

Chapter 1

The Alienation of Power: The Woman Writer and the Planter-Heroine in Caribbean Literature

Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert

Recent scholarship on the history of women in plantation societies has underscored the close association between the ideology that sustained the power of the plantation master and the basic tenets of patriarchal dominance. Scholars such as Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Barbara Bush have documented how, in the American South and the Caribbean respectively,

... just as the family fell to the authority of the father, the [plantation] household fell to the authority of the master, and father and master were one and the same. The men who exercised the two roles drew upon each to strengthen the other: The beneficent paternalism of the father was ever shadowed by the power of the master, just as the power of the master was tempered by the paternalism of the father.¹

Thus, the ideology of the planter class embodied the preeminence of the white male slaveholder, who dominated the household at home and represented it in the larger society. To the degree that female power existed in plantation societies—and it indeed existed, since white women, at least, had their own sphere of power over men, and some women were deemed inferior to them by virtue of their race and status as slaves—that power was legitimized only if it derived from a male. The complexities of power relationships in the Caribbean colonies were further complicated by the identification of the patriarchal plantation master with the colonial ruler.

If we accept the connection drawn by scholars between the power of the father and that of the master, the mere notion of a female planter—a plantation mistress who does not derive her power from father or husband—represents a challenge to the most basic principles of planter ideology. Such a plantation mistress would be, almost by definition, a figure of alienation precariously balanced between threatened possession and questionable legitimacy. Of the many novels by Caribbean women which explore the alienating aspects of women's wielding of power as plantation mistresses in their own right, I have chosen three for brief discussion: Ada Quayle's *The Mistress* (Jamaica), Marie Chauvet's *Amour*

(Haiti; from her trilogy *Amour, colère, et folie*) and Rosario Ferré's *Maldito amor* (Puerto Rico; available in an English version by the author entitled *Sweet Diamond Dust*).² The focus of these works is on women's access to power within a plantation-engendered social system and on women's role in the destruction of the patriarchal/colonial power represented by the Caribbean plantation and its legacy.

The exploration of women's use and misuse of power as planter heroines—and of the impact of their deliberate “misuse” of power on themselves and their societies—is used in these novels to help reformulate obsolete notions of Caribbean history and to point to the need to rethink conventional perceptions of power in order to transcend the oppressive structures of the colonial/patriarchal situation described by feminist historians. As a group, these novels display common features that embody their authors' concept of history:

1. Their focus on the plantation as the locus of history
2. Their preoccupation with the problem of female power on the plantation or in postplantation societies
3. Their agreement on the need to transcend plantation (or plantation-bred) socioeconomic structures
4. Their depiction of women as the destroyers of the plantation, whether as self-immolating/self-destructive heroines who bring the plantation order crashing down or as mediators who make possible the return of the land to the people
5. Their focus, as the basis of their sociohistorical analysis, on the racial differences and conflicting class interests that separate Caribbean women

These authors' concern with the plantation is *prima facie* evidence of their interest in addressing the fundamental component in a history of exploitative relationships between the plantation and the Caribbean masses. Their choice of the plantation as the locus of their (hi)stories denotes a recognition of the plantation as the crucible for the oppressive sociopolitical and economic structures that bind both men and women in a postslavery plantation order. Moreover, through their depiction of the plantation as an intrinsically patriarchal system, they incorporate into their discussion two systems of exploitation—that of the plantation and that of the patriarchy—both of which must be transcended if true Caribbean autonomy is to be reached. The essential lack of power of women on the plantation, and the constant struggle to legitimize their power in the rare instances where they acquire any, is compared in these texts to the essential powerlessness of the Caribbean population vis à vis colonial powers, and it becomes a central element in these writers' historiography.

The problematic aspects of female power on the plantation are best exemplified by the legendary Annie Palmer, infamous mistress of the

Rosehall plantation in Jamaica. Palmer is depicted in legend as a notorious nineteenth-century adventuress who is believed to have gained control of her estates through the murder of three planter-husbands, whom she had reputedly lured into marriage with the aid of her *obeah* powers.

Annie Palmer's story is best known through Herbert de Lisser's 1929 novel, *The White Witch of Rosehall*.³ As told by de Lisser, the Palmer story revolves around three critical aspects of power relations within the plantation: Robert Rutherford's struggle against Annie Palmer to return to colonial/patriarchal hands the estates Annie has violently wrested from her murdered husbands; Annie's relentless and ultimately self-destructive struggle against Millicent, her mulatto rival, to affirm her superior position as a white woman in the race and class hierarchies of plantation society; and Annie's struggle against Millicent's grandfather, a powerful obeahman desperately trying to save his granddaughter from Annie's murderous wrath, a struggle that unveils the problematic issue of white women's supremacy over black males in the plantation household and the concomitant inability of black males to defend black females against the master's or mistress's abuse.

Through its insistence on the illegitimacy of Annie's power, de Lisser's novel prepares the ground for the reestablishment of the patriarchal control she had brutally seized from her dead husbands. (The novel ends with Annie dead, the slave revolt quashed, the status quo restored.) But this very insistence on the illegitimacy of Annie Palmer's power also reveals the precarious and alienating foundations of female control in plantation societies. Annie Palmer's commanding position as plantation mistress required that power should be sustained through the violence that characterized the system. However, her legendary brutality emerges as an “unwomanly” and heinous quality, which serves as a warning against the dangers inherent in allowing women access to power. Annie's dependence on witchcraft as an avenue to sustain her power, her ability to hold control over her slaves and employees through the conviction she had instilled in them that she could summon fiends from hell at will, is further evidence of the pernicious quality of her authority.

The issues of legitimacy raised by Annie Palmer's legend as presented in *The White Witch of Rosehall* are representative of the concerns addressed by women novelists interested in depicting the impact of the plantation system on Caribbean historical development and on women's place within that system. Annie Palmer's commanding position, attained through the murder of the rightful male masters and sustained through violence, witchcraft, and the reversal of traditional patterns of gender relations, embodies the power-related issues that are central to these novelists' critique of plantation social structures. Palmer's illegitimate access to

power as a woman, her defense as a white woman of the racial and class advantages open only to whites in a plantation society, her power of life and death over black men, the misogynist biases awakened by her legendary brutality and sexual excesses, are all elements that women novelists wrestle with in their depiction of women planters struggling to wield some measure of power in Caribbean societies. In her struggle to gain and retain power in a patriarchal plantation order, Annie becomes the ambivalent paradigm after whom other planter-heroines will be modeled.

Laura Pettigrew, the young plantation owner in Quayle's *The Mistress*, is the direct heiress of Annie Palmer's struggle to hold on to her estate in the midst of ambiguities concerning the legitimacy of her claim to possession and the difficulties of exercising authority as an inexperienced sixteen-year-old girl. A creole girl growing up in turn-of-the-century Jamaica, whose semirespectable upbringing and indifferent education have left her suspended between Scottish planters and black laborers, Laura must struggle to find a way to wield power "as a woman" in a patriarchal/colonial world where a young creole girl of dubious antecedents has no legitimate place, other than as daughter or wife. The key access to power as a planter in such a society is the display of a capacity for violence such as that possessed by Annie Palmer. This kind of violence has already tainted Laura through her mother's Palmer-like brutality toward her servants, laborers, and even her daughter, and it threatens to lead to Laura's downfall. Evidence of the pernicious quality of this violence is found in Laura's quasi-erotic reaction to the beatings she has witnessed since she was a child:

She had watched Neil punishing an offender. He was godly as he meted out the blows. . . . His beatings were famous, and they helped to keep the prison empty and the land farmed . . .

For a while she stood hidden behind thick shrubs. It was a good beating. She could almost feel the blows. [She] winced as they fell . . .

Laura looked proudly at Neil. His back was bare. It was broad and strong, and it was oiled with sweat . . .

She was too excited to stand. (Quayle, p. 52)

One of the central themes in Quayle's novel is that of Laura being co-opted and trapped into such male avenues of power, which end up destroying her capacity for growth and fulfillment. The novel follows Laura's degradation as she acquires dubious economic power, a degrada-

tion the more poignant because Laura yearns for affection and acceptance, contrasting markedly with Annie Palmer's reputed mercenary cruelty.

Quayle makes of Laura a heart-rending figure, both sympathetic and repulsive. Her love for the land, her pride in the crops growing at Newbiggin Estate, add to the tragic dimensions of her position; despite that love and pride, she is unable as an adolescent to arrest the course of a history that is bringing rapid social and economic change to Jamaica.

Haitian novelist Marie Chauvet's heroines share with Laura Pettigrew their attempt to escape alienation through their attachment to the land. In the absence of a male child, Claire, the protagonist and narrator of *Amour*, stands to succeed her father as mistress of Morne-au-Lion, the family's coffee plantation. Her training as plantation mistress-to-be is limited to watching her father's monomaniacal displays of power. As a prototypical plantation master, he maintained control of his peasants through economic abuse and hypocritical exploitation of their belief in his voodoo connections and powers.

Once Claire assumes control of the plantation, on her father's untimely death, her tenure as mistress is punctuated by the violent destruction of the plantation. Like Laura, Claire, as an eighteen-year-old woman, is afraid of being exploited by her peasants and forms an alliance with foreign economic interests against peasant interests. This alliance, in turn, leads to the massacre of the peasant-tenants of Morne-au-Lion and the restoration of the plantation to male hands. The novel, one whose plot is not primarily centered on the plantation structure, nevertheless clearly depicts the direct links between the plantation and its patriarchal/colonial underpinnings. In this respect, Claire, a dark-skinned bourgeois in a world of light-skinned, nearly white mulattoes, seems unable to affirm her power as a plantation mistress because of the things she is not: male and white.

The overall assessment of Haitian historical development depicted in Chauvet's work is mirrored by Claire's development from reluctant and ultimately disastrous plantation mistress to rebellious murderess of the oppressor Caledu. This process is marked in the text by three scenes immersed in blood. Chauvet's central metaphor for the historical process in *Amour, colère, et folie* is rape, that of women by men in power and that of Haiti by repressive violent forces. Claire's unnatural role as plantation mistress allies her with the rapists—as her "raping" of Morne-au-Lion indicates. Chauvet's presentation of Claire, standing erect in the stirrups of her horse as she watches the bloodied, mutilated bodies of her tenants, epitomizes the dismal failure of women's assumption of patriarchal/colonial power. A subsequent dream, during which she is decapitated by a statue of Caledu with a gigantic erect phallus, again reinforces the images of rape, blood, and death as symbolic consequences of absolute power.

These elements are underscored in the novel's final scene, as Claire moves from suicide to murder, using the knife with which she intended to kill herself to murder Caledu. Her role at the end is that of "shedder of blood"; she has been co-opted, so to speak, into the violence that characterizes the system, but her action becomes part of a process of liberating the masses. The shedding of blood at the end signals Claire's sacrifice of her own individual fate to that of the masses of her village.

Rosario Ferré's *Maldito amor* develops two themes that we have come to identify with her short stories: the decadence of the planter class and the exclusion of women from the sources of patriarchal power. In *Maldito amor*, Ferré explores the consequences of the transfer of power (exploitative patriarchal control) into the hands of another class, another race, and another sex.

Maldito amor is Ferré's most consciously historical text to date. The novel surveys the events that led to the bankruptcy of the planter class in Puerto Rico as a result of the American takeover in 1898, events that made it impossible for Puerto Rican planters to survive without establishing peculiar and unholy alliances with the invaders.

The focus of the narrative is the Justicia plantation, domain of Don Ubaldino de la Valle, an archetypal patriarch who represents a class on the verge of extinction. The plantation, symbol of the economic power of the planter class, which has made possible the consolidation of its patriarchal power, is the object in turn of the greed, the hopes, the thirst for justice, and the dreams of revenge of the characters. Coveted by the only remaining son, who plans to sell it to American interests, and by the daughters, who want to add it to their husbands' extensive American-controlled landholdings, the Justicia plantation is willed by the patriarch's widow to her daughter-in-law, Gloria, a working-class mulatta who shares with Doña Laura her hopes of avenging through La Justicia the class, gender, and race oppression foisted on the Puerto Rican people by patriarchal planter power. Belonging as she does to a class, a race, and a gender that historically have not had a legitimate place in the patriarchal power structures, Gloria destroys Doña Laura's will, in a gesture that negates the legitimacy of plantation power and underscores the need for its destruction.

In her now famous article, "Novel and History: Plot and Plantation," Sylvia Wynter suggested looking at Caribbean history as the unfolding of the tensions between the structures of the plantation (imposed by the colonial powers) and the autochthonous structures of the plot system.⁴ In these novels, the planter-heroines are portrayed as the vehicles for the return of the land to the plot system of agriculture, thus redressing the imbalance of power created by the hegemony of the plantation system. This transfer of land and power is often stressed in terms of a transfer (not

always voluntary but nonetheless unstoppable) from white ownership to black or mulatto control.

On the subject of race, it should be underscored that the writers discussed here use their assessment of the racial differences and conflicting class interests that separate Caribbean women as the basis of their historical analysis of plantation societies. The plots of these novels revolve around woman-versus-woman conflicts, as these writers bring to the fore of their texts their understanding of plantation societies as the least likely settings for the development of relationships of sisterhood between white and colored women. More often than not, in the plantation household, black, white, and mulatto women were linked, not in sisterhood, but through their various relationships with its master. Hence, relationships between women on the plantation, as portrayed by women writers, underscore their understanding that the race and class struggles were probably experienced in ways related to gender and indeed to sex. The depictions are interesting in that they point to a greater complexity in the alliances and misalliances that make up the complex web of historical relations between racial and class groups in the Caribbean than we are likely to glean from a cursory attempt at applying traditional feminist theory to the study of Caribbean literature.

These novels challenge the patriarchal tradition embodied in the misogynist folktale of Madame Grosdent, the horrible witch whose tale of misused power mirrors the legend of Annie Palmer (see Chapter 4 for more on this folktale). This patriarchal tradition sustains the idea that power and authority are male prerogatives that women cannot exercise wisely and that only unnatural women aspire to possess. This antifeminist tradition has transformed Madame Grosdent and Annie Palmer into oppressive paradigms of female power. As novelists struggling against these negative paradigms, Quayle, Chauvet, and Ferré begin to subvert these negative images, seeking to present powerful women as the vehicles for annihilating the remnants of the plantation in Caribbean societies.

NOTES

1. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), p. 100.

2. Ada Quayle, *The Mistress* (London: McGibbon and Kee, 1957); Marie Chauvet, *Amour, colère, et folie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1968); Rosario Ferré, *Maldito amor* (Mexico: Joaquín Mortiz, 1986); Rosario Ferré, *Sweet Diamond Dust* (New York: Ballantine, 1989). The same editions are used in all subsequent references to these works. Page numbers for quotations are provided in text.

3. Herbert de Lisser, *The White Witch of Rosehall*, (Kingston: Macmillan Caribbean, 1982). The same edition is used in all subsequent references to this work.

4. Sylvia Wynter, "Novel and History: Plot and Plantation," *Savacou* 5 (June 1971): 95-102.