post colonial world

The two novels *Beka Lamb* and *The autobiography of My Mother* unfold in the setting of two Caribbean countries, respectively Belize and Dominica and during a colonial and post colonial period. This is not without consequences in the way sexuality is perceived and exposed in these fictions. The use of sexuality is very specific in the colonial world. It is not only a matter of carnal pleasure, but also and above all a true desire of domination, a way to impose one's power, to conquer forbidden or reticent spaces. Sexuality takes part in the class and ethnic groups' war and contradictorily it is also at the same time a factor for transgression. It allows men and women to throw down gates and go through the boundaries, and as such it favours creolity as a mixing and regenerating process.

Colonial power is above all a male power. Sexuality belongs, for men, to a strategy of acquisition of power and to the legitimating process. It is used to show are strong they are and to dominate the other in this jungle like world. Sexuality is also the counterpart of race on the paradigm of the race and class war. Having sex with black women, the white or mulatto man, encroaches on the black man's land and lowers his authority. The black man also uses his sexuality to defy the white man and to affirm his power, numerous children being the proof of his invincibility. We have many examples of these behaviours in both novels. Zuela 's Father, Mr. Labatte and even the young Emilio Villanueva give their sexuality the force of rule and erect their sex as a command stick. The white or mulatto man enjoys a particular status in which his sexual domination is easier. It is a sexual imperialism.

So, sex is often a stepping stone for politics and recognition in the colonial world. It is thanks to his numerous mistresses and children that Zuela's father imposes himself as a chief. He masters a whole space, but this recognition is not based on respect and love but on envy and fear. He becomes a very influent man but on the back of the wretched women to whom he then refuses affection and protection. The red hair of his progeniture is like a red badge of glory.

Sexuality being often accompanied with violence, in the colonial world sex is not the corollary or the consequence of love. The dominant takes what and who he wants and he is not bothered by any law or interdiction. The social discourse is sexualized and does not take into account any feeling. Love is considered like a form of enslavement; hence it is rejected by men as well as women.

When power reigns somewhere, and particularly abusive power, resistance develops. For women, or rather for some women, sex is part of the strategy of existence and resistance. Zuela's sexuality is a form of rebellion, a guerrilla. She refuses, the order imposed on her. She refuses the notion of the couple; she refuses the consequences of sex: maternity and she dominates her sexual partners, above all the white ones. Zuela refuses to reduce the strength her sex she represents to silence. She uses her sexual energy to fight the forces of repression and domination: colonialism, capitalism and machismo. The energy of her sex is the energy of her life. Her sex allows her to upset the established order: blacks submitted to whites, poor ones, submitted to rich ones. Even when at the age of fifteen, she succeeds in establishing a very ambiguous relation with Jack Labatte, the rich white old man who is supposed to protect but also to dominate her. She manipulates him and without a word forces him to do what she wants. She dominates Phillip in their love making and even in every day life. The honourable British doctor becomes her sexual slave. Zuela imposes her own desires and satisfactions on him, playing with him that she does not love, like a puppet. "I made him stand behind me, I made him lie on top of me, my back beneath his chest; I made lie on the back of me and place his hand in my mouth and I bit his hand in a moment of confusion [...] I made him kiss my entire body, starting with my feet and ending with the top of my head." (TAOMM.pp154, 155).

Beka's strategy is completely different. She chooses negation and flight. She also fights her unjust society, but only on an intellectual level whereas Zuela fights on all levels, carnal, intellectual and spiritual. For Zuela sexuality is a way to react against British authoritarianism and hegemony, for Beka it is her refusal of sexuality which allows her to be permeable to political action, to be opened to a reflection on the peculiar situation of her country and to consider the possibility of a revolution for herself and for her nation. Beka is in a way trapped in a dilemma: she enjoys the emotion and pleasure of discovering sex and her future is endangered, either she sacrifices her sexuality on the altar of her respectability which is the guarantee of her dignity and of a possible progress. Beka can

succeed in her studies, project herself in the future and hope a progression on the social ladder, only if she negates any libido.

For women the acceptance of desire and of sexuality seems to be incompatible with the will to change the world they are submitted, to be respected, to have moral aspiration and to build human relationships based on dignity. This possibility seems to be restricted only to old sexless ladies; but Zuela, a young gorgeous woman claims both pleasure and dignity.

Sex, transgression and punishment

The colonial order is based on a logic made of hypocrisy, conflicts, violence, inequality, arbitrariness, despotism, abuse, subjection, privileges and exceptions. But those who edict the law and create that logic transgress them, imposing silence around their evil actions.

The colonial power places sex under the binary regime where it is considered both lawful and unlawful, admitted and forbidden. Like all the elements which constitute this colonial society sex obeys the laws of contradiction, and is taken into the clash between desire and order. An order so aberrant that it seems conceived to be transgressed. Better, transgression seems to be the fundamental basis of this order. Without any transgression, the colonial order cannot be maintained. You can do what you must not.

So, social, racial and even moral transgressions are tolerated and accepted, but only if the transgressor is a man. Jack Labatte the white Creole friend of Zuela's father in TAOMM forgets his role of subrogate father to have sexual relations with a young girl of fifteen placed under his direct authority. He abandons himself to his incestuous lust with the agreement of his wife and indirectly of the society he lives in, with total impunity. Whereas Toycie, who transgresses the interdiction of sex before marriage, pays this audacity with her life. Her fate is close to Zuela's half sister who is also deprived of her existence even if she does not die, because she has not obeyed to the rule. Those girls belong, contrary to Zuela to the colonial order and cannot resist it. They are crushed by its infernal and inevitable machinery.

Toycie is considered as impure because she has sinned outside of marriage and with a man of another ethnic group. The colonial power set boundaries which cannot be transgressed except by a powerful man and only if the secret of illegitimacy is kept. So to have broken

this rule Philip Bailey is rejected by the members of his class. He has ceded to the temptation of Zuela's black sex and has married her and the couple is obliged to flee in the mountains. It is also for that reason that Misses Villanueva, Emilio's mother, also violently denies any possibility of marriage between Toycie and her son. In this colonial universe, the black woman must remain a toy and the relation with her must never be legitimized.

Church plays a very important role in the making and the maintenance of this system. Through the education given in the religious school, and the Sunday preaches, Sex is presented as a sin, a spot, a blot and forbidden. The knowledge of one's body and particularly of one's sex is prohibited and taboo. So Toycie who is part of the system ignores how she is done and the risk of love making. The sisters who are in charge of her education surround the young girl with a heavy and dark gate hoping that they will try to jump over.

So as soon as Toycie begins vomiting she is suspected and kept aside as if she was plague-stricken. She observed, then judged and the sentence is terrible and final. In spite of the supplication of Beka's father and of her grand mother, she is expelled from the convent. She finally becomes mad and kills herself, jumping over a bridge.

Sex is repressed. Toycie and to a certain extent Zuela and Beka are the victims of the perception and of the repression of sex by church and by the political and moral system of colonialism. Prohibition and censure reigns hypocritically in a perverse world where male sex imposes its strength and its violence as a cultural and historical heritage.

Bibliography

Corpus

Kincaid Jamaica. *The autobiography of My Mother*. Vintage. London. 1996.

Edgel Zee. *Beka Lamb*. Heineman. Oxford. 1982.

Essays

Dauphin Cécile, Farge Arlette. *Séduction et sociétés. Approches Historiques*. Edition du Seuil. Paris. 2001.

Foucault Michel. *Histoire de la sexualité. La volonté de savoir*. Editions Gallimard. Paris. 1976.

Articles

Lacan. J. La logique du fantasme. 24 Mai 1967.

Sigrist Olivier Le fascinus, entre l'image et la lettre : Lecture de pascal Quignard.

This paper was given at The Society For Caribbean Studies Conference held at The University of Lanacster, 1st - 3rd July 2004.

Copyright remains with the author.

PLEASE USE YOUR BROWSER BUTTON TO GO BACK