



## **Fragmentation and Discontinuity in Postcolonial Edwidge Danticat's *The Dew Breaker***

### **Fragmentation et discontinuité dans le roman postcolonial *The Dew Breaker* d'Edwidge Danticat**

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#### **Abstract**

Postcolonial novel is a genre that deals with studies which have the greatest influence, particularly silence that is voiced into speech sounds and words, a silence elucidated through gender bodies that acquire resolutions, discoveries and thus, to women's liberations through means of not only voices of "self" but also communal that connect "persona" with past and future generations. The supporters of radical-libertarian feminism suggest that restricting women to behavior which is increased under feminine traits in itself oppressive and that all women have shared oppression, therefore, becoming "sisters" believing that this oppression offers hope that the situation is temporary. Thus, it is better to bear in mind that those writings have no boundaries in both time and place while it is about to gathering victims of the same influence in patriarchal societies. In literary contexts, transgression appears in different kinds of subaltern characters, the marginalized who are ready to negotiate the norms of society or a family by occupying a kind of divergent position from which new energies could be created. The power of language, too, plays an important role when it comes to characterize and define human experience.

**Key Words:** Postcolonialism, Trauma, Transgression, Doubleness, Acceptance

#### **Résumé :**

Le roman postcolonial est un genre qui traite des études qui ont le plus d'influence, en particulier le silence exprimé en sons et mots de la parole, un silence élucidées à travers des organes de genre qui acquièrent des résolutions, des découvertes et ainsi, aux femmes libérations par le biais non seulement des voix du « soi » mais aussi des voix communautaires qui se connectent « persona » avec les générations passées et futures. Les partisans du féminisme radical-libertaire suggèrent que restreindre les femmes à un comportement qui est accru sous des traits féminins en soi oppressive et que toutes les femmes ont partagé l'oppression, devenant ainsi des "sœurs" croyant que cette oppression offre l'espoir que la situation est temporaire. Ainsi, il vaut mieux garder à l'esprit que ces écrits n'ont pas de frontières dans le temps et dans l'espace pendant qu'ils sont sur le point de rassembler les victimes de la même influence dans les sociétés patriarcales. En littérature contextes, la transgression apparaît dans différents types de personnages subalternes, les marginalisés qui sont prêts à négocier les normes d'une société ou d'une famille en occupant une sorte de position divergente à partir de laquelle de nouvelles énergies pourraient être créées. Le pouvoir du langage aussi joue un rôle important lorsqu'il s'agit de caractériser et de définir l'expérience humaine.

**Mots clés :** Postcolonialisme, Traumatisme, Transgression, Double Identité, Acceptation

### **Introduction**

Writers channel the aspect of Postcolonial identities into their works and left behind a documentation that reflects fact, portrays an accurate image of the emotional and mental anguish left by the collective population of that period of World War I, whose damages had, perhaps, the most far-reaching effects in the history, submerging crisis among people and denounce existing value systems. Because the narratives of women are supported by characters and their purposes are concentrated in the world of women, and because their authors themselves are women. Like any aspect act, the act of writing is a detailed action; that is embedded in a context with specific timing and more traditions and which the works of Edwidge Danticat are the transcription of an exploration through the interior of the closed, secret and strictly coded postcolonial women's universe.

Women's works are rooted within the social context of contemporary society and specifically in identity issues; they arise from women novelists committed vision of writing in relation with the world, as it remains to identify the structure and construction of texts if this engagement is conceived as problematic, proposal, position or simply as contextualization of such topics.

When it comes to the world of voices and representation; different styles carry weight of suffering of all types of characters that reflect an impact each in the novel. Nevertheless, characters are means to whether transmit inner status of the authors or messaging voiceless facts related to reality in a timely and lyrical novel. Hence, the concern of this part will fall over alienated identities in bodies abroad their former location, and how far immigration affects people's sense of belonging to displacement, fragmentation and discontinuity.

### **1. *The Book of the Dead***

Ka Bienaimé is the daughter of Anne and the Dew Breaker (the prison guard). Ka has made a sculpture of her father without knowing his true story as he hides his true identity once he gets married to her mother and has her. In her journey to deliver the sculpture for a client in Florida, she knows the truth about her father and wonders how it is possible a woman can accept a man with such a past. Ka's father used to work for the Dictator in Haiti, he has never been named, whereas, he was a former soldier, a torturer and a *macoute*. His sins are marked by a scar on his face by a preacher he was going to arrest. The dew breaker gets attention from Anne who later becomes his wife and they both escape from Haiti to New York to become a caring father to Ka, a barber and a landlord. Anne and Ka are masks to his scar which is synonymous of his past. And Anne is the wife of Ka's father, although she is aware of his past; she believes he is a different man, she argues that life sways between regret and foreignness. The short story is set in Florida where Ka and her father got closer to know about his truth. Ka is to deliver the sculpture to Gabrielle Fonteneau. Florida reminds her father of the weather in Haiti. Once in Florida, Ka's father destroys his sculpture and then reveals his past as a murderer to his daughter.

### **2. *Bodies Abroad***

If there is one thing the reader needs to know is that the first chapter "The Book of the Dead" and the last one "The Dew Breaker" are linked ones, since the last part holds the complete understanding of the whole personas in the novel, like answers. The first part is on the tongue of Ka's father, whereas the last one is by the novelist. Besides, the purpose of unfolding the two parts is to give the reader a break from the truth of Ka's father, as at first was introduced as a caring father rather than a torturer, and rings out the lives of other victims of the Macoutes to easily understand the ninth short story.

The novel of Edwidge Danticat has been through numerous analyses through numerous scopes: psychological, dialectical, political and thematic as it will be in the following.

The attempt is to analyze this part of the story from a Polaroid of culture, migration, mourning and healing, since the journey of isolation/migration carries changes at the level of personal being much more than external appearance. The first chapter is attributed the name of “The Book of the Dead” ; a name quoted from an Egyptian culture Ka’s father used to read and admires to an extent that he even calls his daughter “Ka”, since it is a reference of doubleness which leads through life and into the afterlife. Papa is gone (Danticat, 2004, p.03). The story begins with the disappearance of Ka’s father. She asks the manager of the hotel (Flavio Salinas) and a policeman (Officer Bo) to look for him. Ka explains that she is born in East Flatbush, Brooklyn and wishes to visit her parent’s birth place, because it is one of the things she has always longed to have in common with her parents who are originated from there (p04).

Ka explains the reason of being with her father to Florida, i.e. to deliver a sculpture (p04) to Tampa. She declares, “I’m really not an artist, not in the way I’d like to be. I’m more of an obsessive wood-carver with a single subject this far- my father” (p04)<sup>1</sup>. This means that her father has become an example for Ka to admire and make a sculpture of him to immortalize his being. In this context, she describes her father to the policeman as: “sixty five, five feet eight inches, one hundred and eighty pounds, with a widow’s peak, thinning slat-and- pepper hair, and velvet-brown eyes” (p04), in addition to a scar on his face from his right cheek down to the corner of his mouth as the only visible reminder of the year he spent in prison in Haiti (p05).

The beginning of this story resembles something of a crime novel, since the disappearance of Ka’s father enters the reader into a wheel of mystery. It seems that the rest of this short story may be centered on Papa and the link which is behind the choice of Ka’s decision of sculpting her father to deliver it after to a Haitian actress in Florida. When the story begins, the revelations of Papa’s true identity are under light. Just as the former victims of Haiti in the novel, the family of the torturer carries also a huge weight of their former lives in Haiti. In addition, the family is trying to go beyond the past and build new identities. The trauma of the past over Ka’s confrontation of her father’s revelations, as she is not victim of the action of a torturer in Haiti, she never knew Haiti although it is the one more thing she has always longed to have in common with her parents, but comes from her father who in some ways knowing him personally can lead to serious damages. The roots are in America, but what Ka believes she knows about her past is what she used to build her own personality; i.e. her father is a former victim, not a torturer.

Going back to Ka’s description of her father, she declares: “My father has had partial frontal dentures since He fell of his and my mother’s bed and landed on his face ten years ago when he was having one of his prison nightmares” (p04). Furthermore, Officer Bo asks if Ka’s father suffers from any disease and Ka denies by replying that he is not senile (p05). In addition, the heavy past of Ka’s father in hold makes him detest taking pictures, thus, always puts his hands on his face to hide his scar:

My father has never liked having picture taken. We have only a few of him... standing between my mother and me, his hand covering his scar... He didn’t want any pictures take of him for the rest of his life, he said, he was feeling too ugly (p 05).

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<sup>1</sup> We will mention only the pages while analysing the short story of Danticat’s “The Book of the Dead”;

Besides, this passage, hence, demonstrates that the act he was exercising had a great impact on him that it makes him ashamed of collecting memories with his family. This means that being in prison haunts the present time of the Dew Breaker, and this nightmare extends to Ka. This pushes Ka to sculpt her father as she perceives him as a survivor. Next, Officer Bo asks for the reason that Ka's father left and suggests that it may be due to a fight which made him runaway, but that is not the case.

In here, alienation was said to rhyme with a state of estrangement of a feeling or affection. Thus, as to avoid the feeling of isolation, the novelist pictures the way both characters behave to fill in the gap created by displacement reflected in Ka's declaration of the absence of her father to the officer, mentioning that his absence is for another reason than bringing breakfast. After that, she comes back to the hotel room and tries to connect with her father by lying in her father's unmade bed, "the sheets smell like his cologne an odd mix of lavender and time that she's always thought too pungent but that he likes nonetheless" (p08). Although Ka's bed is empty and available, yet, she chooses to belong to her inner comfort in which the intimacy of her father provides a sense of belonging to her.

Ka's father in his turn shows love for museums, especially ancient Egyptian rooms. Dancticat symbolizes through Ka that her father likes the relation between Egyptian culture and Haiti:

The Egyptians, they was like us... the Egyptians worshiped their gods in many forms, fought among themselves, and were often ruled by foreignness. The Pharaohs were like dictators he had fled, and their queens were as beautiful as Gabriella Fonteneau. But what he admires about the ancient Egyptians is the way they mourn their dead (p.12).

In the same context, Ka's father also believes that the Egyptians know how to grieve, and the trip seems to bring him alive. Although he seems calm and caring, he was a troubled one at some point in some period. The obsession he has for museums is linked to his grief and troubled issues in the past.

Here, both characters confront double sensations, for the father revealing the hidden truth and Ka's knowledge of the truth. The former, although a caring parent, declares that he was the hunter and not the prey. Apparently, in order to get rid of his past he is ashamed of, he has to uncover to his daughter who was in her turn lost while being worried about his absence and not enjoying her stay in Florida. When she calls Gabrielle Fonteneau, she remarks, "... sounds like she's in place with cicadas, waterfalls, palm trees, and citronella candles... I realize that I too am in such place, but I'm not able to enjoy it" (p.11). Although she is lost about the past, she tries to sympathize with her parents; believing that the stories she used to listen to and her belonging to Haiti are not complete truth. Thereof, she whispers to her mom, "Maman, how do you love him" (p24). She attempts to understand in order to decline her anger since -for Ka- anger is a waste emotion (p16), by coming back to the fact that she was amazed by the way her parents echo each other (p25).

Moreover, after her mother explains that they (Ka and her mother) are the reason they make him stop the hurt, she links this explanation to the feeling she has while carving. She recites, "This feeling comes over me... this sensation that my hands don't belong to me at all, that something else besides my brain and muscles is moving my fingers something bigger and stronger than myself, an invisible puppet monster" (p25). This suggests her understanding of what she feels is larger than a state of normal

being, thus, knowing the truth leads her to doubt her connection to family and her artistic activity, meaning her numerous trials to make the sculpture and her decision to stop the conversation with her parents, unlike her father who is used to live. Ka confronts Gabrielle Fonteneau by the truth of the loss of the sculpture rather than creating another scene as her parents did with her.

The sympathy –although lost – of Ka offers hope that might relate Ka and her father, even his crimes. This suggests that there was one choice staying in Haiti and becoming whether a hunter or prey, a prisoner or a criminal, and this brings back the highlight of chapter one's definition of alienation that emphasizes on people who are limited in power, which suggests that Ka's father choice is to be the strong individual preying the weak. However, since the novel is full of twists, the choice to be a Dew Breaker seems to be contradictory to "papa", since he claims that he neither wants to hurt his child nor anyone else (p20), but he is obliged to in order to survive although it does not exonerate his needs, and certainly provides a third option to the hunter/ prey theory agent (Molitoris, 2011, p45).

In this perspective, it is noticeable that the Dew Breaker transgresses his past to pursuit something better. This is reflected in Ka's vision towards the fragile side of her father; she is fragile in her turn to the nightmares her father used to have "because of what he did to others" (Danticat, 2004, p.23). As a means of healing from the heavy past, he-Papa-declares to his daughter that no matter what, he is still her father and that he would never do these things now (p24). The declaration shares the common point other Haitian's decision to flee Haiti to build a new identity in their own ways each, for the Dew Breaker, he establishes with his supportive wife. Ka seems to estimate the effort of her father, not only she can define him by what he's done in Haiti, but also the person he has become in America by the business he has and the rituals he lives in with his family hoping that the new standards adopted might count too, although the relation father-daughter is odd in the future.

Following the same respect, Papa regrets his past acts and attempts to move on by revealing his truth to his daughter instead of leaving her in lies. More than that, he throws the sculpture that reflects the prisoner in the lake, not even taking into account that the sculpture may represent his actual being in America. The reason behind he never goes back to Haiti is his desire to disconnect from Haiti besides changing the location of the hometown on the island, thereof, Ka recounts: "... I thought he always said he was from a different province each time because he's really lived in all those places, but I realize now that he says this to reduce the possibility of anyone identify him" (p28). The Dew Breaker's wish to flee his past as much as the victims, not only because of the fear to be known but also because he carries his own scars.

### **3. "Ka" in the Ancient Egypt**

In addition to the fact that the dew breaker finds shelter between his family helps him dealing with his past, his passion for Ancient Egyptian culture pushed him name his daughter Ka, which means in the Egyptian world a double of the body, and according to him, he sees his Ka as a "good angle" (p17). Ka is his hope for moving forward, and helps him put an end to his past. The father explains that she is the catalyst to his former identity and that after her birth he starts to reveal the truth to his wife on the first hand. By considering his daughter as good, this transmits the idea that Ka is a means for her father's redemption.

Besides, he feels that he never got over his past as long as he has been hiding the truth from his daughter, so the truth had to be revealed. Plus, the pain he has towards the

carving is derived from his past, that's why he thinks that he does not deserve a statue (p20) because, unlike the statue he used to see in the museum, there "were pieces missing... eyes, nose, legs, sometimes even heads" (p15). His statue, thus, is done in an appropriate and complete form, which he thinks does not represent him correctly, as his crimes done in the past make him feel incomplete; he was a torturer while the statue reveals a complete man. However, he also says that Ka always noticed more than what was not there than what was, which could explain the reason she believes that even though her carving is made in ignorance, it still presents her father as he could become.

Long before the truth comes to the surface, Danticat mentions a passage Ka used to read with her father. The Egyptian book is entitled the *Book of the Dead* which communicates: "I am not a violent man...I made no one weep. I have never been angry without cause. I have never uttered any lies. I have never slain any man or woman. I have done no evil" (p23). This is an excerpt from the Egyptian Book called "Negative Confession". This is a way for the hunter to ease his pain; by denying his acts and his being guilty: Although the numerous attempts to quell his transgression, the nightmares keep hunting the father. We can deduce that it is due to the representation of him as a prisoner in a sculpture that pushes him to reveal his true identity. This chapter is about making oneself better even if the inner self carries a dark past, even if they cause scars, but the one should move on, means that everyone deserves a second chance in life.

### ***Conclusion***

Characters challenge postcolonial dilemmas and that latter lead them towards alienation and identity crisis because of the numerous cultures, regional and Western. Characters are stuck in a state of confusion, and finally find themselves incapable to relate with what surrounds them, since their confrontation with the colonizer erases their own identity and leaves them living in confusion. While this confusion confronts the protagonist to achieve a stable identity, this confusion, ultimately, leads a person towards a distant and isolated place where he or she becomes alienated and stranger. The point is that transgression appears when there is a mixture of cultural elements carrying distinct origins in addition to the aspect of unbelonging, i.e, being at home but in mixed cultural settings. There were multiple attempts by scientists who tried to generalise how the term alienation functions within different contexts in which it is employed, its various uses and common features. In this respect, Arnold Kaufman for instance, affords the following general analysis: To claim that a person is alienated is to claim that his relation to something else has certain features which result in avoidable discontent or loss of satisfaction.

Writers of "symbolic" texts are more aware of the inevitable necessity of using the native as a mediator of European desires. Grounded more firmly and securely in the egalitarian imperatives of Western societies, authors are more or less open to modifying dialectic self and "Other", willing to examine the specific individual and cultural differences between Europeans and natives. Postcolonial texts thematize the problem of colonialist mentality and its encounter with the racial "Other".

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