

Tout Moun

Caribbean Journal of Cultural Studies

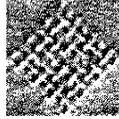
*I Dream to Change the World
Literature and Social Transformation*

Vol 4: No. 1 ▪ May 2018

<http://www.mainlib.uwi.tt/epubs/toutmoun/index1.htm>

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“The Rod of Correction”:
Female Homosexuality and Corrective Rape in
Staceyann Chin’s *The Other Side of Paradise*:
A Memoir



FAY WHITE

Introduction

The perpetration of violence against homosexuals persistently surfaces in current news stories in openly homophobic Caribbean nations, for example, Jamaica. Incidents of homophobic violence or hate crimes are commonly associated with the male homosexual, and thus, print and electronic media and social media platforms feature alarming reports of and deliberations about violence which is targeted at the “batty bwoy,” “Buller man,” or “anti-man” who resides in the Caribbean.¹ In Anglophone Caribbean literature, Lawrence Scott’s *Aelred’s Sin* and Patricia Powell’s *A Small Gathering of Bones* also underscore the significant threat of violence against male homosexuals in the region. This essay, which is centered on female homosexuality, shines a spotlight on corrective rape, a category of homophobic violence which targets female homosexuals, and its representation in Jamaican writer Staceyann Chin’s *The Other Side of Paradise: A Memoir* (2009).

Contemporary diasporic women writers have destabilized dominant depictions of conservative and normative female sexuality by means of their explicit descriptions of female sensuality and alternative female sexuality. Jamaica Kincaid’s *The Autobiography of My Mother* and *Lucy* as cases in point, showcase female-centered erotic encounters and exchanges devoid of affection or emotional attachment. Moreover, diasporic lesbian writers such as Michelle Cliff, Dionne Brand, Patricia Powell, Shani Mootoo and Staceyann Chin unveil female same-sex desire and sexual performance within a Caribbean space where homosexuality is mostly condemned and male homosexuality is erected as the dominant discourse on alternative sexuality. Depictions of lesbian lives in Caribbean literature provide the basis for significant conversations concerning the complexities and challenges which exclusively confront female homosexuals in the region.

¹ Geraldine Skeete’s “Representations of Homophobic Violence in Anglophone Caribbean Literature” explores the effects and implications of effeminophobia and homophobia on the male homosexual.

The threat and terror of violence against women who desire other women emerge as an intricate thematic element in Anglophone Caribbean fictional discourse. An impassioned desire to punish the female homosexual for what is perceived as deviant sexual behavior is most apparent. Geraldine Skeete discusses this in “Representations of Homophobic Violence in Anglophone Caribbean Literature” where she points out, for example, that Makeda Silvera’s “Baby” is:

... a short story that is rich in dramatic irony, for while the two female protagonists are together arguing and making love and conversation, unbeknownst to them a male intruder is outside their bedroom door with murderous intentions. There is further irony in the fact that he needs to be sexually aroused in order to commit the intended physical violence; and although he despises them, the lesbian lovers are his source of arousal. (6)

Contemporary feminists theorize the personal and political implications of sexual violence and violations which occur in varied forms and in diverse cultures across the globe.² The persistence of rape is conceptualized by radical feminists, for example Susan Browne Miller as an attempt to intimidate and tyrannize women and preserve male domination. Furthermore, Judith Herman in *Trauma and Recovery* describes the devastating effect of rape on the woman’s psyche. She states that: “The essential element of rape is the physical, psychological and moral violation of the person...The purpose of the rapist is to terrorize, dominate and humiliate his victim, to render her helpless” (57-58).

Corrective rape, a term which originates in South Africa, is defined as a practice intended to remedy the lesbian’s perceived non-normative sexual orientation. Teresa Da Silva and others in “Multiple Perpetrator Rape: an International Phenomenon” write: “In South Africa the term ‘corrective rape’ has emerged to describe the rape of women who are known to be or suspected of being lesbian in an attempt to make them heterosexual” (27). Although same-sex marriage was legalized in South Africa in 2006, the danger of violence against female homosexuals in that country remains unrelenting.

² Paula Morgan and Valerie Youssef in *Writing Rage: Unmasking Violence through Caribbean Discourse* examine the historical, political, cultural and familial circumstances connected with rape or sexual violence against women in patriarchal Caribbean societies.

This is the focus of Pumza Fihlani's BBC news report published on June 30, 2011 and entitled "South Africa's lesbians fear 'corrective rape'":

Noxolo Nkosana, 23, is the latest victim of a series of violent attacks against lesbians... The attack on her is thought to have begun as a case of what is known as "corrective rape", in which men rape lesbians in what they see as an attempt to "correct" their sexual orientation. The practice appears to be on the increase in South Africa. More than 10 lesbians per week are raped or gang-raped in Cape Town alone, according to Luleki Sizwe, a charity which helps women who have been raped in the Western Cape.

The actualization of a global society as a result of social media platforms, for example Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube, propels conversations and elicits rage regarding acts of violence or hate crimes committed against diverse groups who are perceived as vulnerable, marginalized, and discriminated against in their society. Hence, when a woman is publicly raped in India, a patently patriarchal society, that offense, which is instantly disseminated by means of social media to every region of the world, potentially impels feminist advocacy and widespread anger. It is not surprising then that reports of corrective rape in South Africa have sparked outrage, discussions and debates around the world. In the *Trinidad Express* newspaper article "Trinidadians speak out on corrective rape" dated December 10, 2011, Afiya Ray presents varied responses provided by Trinidadians when questioned about their perceptions of the incidents of corrective rape in South Africa:

Express Woman spoke to some persons about their view on corrective rape. Some people expressed outrage while others remained neutral, refusing to comment... Social activist and volunteer Kim Maharaj said she became enraged every time she heard of the situation. "It is a despicable practice," she said. "Rape is rape, there is nothing corrective about it, those two words should never be in the same sentence together..." Jacqueline Newton said, "Rape is rape and cannot be justified; however theirs is a different culture to ours and I foresee no problem with that sort of behaviour/practice here."

While corrective rape has not emerged as a phenomenon in Trinidad, it has been portrayed as a brutal reality in Chin's memoir, *The Other Side of Paradise*, which is set in Jamaica. She explicitly describes an episode of attempted corrective gang rape which she

experiences in a public restroom on the campus of The University of the West Indies, Mona:

“Is why you don’t want no man? Why you ‘fraid o’ the rod of correction, eh, baby?” Blue Shirt’s tone attempts the seduction of Red’s... (258).

“Yes, why you so frighten a de big bamboo? You think it goin’ hurt you? It not goin hurt you, you know. Just make you get better quick. Come feel it, nuh.”

White Shirt moves closer to me. Blue Shirt follows him. The circle moves in. (259)...

Red runs his hands down my right hip and thigh.

“Yes, we going fuck her to bring her back to the right way of thinking. We fucking her to save her from herself and from hellfire.” (264)

The insistence and dominance of hegemonic ideology in the Caribbean imagination is concomitant with homophobic violence or corrective rape in Chin’s *The Other Side of Paradise*. Alternative female sexuality is not only considered a challenge to the power of heteropatriarchy, but also subverts conventional expressions of female sexuality or heteronormativity and, as such, female same-sex desire is derided by the males in the narrative. Hence, the act of corrective rape perpetrated by men against the lesbian in the story serves to sustain patriarchal ideology regarding normative expressions of female sexuality. Jacqui Alexander in *Pedagogies of Crossing* explains that “formerly conflated in the imaginary of the (white) imperial heteropatriarch, the categories “lesbian” and “prostitute” are now positioned together within black heteropatriarchy as outlaw, operating outside of the boundaries of law and, therefore, poised to be disciplined and punished within it” (23). The male’s endeavor to normalize female sexuality by means of corrective rape, inherently serves to punish aberrant behavior, coerce female compliance, and preserve patriarchal power.

Religious faith or conviction also appears to propel homophobia and corrective rape in *The Other Side of Paradise*. Chin represents the perpetrators as religious persons who rationalize that their act of violence is mandated and sanctioned by God. The penis is thus erected as the analogue to the rod of correction, a term which is connected with authority and discipline in religious discourse: “Foolishness is bound in the heart of a child; but the rod of correction shall drive it far from him.” (Proverbs 22:15, KJV). The perpetrators inform the victim that the purpose of the sexual violation is to facilitate her salvation and deliverance from eternal damnation.

The abandonment of the homeland and subsequent migration to the Global North are consequences of homophobic violence in Chin’s *The Other Side of Paradise*. Following her

terrifying experience of attempted corrective rape, Chin decides that she must migrate to New York for her own safety. She realizes that she cannot be openly lesbian and reside in Jamaica due to the prevalence of homophobia, and perceives that migrating to the United States will afford her the opportunity to explore her sexuality without the threat of violence engendered by heterosexist and homophobic attitudes in the Caribbean:

In New York I wouldn't have to sneak around and live like something is wrong with me. I could go on dates with women and hold hands and act like I am a normal person. I could forget my father's denial of me, my mother leaving. America seems like the kind of place where people go when they want to leave everything behind. Sometimes it's good to leave everything behind. So you can make room for new and better things. (267)

Other diasporic women writers echo similar sentiments of disenchantment regarding "home" and trepidation about residing in the Caribbean. Shani Mootoo, an immigrant from Trinidad and Tobago who resides in the Global North, talks about her feeling of exclusion when at "home" as a result of her alternative sexual orientation. In the printed interview "In Her own Words: Shani Mootoo on Migration, Writing and the Human Spirit," Mootoo states: "I am undoubtedly Trinidadian, even Caribbean in my sensibilities and aesthetics, but I am otherwise in the sense of the permissions I am afforded." (cited in Adams, 102).

Mootoo talks about her anxiety about homophobia in the Caribbean, and her refusal to reside in a space which openly vilifies and victimizes homosexuals. She sees the Caribbean as a perilous place to write about contentious issues: Caryn Rae Adams comments on Mootoo's dislocation:

The distance not only provides a critical gaze that is less influenced by one's immediate surroundings, but it also maintains a measure of safety for the one who is speaking out... Mootoo's own hesitation to return to the Caribbean in any permanent sense is in part fuelled by fear of her safety as a lesbian in a society which prescribes heteronormative behavior... (103).

The risk of corrective rape in the Caribbean has also forced lesbian citizens to seek political asylum in the Global North. A *BBC* news report titled "Jamaican lesbian can stay in UK, tribunal rules," published on 6th July 2011, describes the successful attempt of a Jamaican lesbian to secure refugee status and be granted permission to remain in the United Kingdom because of her fear of homophobic violence if she were to return home.

Her lawyers said Jamaica is a "deeply homophobic society" and lesbians, as well as women who are "perceived" as being gay, face a risk of violence including "corrective" rape and murder. They argued that if the woman returned to Jamaica she would be living as a single

woman with no “heterosexual narrative” and would therefore be exposed to such a risk. Allowing her appeal, senior immigration Judges Gleeson and Spencer said that any return to discreet living would be because of her fear of persecution rather than “by reason of social pressures.”

The threat of corrective rape in the Caribbean ensures that lesbian sexuality remains silenced or closeted. Jennifer Rahim in “The Operations of the Closet and the Discourse of Unspeakable Contents in *Black Fauns* and *My Brother*” explores the implications of closeted identities:

While for some the concealment of sexual identity functions as a necessary space of survival against the fear of discrimination and rejection, the closet is primarily understood as a prison house of privacy a or disciplinary apparatus, ideologically and legally enforced by a heterosexist culture... (2).

“Coming out of the Closet” in Chin’s *The Other Side of Paradise* is represented as a complex decision. The revelation of the lesbian’s alternative sexuality potentially encourages homophobic violence against her and other females with whom she is associated. Chin’s decision to “come out” as a lesbian in Jamaica immediately threatens her relationship with her best friend, Rachel:

Rachel is worried that I am putting myself in danger unnecessarily. I tell her I won’t allow myself to be cowed back into the closet. She tells me that people are saying that I sleep with a different girl every night... she points out that it doesn’t take long for rumors about close friends to join the circuit too. I tell her if she feels like she is in any danger, I would understand if she wanted to conduct our relationship in private. (254)

Lesbian love and homoerotic desires in *The Other Side of Paradise* are foreclosed by the constant threat of homophobic violence. Thus, when Chin expresses her affection for Annabella, her love interest in the autobiography, the rejection which she experiences is hinged on homophobia in Jamaica: “I have to tell you that I think that you are the most beautiful girl I have ever seen.” I can’t believe I just said that... “You don’t have to say anything else. I was just paying you a simple compliment...” (243). Annabella’s reply signifies her awareness of Chin’s homoerotic desire but also reveals her concern about homophobia in Jamaica: “Yes, but that is not all you are saying when you say that. And it’s not like I am not flattered. If Jamaica was a different place, I might feel differently, but I don’t think I have the freedom to even consider that as an option” (243).

Some female homosexuals in the Caribbean opt to feign conformity to heteronormative standards to make sure that their alternative sexuality remains hidden. These women pursue heterosexual relationships publicly and at the same time participate in same-sex

relations privately. In the text *Tongues on Fire: Caribbean Lesbian Lives and Stories*, an anthology of anecdotes and short stories, Rhonda Sue remarks:

I know a girl right now, she's livin' with her man, but she's a lesbian. When she met me she tol' me if I didn't have this girlfriend, she would leave her boyfriend and live with me. But I didn't love her enough for that, and I didn't want to get involved with her. She's a lesbian. She doesn't love men. (24)

Government policy in the Caribbean also polices alternative sexuality. Jacqui Alexander in "Not Just (Any) Body Can be a Citizen: The Politics of Law, Sexuality and Postcoloniality in Trinidad and Tobago and the Bahamas" discusses the Sexual Offences Act in Trinidad and Tobago and the Bahamas and explains that, historically, Caribbean laws concerning sexuality criminalize citizens who do not conform to heteronormativity. While repeal efforts in the Bahamas realized the legalization of same-sex relations in 1991, there remains a disparity in legal protection granted to homosexual and heterosexual couples. Moreover, the persistence of buggery laws in Trinidad and Tobago prompted homosexual activist Jason Jones in 2017 to pose a legal challenge pertaining to section 13 of the Sexual Offences Act of the twin island state which, to date, still identifies buggery as a criminal offence.

Sexual citizenship in the Caribbean is instituted through the vilification and suppression of the human rights of gays and lesbians. Multiple institutions sanction the terrorizing, humiliation, and silencing of homosexuals. Skeete comments on the diverse discourses which proscribe alternative sexuality:

Heteronormative discourses of Church, State, home and school are the underpinning of the society's prejudicial and discriminatory views and actions against non-heterosexuals (3)...Secular laws, in tandem with religious ones, legislate against non-heterosexuals in the Anglophone Caribbean. (4)

Homophobic violence or corrective rape, which is influenced by hegemonic ideologies and belief systems, has important implications for the lives and relationships of female homosexuals around the world. Caribbean nations which support traditional religious beliefs and patriarchal ideology implement laws which sanction heteronormative standards, legislate homophobia and silence the sexual citizenship of female and male homosexuals. The submersion of female homosexuality within a male-centered discourse on homosexuality also silences important issues which are important to female homosexuals in the region. Caribbean diasporic writers who depict the experiences of female homosexuals in the Caribbean reveal the vilification, victimization, violence and violations which lesbians who decide to remain at "home" must endure.

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