Tout Moun
Caribbean Journal of Cultural Studies

In A Fine Castle: Childhood in Caribbean Imag/nations

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Figuring the Father in Contemporary Caribbean Fiction

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Introduction

The figure of the father has long troubled the Caribbean's imagination. This unease is perhaps most demonstrated in the fact that, across the disciplines, fatherhood has often been represented in various states of absentia: not so much completely missing, as relegated to the margins of literary and cultural studies. The region's matriarchal construction has generally been given more attention, and understandably so. Edith Clarke's foundational 1957 study, My Mother Who Fathered Me, evokes this well-circulated feature of the Caribbean's social landscape. Clarke's title alludes to George Lamming's novel, In the Castle of My Skin (1953), where the protagonist G. praises the almost hermaphroditic heroism of his mother: "My father who had only fathered the idea of me left me the sole liability of my mother who really fathered me" (11). From the beginning of the 1990s, a new cadre of novels from the Anglophone Caribbean that gives prominence to fathers and fatherhood suggests this trend has shifted. Some of these include Shani Mootoo's Cereus Blooms at Night and Valmiki's Daughter, Nalo Hopkinson's Brown Girl in the Ring and Midnight Robber, Lawrence Scott's Night Calypso, Merle
Hodge’s *For the Life of Laetitia*, Jamaica Kincaid’s *Mr. Potter*, Martin Mordecai’s *Blue Mountain Trouble* and Patricia Powell’s *The Fullness of Everything*.

**Father Figure**

Interestingly, the current literary preoccupation with the father figure intersects with a growth in scholarly work on Caribbean masculinities. Though starting from different vantage points, imaginative literature and gender studies overlap on the need to address a gap or imbalance in traditional representational practices and politics of gender. In both areas of study, there seems to be consensus on the interdependence between the struggle for gender equality and the recalibration of a culture of manhood defined by violence.  

As a result, these works of fiction provide a formidable exposé of the ideological, psycho-spiritual and pragmatic limitations of one of the region’s most problematic myths of identity—its matriarchal construction. In so doing, the authors draw attention to the construct’s absent Other, the father.

The limitations of the mother-nation dyad are two dimensional. Firstly, the traditional ethnocentric construction, with its selective celebration of a triumphant black motherhood, fails to contain the complexity of the region’s multiethnic composition and its colour and class systems. Secondly, the figure inadvertently reinforces its own discursive history as a brand of “monstrous” or deviant womanhood that usurps male authority. Its premise, therefore, is that of a “father-lacking” situation in need of realignment with a still operative gender hierarchy that privileges the (absent) male.

Patricia Joan Saunders addresses this deceptive politics of (dis)empowerment with reference to the Trinidadian barrack-yard stories of the 1930s. She argues that the literary appropriation of black women’s bodies in these narratives belies their circumscription by the “outer spaces” of a “colonial patriarchal society”. With the emergence of nationalism, their literary erasure correlates with an economy of gender that “required men have access to mobility and control over their social surroundings” (92–93).

Even when more “progressive” nationalisms emerged that appeared to correct the representational narrowness of a black female aesthetic, these were aligned with the same

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patriarchal matrix of power. Shalini Puri in The Caribbean Postcolonial demonstrates this phenomenon with reference to Eric William’s “Mother Trinidad” hybrid icon, which was devised to conjure, from within William’s predominantly Afro-Trinidadian ruling party, a “trans-ethnic solidarity” (47–48). She concludes, however, that since “the hybrid subject nation was rarely imagined differently from the unitary Enlightenment subject . . . forging political opposition between nationalists and colonialists . . . entailed no necessary epistemological break with prior modes” (47). The symbolic agency granted women in the rhetorical and representational practices of nationalism is, therefore, an ironic representation of the postcolonial Caribbean nation because it is sustained by the covert operation of an entrenched patriarchal law.

Belinda Edmondson builds a convincing case for the “exile” of the Caribbean “matria” from Luce Irigaray’s argument that “because the woman–mother constitutes the foundation of patriarchy, the nation itself, she cannot exist as a subject within the patriarchal nation” (145). The force of this convention surfaces in Lamming’s formulation of G.’s experience of motherhood as one that substituted the primary or normalised subject of provision, that is, the absent male; hence, the assertion “my mother who really fathered me.” Inadvertently exposed is the untended wound opened by the unknown father in spite of the mother’s no doubt heroic effort to redeem the situation. This father wound, so to speak, introduces the second locus of deficiency in the matriarchal icon. The construct suppresses another reality: the deeply ontological desire for the father as a complementary site of recognition and relationship that often gets lost in the celebration of a resilient Caribbean womanhood.

The “conflict of recognising and denying paternity”, as Lamming puts it, is integral to Caribbean experience and points to a crisis that is experienced not merely at the level of gender relations and family life but penetrates to the very core of the region’s collective unconscious. Sandra Pouchet Paquet, with reference to Lamming’s 1960 novel, Season of Adventure, argues that the self-saving revolt of the mixed protagonist, Fola, is against “a style of living that preys on its own people” (79). One aspect of this national cannibalism identified by Paquet is the reproduction of a culture of “fatherlessness”. Significantly, the plot of Season of Adventure pivots on the mystery of Fola’s “double fatherhood” (Season 343). The novel stands, therefore, as an authoritative forerunner of the literary treatment of the theme about the (absent) father. Fola’s particular experience is as a consequence of her mother’s refusal to disclose knowledge of her daughter’s paternity in a misguided effort to “save face” and preserve social mobility in San Cristobal’s rigidly policed race/class borders of privilege.

The phenomenon of fatherlessness, however, has several manifestations and not surprisingly, the writers under consideration explore several of its aspects. It also pertains to the deceptive and patronizing paternity colonising Europe offered its forcefully displaced New World subjects, along with the numerous states of ontological and cultural bastardization colonial rule engendered. Chandin Ramchandin from Mootoo’s Cereus Blooms at Night and Theophilus Dellacourt from Scott’s Night Calypso are prime

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examples. Fatherlessness also includes the more familiar theme of Afro-Caribbean male abdication of parenting and financial responsibilities, although this has to some extent been misrepresented. It is the subject of Lamming’s *In the Castle of My Skin*, Mordecai’s *Blue Mountain Trouble*, and revisited, from a daughter’s perspective, in Kincaid’s *Mr. Potter*. Additionally, fatherlessness is applicable to the emotional absence and non-participation of men in the domestic sphere as displayed by Mr. Cephas in Hodge’s *For the Life of Laetitia*, as well as in instances of severe role betrayal due to dysfunctional behaviour associated with abuse, addiction, womanizing and criminal activity. Hopkinson’s *Brown Girl in the Ring* and *Midnight Robber*, Powell’s *The Fullness of Everything* and Scott’s *Night Calypso* are in this category.

In some ways, the habitual and new constellations of thematic concerns that characterise these texts signal an important epistemological “moment” in the discourse of gender given their interventionist agendas. The predominance of female authors no doubt accounts for the interest in the father–daughter relationship through which the nation is (re)allegorized to expand the foundational focus on novels of boyhood. That preoccupation changed dramatically from the 1970s when women writers introduced the exploration of Caribbean girlhood. The current group of texts, however, invites consideration of underexplored and new terrains of relations and unresolved issues that possess their own hinterlands of deprived and traumatised histories that impact how men and women are differently dis/empowered within the borders of the Caribbean (trans)nation. Moreover, these texts explore possible routes to conflict resolution and psycho–spiritual healing that productively contribute to the task that must engage us all with equal urgency—the future development of the post-independence Caribbean.

Though their foci are various, all converge on the imperative to reconstitute gender constructs and sexuality norms, especially those ideological constructions that conflate manhood with violent behaviours that enable and even reward oppressive masculinities. While the father is at the centre of plot designs that link family and nation histories, what the narratives in fact call to the fore are the complicated web of historical causalities and new socio-economic circumstances. These shed light on how gender has been mediated through (post)colonial oppressive systems of governance, their discriminatory discourses on human subjecthood, destructive ideologies of development and exploitative modes of capital accumulation. While critical attention is given in this essay to representations of the father, the way in which aggression and violence become installed within the fabric of human relations is unavoidably the larger concern. Typically, gender and sexuality norms are harnessed to race, ethnic, class and geo–national differences in the interest of marshalling agendas but with outcomes that give troubling credence to Anne McClintock’s argument that “[a]ll nationalisms are gendered; all are invented; and all are dangerous—dangerous . . . in the sense that they represent relations to political power and to the technologies of violence” (89).

The desire for the presence of the father is pervasive in these texts. Unfortunately, this need is most dramatically expressed in contradistinction to the expectations of its fulfilment since many plots feature fathers who are agents of tremendous traumas, inflicting lasting psycho–spiritual wounds on their progeny. As a result, children display a
worrying range of anti-social behaviours manifested in self-destructive or violent personalities, drug addiction, and criminality, inclusive of murder. Childhoods marred by experiences of unacknowledged paternity and abandonment, domestic irresponsibility and licentious lifestyles, physical and sexual abuse leave offspring with acute conditions of “father hunger”, intense experiences of existential unmooring, unrelenting anger, mental instability, displacement and angst.

Powell’s *The Fullness of Everything*, for instance, is the story of two brothers, Winston and Septimus, who struggle to resolve the injustices and humiliations suffered from the abusive tendencies and philandering lifestyle of their father, Samuel Rowe. Even in his old age, Mr Rowe brings Rosa into the family house, the daughter produced from his sexual exploitation of the eleven-year-old Beverly Johnson. So traumatic has been Winston’s childhood that twenty-five years after his escape from Jamaica, he admits to his mother that he is trying to “deal” with his “anger”, “trying to put Papa to rest” (174). Similarly, in her fictional biography, *Mr. Potter*, Kincaid therapeutically confronts her own experience of absent fatherhood, choosing to write the father she never knew as a means of exorcising the “spectre” that haunts her life (138). The same is true for Jammy/James of Mordecai’s adolescent novel, *Blue Mountain Trouble*. His unknown father, Royston Gilmore, is described as an unsettling “presence that was an absence” (324). He is the faceless identity that, for his estranged son, Jammy, demands a resolution, a need powerfully enunciated in the title of Geoffrey Philip’s short story collection, “Who’s Your Daddy?”

A troubling dimension of the theme is the abdication of the role of protector by fathers who sexually violate their children. Paternal rape is the focus of Scott’s *Night Calypso*, Mootoo’s *Cereus Blooms at Night* and Hopkinson’s futuristic novel *Midnight Robber*. These fathers are presented as horribly dehumanised predators that prey on their own offspring, making them sites for the outworking of a host of pathologies most often related to internalised notions of male entitlement and power. Disenfranchised and emasculated fathers become victimizers in conditions where institutionalised hierarchies of difference perpetuate violent social structures and prejudicial norms of exclusion that reinforce the exercise of power through domination—rape, in this case, being its gendered signifier. A general trend in the region’s discourse on rape, however, has been its focus on (adult) heterosexual violation. Paula Morgan and Valerie Youssef, for instance, justifiably address the crime in heterosexual terms when they pose this question: “Is it biology or the social construction of gender identities which dictates that overwhelmingly men (biologically fitted with agents of penetration) assault and penetrate women (biologically fitted with inner space designed to receive such penetrations)?” (171) Further, even when the victim is a female child or adolescent, critical analysis gives precedence to

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4 Interestingly, while the Rowe family claims Beverly was thirteen at the time of the incident, the girl’s grandmother records her age as eleven. The inconsistency reveals the desperate effort, particularly on the part of Mrs Rowe, to deny her husband’s full culpability for the shameful crime. She even goes as far as calling the child a “whore, a prostitute”. Patricia Powell, *The Fullness of Everything* (Great Britain: Peepal Tree Press, 2009), 50 and 98.
gender over age, which unrealistically levels the dynamics of power involved in these crimes between adult perpetrators and their under-aged victims. As a result, the nature of the damage wrought on child victims and their particular needs for recovery are either ignored or misunderstood.

_Night Calypso, Cereus Blooms at Night_ and _Midnight Robber_ demonstrate the crude democracy of sexual abuse that targets children and adolescents of both sexes. As such they indicate the necessity for a critical and theoretical adjustment to the analysis of the crime, particularly in literary discourse. Much discussion has circulated around the rape of the female (island) body as a metaphor for the experience of imperial subjugation.\(^5\) Needless to say imperial and postcolonial discourses have often constructed (ex)colonised lands and peoples as female, a ready synonym for child given the intensely sexualised nature of the Caribbean’s historical evolution and the conflation of the child and the feminine. Alison Donnell’s two-part explanation for what she notes to be the predominant silence on sex and sexuality elucidates this trend. The first is the influence of a “conservative Anglican Christianity”. The denominational marker, however, is a little misleading given the significant influence of Roman Catholicism in the colonising mission. The second is, as Ramchand notes, the “focus on childhood in many of the region’s canonical narratives”, in which the presumption of sexual innocence or a desexualised construction of childhood is pervasive (182).

Conversely, more contemporary novels like Oonya Kempadoo’s _Buxton Spice_ and _Tide Running_, Kincaid’s _Annie John_ and _Lucy_, Scott’s _Aelred’s Sin_ and _Night Calypso_, and Mootoo’s _Cereus Blooms at Night_ and _Valmiki’s Daughter_ demonstrate a greater willingness to interface the politics of nationhood with the sexual identities and histories of children and (post)adolescents. Recent Anglophone fiction demonstrates an unprecedented exploration of children’s erotic lives, either in terms of natural or forced awakening. This development radically reconstitutes the allegorical template of the canon’s pioneering novels that either obliquely deal with sexuality or represent childhood as a sexually “innocent” phase. Significant among these are Drayton’s _Christopher_ and Anthony’s _The Year in San Fernando_ where the theme is metaphorically projected through nature imagery. The theme of growing up is now more visibly constructed in relation to the nation state’s gendered politics by which its adult citizenry are circumscribed. Moreover, by placing the sexual stories of the young at the centre of the journey towards adulthood, children’s bodies are not merely the symbolic agents of that process. They are situated within the literary nation as sites of tension where the societies’ most guarded gendered subjectivities can be challenged or recalibrated, and their histories of shame exorcised and hopefully healed.

Novels like _Night Calypso, Cereus Blooms at Night_ and _Midnight Robber_ are of particular significance as they turn their attention to even more disturbing realities in their treatment with incest. Until recently, this issue has been somewhat muted, not only at the level of public policy and litigation, but also in critical analysis. The taboo nature of the

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\(^5\) See Morgan and Youssef, _Writing Rage_, 170; Saunders, _Alien-Nation and Repatriation_, 91.
crime and a culture of silence around sex and sexuality arguably account for its late arrival as a topic for public debate. But disclosure continues to be difficult as parents and guardians may fear public scandal, the destruction of household units and economic ruin. Even exposure to retaliatory violence and the collapse of relationships with sexual partners can influence the choice of wilful ignorance, blame or the enforcement of the “don’t tell rule”. When, for instance Beverly is discovered to have been violated by the man who functioned as a surrogate father, her grandmother offers the traumatized girl a brand of compassionate though acquiescent consolation:

. . . bawl it out, for when I was a young somebody like you, ain’t nobody to tell these criminal acts to, nobody; we carry them with us all through life, burdening weself with them; can’t tell your mother, she don’t believe you, tell you is your own damn fault . . . (The Fullness 98–99).

The practice of transferring blame even to the underage victim of sexual abuse is also evident in Hopkinson’s Midnight Robber. Janisette constructs her stepdaughter, Tan-Tan, as a sexual rival to assuage her guilt for not confronting Antonio since this may mean jeopardising his interest in her. By giving Tan-Tan a knife for her sixteenth birthday, she implies that the teenager should take responsibility for her own protection. However, when Tan-Tan defends herself, Janisette undertakes a personal vendetta against the girl. Moreover, although the release of her agony within the private space of the home may be therapeutic and Tan-Tan is supplied with a weapon for self-protection, neither measure demands accountability on the part of the perpetrators and both facilitate the perpetuation of the crime.

The urgent social justice issues that attend these crimes indict parents, communities and governments alike—all of whom are charged with the responsibility to protect and nurture their society’s most vulnerable members. Child abuse, like domestic violence, is unquestionably a social disease Caribbean nation states need to show more resolve in addressing. Indeed, Powell’s character, Winston, presents an alarming scenario that suggests the escalation of the crisis to a pathological norm:

He was fourteen years old, but he saw it as clear as day, this great betrayal, and it was not just in his family alone, he saw it everywhere he looked now in the village; he saw it every day that there was light. He saw parents turning their backs, parents drawing a mask over their faces so as not to see, parents breaking their word, violating their own laws, perpetrating violence against their own flesh and blood. (The Fullness 23)

There is dire need for the development of legislative structures that allow for the swift prosecution of sex offenders and the design of social policies that include some measure of mandatory parenting education and rehabilitative programmes for abusive parents. The dread poetics of violence associated with the lives of children and adolescents in this new fiction marks the emergence of a disturbing trajectory in the narrativisation or allegorisation of the Caribbean nation. The apparent acceleration of gendered violence across the region is a clear indication that more has to be done to comprehend the continuities between past and present causalities, as well as the new social conditions
that provoke crimes such as the abuse of women and children. Morgan and Youssef have
done tremendous path-breaking work in the analysis of rape in the Caribbean imaginary
by referencing its connectivity to gender systems and power relations within the imperial
economy and contemporary contexts. Wilson Harris also deals with the issue in his essay,
“Profiles of Myth and the New World”, where he provides an original theoretical paradigm
for engaging the manifestations of incest with particular relevance to (ex)colonial states.

Classifying the act as one of the “unjust convention[s]” to which all human cultures are
subject, Harris argues it has been “countenanced at times as a royal privilege to preserve
the purity of the ruling line” as well as “a dread abuse of the weak in so-called ordinary families” (204–205). However, these disparate groups, “the royal line” and the “ordinary families”, are held in “tension” via a shared preservationist fetish. The obsession, for
instance, with safeguarding “pure” bloodlines or ethnic practices from corruption due to
mixing exemplifies what Harris identifies as the “compulsion” to “frame the identity of the
family into an absolute convention” (205). Harris, of course, launches into a reading of
incest that transcends its physical manifestation as intrafamilial sexual abuse and
inbreeding by unveiling the act’s larger political implications. He thereby offers a lens for
understanding how and why oppressive hegemonies are reproduced in (post)colonial
societies and beyond. The incestuous impulse to guard and reproduce sameness,
therefore, analogises a brand of political/ideological narcissism through which status quo
arrangements can be preserved within the individual and national family or state. These
are seldom without their enabling identity constructs and practices of recognition and
exclusion, reward and punishment.

Scott’s Night Calypso provides a means of elaborating Harris’s thesis in terms of the
foundational race, gender and class stratification conventions installed under colonial
rule. Set in the period of Trinidad’s labour riots of the 1930s to the end of World War II,
Scott’s novel focuses on Theo, alias “Coco”, the multi-voiced teller of his family’s tale of
intergenerational rape in which the Dellacourt girls are violated by a succession of de
Marineaux men, metonymically called “Mister”. The adolescent is the “illegitimate”
offspring of one of those encounters. Although his birth interrupts the Dellacourt’s female
line, he is not spared the perverse rite of sexual proprietorship exercised by the estate’s
owners whose atrocities are aided by the island’s apathetic and demoralised religious
hierarchy. Theo’s horrid sexualisation, therefore, continues an “ancestry of such
interference” that can be traced to his great-grandmother, Christina who, at age twelve,
was tagged with the name “puppy” before being sexually assaulted (Night Calypso 137).

A sad history of infanticide and suicide is also revealed by Theo’s nocturnal conversations.
Christina’s daughter Alice, having produced a twin, Louis and Emelda, and then Mercy
under similar circumstances, smothers her last child in a desperate attempt to save her
from the “damage between the sheets of de Marineaux”. Then, finding the guilt of that act
too great a burden, Alice takes her own life (138). The dreadful catechism of brutality
Theo embodies is borne witness to by the physical scar that runs the length of his spine
as well as the severe psychological wounding he manifests, but which is conveniently

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6 See Morgan and Youssef, Writing Rage, especially Chapter 8, 169–191.
misread by the religious leaders as spirit possession. Notably, Theo’s forced sexualisation is initiated by Mr de Marineaux’s disapproval of his friendship with Chantal, who also happens to be the boy’s clandestine half-sister. Very much like Chandin who desires Lavinia in Mootoo’s Cereus Blooms at Night, Theo is forbidden to “play with Chantal”, the white girl whom he is disallowed as a potential partner (Night Calypso 367). As a disciplinary intervention, “Mister” literally makes Theo his night-time concubine, the effeminised horse he sexually rides as a testament to his substandard or deficient masculinity as a mixed blood, illegitimate male.7

The multiple acts of sodomy endured by the adolescent can be productively read through Harris’s concept of “projected incest” or the “projected violence by the state [read ruling class] upon others to preserve stereotypical purities” (204–205). For the de Marineaux men, the practice of taking sexual liberties with the estate’s defenceless women is a strategy for asserting their social privilege. These women are impregnated with their half-breeds who are then incestuously raped by successive heirs. Miscegenation thereby secures the plantocracy’s elite racial purity on which its right as the “ruling line” is founded, even as the wanton fathering of “outside” children is a means of flaunting proprietorial entitlement and justifies the claim to a superior masculinity. In Theo’s case, rape cements his inferiority to a male planter class that violently enforces its rule/law against any native socio-political and/or sexual challenge to it.

If the imperial conquest of the Caribbean had been signified, in the main, through the penetration of the female (adult) body, this representational field is certainly expanded to include males in Scott’s Night Calypso. Scott had already introduced the theme in Aelred’s Sin where it is suggested that the African slave-boy, Jordan/Mungo, is a victim of sexual usury. But whether performed by the males that represent the colonial plantocracy or by its victimised and socially displaced (ex)subjects, the literary construction of incest is fundamentally a pathological instrument of punishment and control directed towards the conservation of a patriarchal (heterosexist) social convention. The humiliation caused to fathers by female infidelity, for instance, engenders monstrous acts of retributive recompense levelled against their own daughters in the absence of perpetrating wives. Mootoo’s Mala and Hopkinson’s Tan–Tan are, as a result, twice punished. They are made substitute brides and forced to render marital service otherwise denied their fathers. Later, when the girls attain puberty and develop independent romantic interests, they are punished for what their fathers perceive as the betrayal of the right to exclusive access to their daughters’ bodies.

In the case of Chandin, the rejection he suffers in a colonial dispensation that judges him an inferior male is exacerbated when his wife, Sarah, is seduced by Lavinia, the very woman he desires. According to Morgan and Youssef, his Chandin’s humiliation comes via his “inescapable blackness” and Lavinia’s “usurpation of his position when she runs off with his wife” (143). Mala, his immediate same (race and blood) and “Other” (gender and age), is therefore targeted as an ideal site for the outworking of a form of self-inflicted chastisement given that he has been judged unworthy by the very system he emulates. She is also the vessel through which he can construct the illusion of a reclaimed manhood.

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7 Edmondson uses this concept in Making Men, 27.
which had been wrenched from him by the colonial status quo and the very gender he had 
been socialized to think his subordinate. This pattern of behaviour finds an explanation in 
Reddock’s comment that “[v]iolence is a gender issue. With men, it is about violence, 
power and influence. The less power men have, the more they seem to use violence”. Not 
surprisingly, then, when he discovers Ambrose to be his rival and so feels his authority 
threatened, his daughter’s body is reified as property over which he lays permanent claim 
in a vicious rape orchestrated to obliterate her very personhood. The attack is therefore 
overlaid with the vow that “no man, no woman, no damn body go tief my damn property 
again” (Cereus Blooms 220).

Similarly, when Antonio confronts the reality of his exile on New Half Way Tree, Tan–Tan 
is his only means of accessing some of the privileges of his former life as Mayor of 
Toussaint. He therefore takes her into his confidence with a loaded confession that 
foreshadows her abuse: “You is all that leave to me now. You dear to me like daughter, 
like sister, like wife self” (Midnight Robber 76). The feminisation of his loss occasions his 
distortion of the father–daughter bond. From the age of nine, Tan–Tan is made a 
scapegoat for her mother’s transgressions and is viciously abused for being “a blasted 
slut with a slut for a mother” (167). Like Mala, her most severe experience of paternal 
rape occurs when Antonio recognises Melonhead’s romantic interest in her. Echoing the 
drunken rage of Chandin, Antonio interprets the young man’s interest in his daughter as 
an act of thievery and retaliates with brutal physical force that climaxes with rape: “Is man 
you want? Is man? I go show you what man could do for you” (168).

The chronic gender crisis to which these novels point is, in the extreme, manifested in an 
alarming number of plots that address patricide. Children kill their fathers in desperate 
acts of self-preservation and retaliation. These plot designs are, therefore, strong 
indictments of family structures and national environments that fail to ensure the well-
being and holistic development of children. Father killers appear in Mootoo’s Cereus 
Blooms at Night as Mala’s means of saving herself and her sister, Asha, from Chandin’s 
incestuous rule. Tan–Tan also murders a father who repeatedly rapes her to punish his 
wife’s infidelity. Ti-Jeanne from Hopkinson’s Brown Girl in the Ring is cast as the 
appointed “Duppy Conqueror” who, with the help of a pantheon of Orishas, annihilates 
she diabolical “spirit-catcher” grandfather, Rudy, in a battle of cosmic proportions. 
Winston’s question to his mother, “You think I killed him...?” reveals the unresolved guilt 
he bears for the expected though sudden death of his sick father (Fullness 173). Even in 
Edwidge Danticat’s The Dew Breaker, a novel very much in this narrative vein of centring 
the father, the fourteen year-old Claude eventually shoots his abusive father who had 
“forced [him] to defend [himself]” (119).

Patricide, however, is not always literal. Kincaid’s fictional biography of her father in Mr. 
Potter translates actual murder into a startlingly premeditated imaginative and linguistic 
act. For Kincaid, the representational authority associated with literacy would be the 
vehicle through which she attempts to terminate the multiple negations she inherited

8 See “Sex, Lies and Leadership”, Express Woman, 30 January, 2011, 5. Reddock makes 
the comment in a conversation with journalist, Renée Cummings.
from a patriarchal, colonial economy and its “macho” island culture that produce men like Roderick Potter (servile, illiterate and ignorant) and validate his womanising and domestic irresponsibility. Kincaid precipitates her autonomy through a deliberate termination of the “name” of her father, the (missing) biological and legal source of her genealogical line that renders her outside the law as his illegitimate child:

And this line that runs through Mr. Potter and that he then gave to me, I have not given to anyone, I have not ceded to anyone, I have brought it to an end, I have made it stop with me, for I can read and write and I now say in writing, that this line drawn through the space where the name of the father ought to be has come to an end (Mr. Potter 100-101).

Shortcomings and betrayals perpetrated by father figures, who are also in many ways themselves victims of the ideological constructs and socio-political systems they seek to negotiate, are centric to these narratives’ differently designed demand for the nurturance of alternative masculinities. The implied imbalance, which necessitates a vigorous challenge to unproductive gender norms, is therefore addressed by some positive representations of father figures, types that often get lost in the plethora of negative portrayals. Hodge’s *For the Life of Laetitia*, for instance, stands as a counterpoint to Kincaid’s rather acerbic critique of her absent father. Hodge’s narrative significantly demonstrates the supportive role of men like Pappy, Uncles Leroy and Jamesie and even the English teacher, Mr. Joseph. Such characters contest the discursive normalisation of the Afro-Caribbean working-class male as a truant to his domestic and child-rearing responsibilities as they all function as nurturing father-figures in Laetitia’s life, but in ways that deconstruct the artificial divide between traditional gender roles.9

Redemptive fatherhood is a thematic preoccupation in Scott’s *Night Calypso*. Vincent Metivier, for instance, is the corrective conscience for colonialism’s abusive paternity, for which he also shares guilt as a member of its class. Through his unplanned role as surrogate father for the deeply disturbed Theo, he is challenged to confront his own sins of omission by taking responsibility for the son he fathered as a young man with Odetta, the daughter of a servant in his parents’ household. In the case of Mootoo’s *Valmiki’s Daughter*, Viveka’s battle to negotiate the difficult implications of her lesbian identity attracts the compassionate support of her father, a medical doctor who lives as a closet homosexual in Trinidad’s homophobic and ethnically strained socio-political environment. For Annaise, the protagonist of Joy Mahabir’s novel, *Jouvert*, her father’s struggle against marginalization as an East Indian mas’-maker in Trinidad’s post-independence Afro-centric cultural nationalism forms the inspirational backdrop of her own complicated artistic journey.

**Conclusion**

9 This discussion is expanded in my article “Fatherhood: A Silence Explored in *For the Life of Laetitia*”, *Journal of West Indian Literature* 7.2 (April 1998) 81–87.
Signs of a fresh epistemological engagement with gender, its power relations and representational norms are unquestionably emerging in Caribbean literature and criticism. Integral to this project is the challenge these texts render to fatherlessness as an identity marker of Caribbeanness. Most urgent is the need to redress a culture of violence rooted in patriarchal ideologies of gender that impact male–female and family relations, the practice of politics, and socio–economic development. The unhealthy state of affairs is made abundantly clear in the appearance of the child as victim in fictions where they symbolise the deficiencies of Caribbean nationalisms and the societies they have produced. What is more, the culture of violence that plagues the region brings to the centre of the debate the very basic question: how does the politics of gender and sexuality hinder or enable the fullest realisation of our common humanity?

Indeed, much of the tension in this regard has been identified as a crisis of masculinity. No doubt this focus needs expansion. Edmondson, nevertheless, makes the critical observation that while Caribbean men have been “emasculated” by colonialism, the necessity of “re–masculinizing Caribbean manhood” cannot be wrought “according to the definitions of masculine subjectivity as they have been traditionally defined”. For her, such a “proposition would mean investing Caribbean men with the authority of male power associated with the colonizer” (99). Edmondson’s point certainly carries but is nevertheless limited because she frames exploitative male authority solely in terms of colonialism’s Euro–male capitalist ethos. This oversimplifies the dynamics, as Patricia Mohammed suggests, of the competing Euro, Indo and Afro–Creole patriarchies which colonialism brought into play.10

Additionally, according to Reddock’s reading of the contemporary performance of masculinity in the politics of Trinidad and Tobago, these patriarchies are still very much alive. She writes that “interethnic relations . . . are often expressed as a contest among men, where control of political power and the state serves to legitimize claims of citizenship and becomes a symbol of ‘manhood.’”11 Race and ethnicity continue to be manipulated to ratify the right to rule, and gender and sexuality clearly remain bound up in a patriarchal philosophy of human value. The most challenging outcome of such a dispensation is the perpetuation of a tenacious (heterosexual) masculinity that finds its full legitimation in the capacity to exercise representational control over gender and sexual politics. At its worse, this ideological practice is expressed in disciplinary acts of violence directed at the female–island–body or, alternatively, at what is perceived to be weak or marginal. The regional increase in sexual violence against women and children is a prime manifestation of this outcome.

There is an unprecedented show of imaginative daring in the attempt by the authors of these texts to draw lines of termination through the systems of thought and socio–political structures that produce and enable exploitative masculinities. Lamming’s

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11 Reddock, xxi.
*Seasons of Adventure*, however, is a critical predecessor in this regard. By linking both the coloniser and the colonised male to the violent “double fatherhood” that haunts Fola’s identity, he quite early debunks a simplistic ethno-centric approach to (male) violence, insisting that patriarchal power be read in relation to specific socio–historical conditions. However, Hopkinson’s remarkable treatment of the theme of abusive paternity, particularly in *Midnight Robber*, takes this intervention even further. The novel makes a radical shift in the discourse of oppression from its accustomed geographies and victims. Barbara Lalla astutely argues it “challenges our moral complacency in portraying Caribbean colonisers exploiting indigenous species on a new New World” (18). In so doing, Hopkinson warns of the repercussions of an entrenched trans–historical and trans–planetary patriarchal (capitalist) ethos through which modes of thinking and behaviour motivated by domination and exploitation are normalised across indices of difference.

The concern is also existent in her novel *Brown Girl in the Ring* which imagines a ruined metropolitan Toronto called “the Burn” (10). The gender debate and its associated issues of violence are situated as phenomena within the history of human civilisation but with a futuristic reach. Violence is thereby staged as a problem to be tackled via an interrogation of the conflicts that erupt from the organisation of social life, often gendered, which motivate the abusive exercise of power. Critical to the process of renewal is the re–imagination of gender norms which Hopkinson typically advances through her trademark disruptions of stereotyped gender binaries.

Even with the significant improvement in women’s lives since the period of independence and the symbolic currency enjoyed by the matriarch, any engagement with the ideological reworking of the gendered subject can benefit from Edmondson’s reading of the exiled Caribbean “matria” (145). In its broadest application, her insight implies a necessary reformative return of the banished “feminine” to the architecture of the human which has particular significance for the Caribbean given the deceptive nature of its matriarchal construction. Certainly, the destruction wrought by the enactment of violent masculinities explored in these texts suggests an urgent need to redress that imbalance. If Tan–Tan’s story testifies to the extreme human trauma caused by this reality, the birth of the son conceived by paternal rape signifies the evolution of a potentially new type of manhood. He is named Tubman, after the slave liberator Harriet Tubman (*Midnight Robber* 329). This transformative turn also intersects with the purgatorial phase Powell imagines for Samuel Rowe that allows him the opportunity to “fix up things” with the many people he wronged during his lifetime (*The Fullness* 166). Powell’s ideological investment is also in the healing “feminine”, as Mr Rowe’s redemptive process is overseen by a spirit presence in the form of an old woman and is witnessed by Rosa, the gifted child of his last indiscretion.

Violence as a behaviour certainly transcends gender, a fact that makes the issue a deeply human one. Moreover, when the criteria of value that mark a superior humanity or validate entitlement are associated with possessions, violence can evolve into a way of life or a culture in order to secure power and procure resources. This malady is perhaps as old as time itself. Stories, however, at their very best, help us, as Lamming argues, to
return the society to those areas of experience which remain largely invisible between citizen and citizen in the normal course of living together. They return the society to itself; to its past as well as to the visions of the future which constitute its present.\textsuperscript{12}

These narratives bring the sufficiency of the matriarchal construction of the Caribbean into focus by pointing to the father as an essential participant in the (re)making of the Caribbean nation, now well into its post-independence phase. The discursive turn to the father is a confrontation with the illusion that his traditional absence ratifies the authority of the woman or matriarch. What is actually in operation is a pervasive male-centred economy that, even in apparent absenta, authorizes gender constructs across the indices that define femininity and masculinity. Not surprisingly, the child remains a critical sign of that future. Quite appropriately the authors suggest that the celebration and healing of the father-child relationship are essential to its realisation. These works of fiction are, therefore, pivotal to that collective labour of redrawing the lines of death-wielding gender ideologies that contrive to keep us incarcerated in the “duppy-bowl” of their destructive systemic reign.

Works Cited


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