

Fall 1993

# Matriarchs, Doves, and Nymphs: Prevalent Images of Black, Indian, and White Women in Caribbean Literature

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## Recommended Citation

Dance, Daryl Cumber. "Matriarchs, Doves, and Nymphs: Prevalent Images of Black, Indian, and White Women in Caribbean Literature." *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 26, no. 2 (Fall 1993): 21-31.

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## Daryl Cumber Dance

### MATRIARCHS, DOVES, AND NYMPHOS: PREVALENT IMAGES OF BLACK, INDIAN, AND WHITE WOMEN IN CARIBBEAN LITERATURE

Universally, male writers have tended to create images of women which reveal the familiar male tendency to view women merely as functionaries whose role basically is determined by male needs, male motivations, male fears, and male fantasies. When woman is submissive, docile and pure, she is to be protected and revered; then, she is the virgin/goddess. When she is assertive and strong, she is to be avoided and despised; then, she is the bitch/shrew. When she is passionate and active, she is to be resisted and feared; she is the whore/temptress. While this general categorizing of women characters carries over into Caribbean literature, it is interesting to observe that the specific role of female characters in this body of literature is most frequently determined by race. Here, the common image of the black woman is that of a strong matriarch, dedicated to protecting and nourishing her male charges. Here, the most frequent image of the Indian woman is that of a docile, insipid, tractable shadow of a being with no mind, personality, or significance of her own. However, the most persistent, stereotypical, and restricted image in this context is that of the white woman, who is viewed as an eager, lustful, sex-starved nymphomaniac, one whose goal in life is to be desired, seduced, and violated by a black or Indian buck.

That Caribbean writers would tend to portray black women as matriarchal may seem inevitable given the fact that it was "not uncommon for women to be the sole visible financial mainstay of the family," as Rhonda Cobham notes in her study of women in Jamaican literature (196). Even Lucille Mathurin concedes: "The rather tired cliché of the black matriarch perhaps contains some validity in terms of the numbers of women who head their own households . . . and in terms of the moral strength they . . . exercise within the family" (5). Certainly, substantial numbers of Caribbean writers grew up in households headed by a woman or dominated by a woman. During most of their formative and impressionable years, for example, Derek Walcott, Michael Thelwell, Michael Anthony, Austin Clarke, Andrew Salkey, and George Lamming lived in homes that were headed by a strong black mother with no father figure present. They have dramatized such situations in their fiction. Most of these authors insist that the absence of the father was not significant. Austin Clarke, for example, maintained during an interview, "My mother was my mother and father . . . so I didn't miss my father" (Dance 66). These mothers, who in real life are recalled by their sons as strong, hardworking women, forever driving their progeny to be clean, neat, well-behaved, educated, and devout, are rarely portrayed in autobiographical accounts or in novels as having any concerns outside their

children. Caribbean literature abounds in matriarchal figures—strong, independent, domineering black mothers forever brooding over their young. The Barbadian community so often pictured in Austin Clarke's short stories is characterized by such a strong black mother, determined, even if it kills her son, that he receive an education, that he accept Christ, that he be properly dressed (albeit in too-tight shoes!), and that he comport himself acceptably. In Clarke's Toronto trilogy (*The Meeting Point*, *Storm of Fortune*, and *The Bigger Light*) the Barbadian women, even those who have no children, project the image of the matriarch: Bernice, who "can do the work of a mule, two mules" (*The Meeting Point* 6), is very much a mother to her young lover; Dots for a time financially supports her husband (significantly called Boysie), a fact that affects a lasting impact on his sense of his manhood and his relationship with his wife. Matriarchs are numerous in Salkey's *Drought*:

[The peasants'] existence was bolstered and shaped by all the women, the wives, the mothers, the grandmothers, the entire female population. They were the silent partners, the binding influences, the earth governors. The men and the boys owed their over-all security to the unassuming and un-sung strength of their womenfolk. (31)

Wilson Harris's Magda of *The Whole Armour* knows no bounds in her efforts to protect her son Christo; on many occasions she prostitutes herself to educate him and to protect him from the law, and in one unforgettable scene she uses a gun to force him to exchange clothes with a stinking, rotting corpse, thereby creating a ruse to save her threatened child. Miss Mando in Michael Thelwell's *The Harder They Come* is "hard working and as strong as most men" (36). Her life and even her death are devoted to preparing and protecting her grandson Ivan's well-being and future. George Lamming's village in *In the Castle of My Skin* is full of boys growing up in homes headed by women. At one point, the boys discuss the roles of fathers in their lives, considering their lack of power because they don't live with them or don't support them; they conclude, "We can do without fathers" (43). The protagonist recalls "[m]y father who had only fathered the idea of me [and] left me the sole liability of my mother who really fathered me" (3). Even in the relationship between Ma and Pa in that novel, Pa, despite his admirable strength in some regards, must obey Ma until she allows him freedom (86), and when he is afraid, as he often is, she comforts him like a mother consoling a child (93–95). The image of and the reaction to these protective, sustaining mother figures is tersely summed up by Lionel Froad in Denis Williams' *Other Leopards* via his recollection of his mother. Froad reflects on himself: "Mama's well-loved, well-licked lickle puppy. Dear old devoted, devouring, dead bitch of a mama!" (41). Inevitably, the sons in these works have as their main goal escaping the domination of these overbearing matriarchs, and they never even consider seeking similar models as wives.

Like such black women, Indian women are portrayed as being selfless beings whose main reason for existing is to nourish and care for their families, especially their children. The important differences, however, are that the Indian women are frequently portrayed as operating within the traditional nuclear family which includes a male; and that though they serve, they do not rule, at least not outwardly so. Their demeanor offers an absolute contrast to the black matriarch's. Where she is assertive, they are docile; where she rules with an iron hand, they humbly obey; where the black figure often comes across as a powerful, dynamic, highly individualized, resolute character, they are most often seen as insipid, tractable, indistinguishable, and unassuming beings. The Indian woman has been dubbed by Ramabai Espinet "the invisible woman in West Indian fiction" (116).

Clearly this representation of Indian women is consistent with the universal image of the subservient, submissive Oriental woman. Further, their portraits here may be to some degree reflective of the experiences of the major Caribbean Indian male writers, such as Sam Selvon, V. S. Naipaul, and Ismith Khan, who grew up in two-parent families which reinforced the commonly accepted roles of the Indian father and mother. Yet, as Espinet notes, despite the fact that the strict socialization of women within traditional families has conditioned Caribbean Indian women to adhere to certain codes, the reality is that "the prevalent notion of Indian female personality as submissive, shy and timid is a fallacy" (116).

Characteristic of the literary portraits of Indian women is Edgar Mittelholzer's Sosee (*Corentyne Thunder*), typically fearful of and subservient to her husband, the appropriately named Big Man, who "saw her only as a kind of slave—a healthy female slave whom he had brought into his house to satisfy his sexual needs and to reproduce his kind. Somehow he never thought of the children as belonging partly to her" (94). Indeed, most of these Indian women are, or at least appear to be, like Samuel Selvon's Rookmin in "Cane is Bitter":

perhaps she might have been unfaithful to [her husband] Ramlal if the idea had ever occurred to her. But like most of the Indians in the country districts, half her desires and emotions were never given a chance to live. (60)

Thus, we see her as a shadow-like figure, never voicing an opinion of her own, but rather "wait[ing] for [her husband] to speak, in an oriental respectfulness" (61). Such are most of the other docile, sometimes beaten and abused, Indian wives in several of Selvon's stories and novels. Although some of them may achieve some goal in a conflict with others, the failure of the novelist to dramatize such scenes leaves these women with at least their veneer of tractability. Hence, in "Johnson and the Cascadura," although the Indian girl Urmilla does not marry the man her father chose for her, our narrator can only tell us, "How Urmilla defied her father's wishes I never found out" (16). Throughout

the story she manages to achieve her ends, but her resolution and her rebellion are never portrayed, and we see only the stereotypical quiet facade of what we intuitively know is an uncharacteristically determined and feeling Indian girl.

With Earl Lovelace's Dolly (*The Dragon Can't Dance*), we never dream that she has any desire, hope, feelings, or needs of her own as she docilely follows her husband wherever he wants to go and helps him in whatever he decides to do. Then finally one night her husband Pariag looks across the bed at his supportive, uncomplaining, submissive wife and impulsively asks her if she wants to go to a movie. This apparently simple request causes her to burst into tears. He is at first bewildered at her response, but "then he realized that this was the first place he had asked her to go to" (143). Only in this and one other instance are we led to consider her as anything more than a silent shadow. The second such scene occurs near the end of the novel when Pariag complains that other people fail to see "the whole me" (211). At this point, Dolly utters a dramatically assertive proclamation. She first reassures Pariag that in fact she knows there is more to him, and then she goes on to declare, "I is more than what I show you" (212). This shocking assertion, which she fears will "vex" her husband, causes him, for the first time in their marriage, to consider her also as a person. He looks at her and asserts:

"We have to start to live, Dolly, you and me."

"Me and you?" Dolly asked, her voice choking. "Me and you?"  
(212)

V. S. Naipaul's Shama Biswas (*A House for Mr. Biswas*) does actually take charge when she decides that she must. She is in reality much stronger than her weakling husband, but she too seems typically self-effacing, and she usually endures in silence whatever he doles out, including "licks." (Indeed, among the numerous wives in her extended family, the beatings of a husband are regarded as something of a status symbol). Throughout her marriage, she reads her husband's insensitive stories bewailing his entrapment in wedlock and acclaiming his passion for the "fresh, tender, un-kissed" (345) barren heroine whom he creates, but for years she never mentions these stories. Generally without complaint she meekly follows him from one bad situation to another, attempting to make peace as he perversely provokes those around him to humiliate and attack him.

Even so strong a figure as Mrs. Tulsi, head of the powerful Tulsi household in *A House for Mr. Biswas*, seems to prefer the role of the quiet, docile Indian lady, generally relegating assertive acts to one of her sons-in-law, affecting (whenever she has the privilege thus to indulge herself) the role of dove—i.e., shedding delicate tears or even fainting. She seems to look forward to the day when she can relinquish the governance of the Tulsi house to her son. When that son, now head of the family, returns from England, she who had been nursed and

cared for by others quickly slips into her preferred role: "forgetting her own illnesses and anxious instead to nurse, [she] held Owad's hand or head while he spoke" (540-41).

Happily, despite the generally restricted, limited roles assigned to black and Indian women, there are enough exceptions and variations to the stereotypes to suggest the possibility of more complexity and interest to these characters were they further explored. In other words, the authors frequently allow us—indeed at times provoke us—to consider possibilities even when the portraits we have seen are basically flat, shallow, and one-dimensional. Such is rarely the case with the white woman portrayed in Caribbean literature, one who is limited almost completely to the role of sex-starved nymphomaniac. Rarely is there any suggestion that she has any goal, motivation, need, or yen other than to be desired, seduced, and violated by the black (or Indian) buck, whose substantial sexual equipment, fabled potency, and unique skill have assumed all the delightfully grotesque qualities of myth. She is, quintessentially, Ann Maria Chupa's "Thrill Seeker" / "Slummer,"—a stereotype of the slumming-tease-looking-for-a-rape-fantasy-to-be-fulfilled" (109). The explanation for the prevalence of this stereotype of the white woman is perhaps more complicated and more controversial than were the two stereotypes already discussed. A few of the more obvious and frequently noted theories might, nonetheless, be mentioned here.

One possibility may be that these stereotypes may indeed truly arise out of the experiences of the authors—or at least their perceptions of their experiences. In his autobiographical "Walking with Caesar," Jan Carew explains to his friend Caesar the reasons for his appeal to the white girl Barbara: "She wanted a big black symbol of terror in her life" (195). Caesar later reciprocates by explaining to Carew that Madam Renault had given Carew an apartment in her house because "[t]he woman want you to screw her" (198). Denis Williams once told me of his *shock* upon arriving in London to discover the reactions of white women to black men: "I mean a typist there said, 'Oh, gosh, I am so fed up and so bored I could just go down to Charing Cross and find myself a *good* Black man.'" Furthermore, Williams told me that the first thing he did when he got to London was to visit a shoe store, where a salesman, "the first Englishman that speaks to me . . . says, 'I betcha women don't leave you *alone*. What is it you chaps got?' That's the *first* thing I heard!" (Interview). In *The Pleasures of Exile*, George Lamming recounts Sam Selvon's account of a Jamaican whose jacket English girls lifted to see if he had a tail, and Lamming goes on to explain that they were looking for *more*, something

which they had received from a traditional mythology, and which they felt was worth investigating. They were curious to see his prick in order to get eye evidence of its size. They had heard about *It*, and asked themselves the genital question: "Would the native black steel rise to its fantastic stature?" (78)

Another possible explanation for the wholesale acceptance of the myth of the white woman's lust for the black man may be the black male's need to avenge himself against the white man and white society in general by ravishing and thereby degrading and destroying that society's symbol of purity while at the same time asserting the black male's superiority over the white male. This theory is supported in any number of scenes in the literature. Similarly, this stereotype may address a corollary to the notion of the black man's revenge. The image counters the myth of the black man's "craving" for white women, which Sterling Plumpp has characterized as an *addiction* (93), and which Lloyd Brown has termed a "fatal fascination . . . a psycho-sexual obsession" (17, 42). Consequently in these works the black man is usually not the lustful, lewd seducer and attacker; rather he is most often the innocent, often exploited and violated victim.

Yet another possible reason that the white woman remains such a flat, one-dimensional figure, at least in one of these authors' works, was explained to me by Sam Selvon. When we were discussing the relationship between the black Trinidadian Mark and his white wife Joyce (*I Hear Thunder*), Selvon explained:

I was much more interested in Mark and his reaction than—what was her name? Joyce. I am not interested in *Joyce*. I mean she has got *her* problems, I am sure she has, but I don't know much about the white psychology to put myself in *her* place, and I am not going to attempt to do that. I use [my white women characters] merely as figureheads. I am more interested in the other characters, in the Black man who has intercourse with her and *his* motivations rather than to *see* it out of the eyes of the white woman.<sup>1</sup>

Thus while most of these works do focus on the black male character and explore in much detail his motivations, the white woman remains a mere figurehead.

One of the first things that impresses us about the white woman as portrayed by many Caribbean male writers is her willingness, her eagerness, her urgency to be ravished by the black male. There need be no courtship, no enticement, no attraction—merely an opportunity, and that need not be ideal. Thus, the first time the lowly houseboy Nebu finds himself in the house alone with his white mistress in Vic Reid's *The Leopard*, Reid need tell us no more than, "With the tip of her tongue, the msabu touched the rainwater on her lips" (220). Apparently no words are exchanged, no endearments uttered. All we know is that he remembers "the *unfumble* of her fingers opening the blouse to offer and offer [and] the rough thrusts of [her] hips when she fought for him to fill her, using the rich language of her body to talk away his fears" (23; emphasis mine). Similarly, although Doreen, the Indian Tiger's white employer in Selvon's *Turn Again Tiger*, despises and degrades him as an employee and as an Indian, the moment they are alone together, without any words they fervidly charge into a

brutal coupling, which neither one ever mentions to the other. Similarly, in Selvon's *I Hear Thunder*, the black Mark and his white wife Joyce are out walking with Mark's best friend, the Indian Adrian, and his girl friend. During their walk, for just a few seconds Adrian and Joyce are separated from their mates. During this brief moment, he confronts her and they hungrily, breathlessly, and hurriedly copulate before rejoining their respective companions and continuing their stroll as a foursome. Significantly, when Adrian confesses to Mark, the husband is not the least bit surprised or disturbed by his white wife's wantonness.

Although the white Londoner Jane in Naipaul's *Guerillas* lives with Roche, when Jimmy, who is of mixed Negro heritage, calls her and tells her to meet him, the moment they are alone she "fixed her mouth on his, her lips opened wide" (77) and undressed and got in bed with a "speed [that] alarmed him" (78). She was a "starved" woman (81) whose "needs . . . had sent her out into the sexual jungle" (97). As in *I Hear Thunder*, Roche is more inquisitive than surprised when Jane informs him of her infidelity: he suggests that it would not be "news" and asks:

Has he taken a picture of you naked? Did you pose for him with your legs open? . . . Isn't that what they do with the women they've degraded? Keep them in their wallet to show the others. Or did he do the other thing? The other act of contempt. (224-25)

O. R. Dathorne's white Helen of *The Scholar Man* is no less fascinated by and enthusiastic about sexual intercourse with black Adam Questus, but she enjoys teasing and tantalizing him, enticing him to ravish her. On one occasion when Adam is in a frenzy to possess the coquette, panting "After the dance. . . . After the dance. . . ." she maliciously sends him home with her mother. But this substitution obviously makes no difference to either party: "Half way down the stairs, he held her [the mother] round her waist and pushed her brutally against the wall. His mouth found hers and he greedily sucked at her breath and her resistance" (153). In George Lamming's *Water with Berries*, we meet a mysterious white girl who had endured (or perhaps enjoyed) being raped in San Cristobal by a mob of black islanders and two dogs. She now hangs out on a dark London street where men, including our black hero Teeton, fornicate with her in the dark without ever even seeing her face. Salkey's *The Late Emancipation of Jerry Stover* is filled with white women seeking thrills from a potpourri of males in an endless variety of ways, including one Jenny, who solicits a black man to put on her husband's academic robe and beat her with a leather belt. During his sojourn in England, Salkey's Catullus Kelly (*The Adventures of Catullus Kelly*) enjoys the favors of numerous eager white Europeans, including one Negrophobe who devotes herself to writing black hate-literature that by contrast might make Ku Klux Klan propaganda appear benign.



Frequently, the white female's attraction to the black male is intensified by his animalism, his beastiality. In Denis Williams' *The Third Temptation*, an attractive blond recalls her affair with a black male who had no nose—just two black holes in the middle of his face. She reminisces, "It was the best ever, ever, oh God!" During their intercourse, she exclaims, "Black baboon you wonderful beast!" (88). Similarly, in Austin Clarke's *Storm of Fortune*, the wealthy, sophisticated, white doctoral candidate Agatha marries the ignorant, ugly, unemployed, aging, black Henry and devotes herself to making him blacker than he is through hair styles and indoctrination. During their lovemaking, she exults:

*"I love you because you are black. I love your black black skin. I love your black hands. I love your black face. If you were lighter in complexion . . . I would not like you so much . . . I love your thick wooly hair. I love your thick purple lips. . . . I love you, I love you, I love you, you big black beautiful black beast."* (278)

Such perversion is reinforced in Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* where the narrator explains that the white girls are not impressed by black men who put on an English accent and say they are studying medicine at Oxford or act polite and civilized:

[T]hey don't want that sort of thing at all they want you to live up to the films and stories they hear about black people living primitive in the jungles of the world that is why you will see so many of them African fellars in the city with their hair high up on the head like they ain't had a trim for years and with scar on their face and a ferocious expression going about with some real sharp chicks the cruder you are the more they like you. (124)

The principle operating here is evidently that the black male is often the victim of the white woman. This principle is reinforced in the relationship between Andrew Salkey's black Jamaican Johnnie Sobert and the white Fiona Trado. Johnnie hates Fiona and recognizes that she is merely using him to satisfy her insatiable sexual appetite and her fantasy about black males. When she tells him she likes being with him, he retorts, "You like using me, you mean" (*Escape to an Autumn Pavement* 125). Recognizing that he is blindly "serving her needs," he laments of their lovemaking: "All this for free, from me without my love. From me without my permission, only submission" (126). In Anthony C. Winkler's *The Lunatic*, a white German woman "saw the size of [the black madman] Aloysius's . . . two pounds of hood dangling between his legs" (94), lured him to a hotel, and tied him to the bed with the goal of "fuck[ing] him senseless right there and then" (84). With Derek Walcott, the black "beast" becomes sacrificial offering:

Virgin and ape, maid and malevolent Moor,  
their immoral coupling still halves our world.  
He is your sacrificial beast, bellowing, goaded,  
a black bull snarled in ribbons of its blood.

(*The Castaway* 27)<sup>2</sup>

Some West Indian literature focuses on the white woman as victim, albeit willing and eager victim, of the black man's need for revenge. In conversation, Samuel Selvon once told me about a chapter deleted from *An Island Is a World* by his English publisher. It dealt with his male character's "shedding all this feeling of white supremacy" through sexual mastery over the white woman, "you know, saying, 'I'll fuck it all out of you, you white bitch!' You know what I mean . . . almost as if now he's trying to shed all that feeling that this race is supreme" (Dance 235; emphasis in original transcription). Austin Clarke's Henry explains to his friend Boysie in *The Meeting Point* that when he has intercourse with Agatha he is thinking of all the injustices to blacks. He asserts, "I'm driving and driving, baby . . . she was thinking I was loving her. But, man, I was re-paying! I was re-paying her for what her brothers do to my sister, you dig? There ain't no such thing as love, baby. It's a re-payment" (199). Before her affair with Johnny, the white Fiona of Salkey's *Escape to an Autumn Pavement* had had a liaison with an African. Of that relationship she says:

"He carried [Africa] around with him like a packhorse. I don't think he ever dropped it. Not even when he made love to me. At times, it would seem that he wanted me only as a sort of beating-stick for the white man's plunder of Africa, or something like that." (42)

In some of these works, the black male is driven actually to kill the white woman, an act which is both an aggressive act against that white world which she symbolizes and also an escape from it. Occasionally, the deed is actually performed and vividly represented: Lamming's Chaca-Chacara beats to death a masochistic old white woman; Lamming's Teeton kills the Old Dowager in *Water with Berries*; and Naipaul's Jimmy, with the assistance of a cohort, brutally murders Jane in *Guerillas*. Most often, however, the murder is sublimated or merely symbolic—acted out in the mind or in a dream. Thus Neville Dawes' Ramsey of *The Last Enchantment* imagines himself killing Deirdre, the white girl with whom he is having an affair:

"I looked up and saw her face and I strangled her, and her body is there on the sofa and she is dead. I had to destroy that face. It was . . . the face of my blackness and my inferiority and my ambition. It was my own face." (200)

Similarly, Derek Walcott's Makak in *Dream on Monkey Mountain* must destroy his white muse/siren/goddess who inspires him to new visions of himself. Of her effect on Makak, parodied by his cellmate Souris, the Corporal observes: "It is this rage for whiteness that does drive niggers mad" (228). Thus the Corporal instructs Makak that he "must violate, humiliate, destroy her . . . for she is . . . the mother of civilization and the confounder of blackness" (318-19). When Makak beheads her, he exclaims, "Now, O God, now I am free" (320).

The fact that all too often the images of women in Caribbean and other literature have been limited and stereotypical does not obscure the fact that several of these Caribbean writers have either portrayed or hinted at greater complexity in their female characters than perhaps was requisite for their purposes in specific works. Obviously such a wholesale grouping as I have attempted within this large body of literature is, of necessity, an oversimplification. Clearly, male Caribbean writers have created numerous women characters who are too complex to be so easily stereotyped, and there are women characters who, though they may be stereotyped, would not easily fit into any of my three conveniently designated groups. Constraints of space preclude discussion of, for example, John Hearne's irresistible vixen Rachel Ascom (*The Faces of Love*), Vic Reid's beautiful woman and brave warrior Kedela (*The Jamaicans*), Earl Lovelace's "fucked but untouched" virgin Sylvia (*The Dragon Can't Dance* 25), Ian McDonald's defiant Indian Jaillin (*The Hummingbird Tree*), or Michael Anthony's coolly accepting but audaciously scheming Sylvia (*The Games Were Coming*). Despite the exceptions, however, the conspicuous fact that emerges from one's reading of literature by male Caribbean writers is that certain types have appeared and reappeared with unusual frequency.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> A different version of this passage is given in *Dance* 238; the passage cited here is from the unedited transcript of the interview.

<sup>2</sup> Here Walcott simultaneously articulates two notions, the black man as sexual beast and also as victim exploited by the white woman. Thus, while he often adopts the poetic discourse of the colonial masters ("I had entered the house of literature as a houseboy, / filched . . . appropriated / those heirlooms" [*Another Life* 77]), he characteristically uses it to express indignation at such exploitation. In effect, he overturns the Caliban myth by calling Miranda into question.

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