Maha Marouan


Witches, Goddesses and Angry Spirits examines the politics of female spiritual freedom in the novels of three renowned writers, Edwidge Danticat, Toni Morrison, and Maryse Condé. The female characters of Breath, Eyes, Memory; I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem; and Paradise attain spiritual freedom through the practice of African diaspora religions, namely Vodou, Candomblé, and “witchcraft.” While the topic of African spiritual consciousness is not new, reading African religious practices through the lens of diasporic continuity and transnationalism solidifies the analytical framework of the book.

Maha Marouan explores the way African diaspora religions engender a narrative of resistance to Western Christian hegemony. To this end, she argues that the embrace of African spiritual and cultural practices facilitates a detour from Western notions of Christianity. This liberatory agenda allows the inscription of “black female spirituality into history and effectively address[es] social injustices against women” (pp. 6–7). Drawing on the work of specific theorists, including Paul Gilroy, Édouard Glissant, and Maryse Condé herself, Marouan incorporates various facets of creolization—culture, language, and intertextuality—to demonstrate the transnational scope of her book. While the inclusion of the “African Americas as a whole” in her use of creolization is not new, the argument is well executed (p. 19).

In Chapter 2, Marouan describes how Danticat’s female characters embody the loa Erzulie in its various manifestations and does a commendable job differentiating Erzulie Danto and Erzulie Freda. Erzulie Danto exemplifies Martine’s socioeconomic reality and Erzulie Freda represents an unattainable image of womanhood. However, one does not get a clear sense of how Erzulie Jewouj becomes manifest in Martine. Her transformation to “a fierce spirit of the night” powerfully resonates with the witch/woman, but it does not translate to her “turn[ing] men into her victims” (p. 46). Linking the women’s names with goddesses is useful and effective. However, by not according Ife’s name much significance, Marouan has missed an opportunity to explore further the “goddess” theme. Whereas Marouan acknowledges that Ife’s name “refers to the original home for all beings in Africa,” she overlooks the Yoruba legend of Ife, the geographic locale, where deities created the world (p. 48). Furthermore, Atie’s “unusual female name” challenges fixed gender roles and category, even as it draws attention to her homosexuality (p. 47).
Marouan argues that Ife “does not see a way out of oppressive practices against women in Haiti” (p. 49). That said, she fails to notice Ife's transformative role in the novel. Whereas Ife may not have been able singlehandedly to halt the demonic practice of “testing,” she played a pivotal role in the recovery and recuperation process of her granddaughter, Sophie. She initiates the freedom song at the close of the novel, posing the rhetorical question: “‘Ou libéré?’ Are you free, my daughter?” (Breath, Eyes, Memory p. 234). Moreover, Ife’s apology to Sophie for the “testing” that haunted three generations of Caco women is her coming into diasporic consciousness. Along similar lines, Ife narrating to Sophie the folktale about the little girl who outwitted the lark is instructive, conveying the message that “women’s freedom is [a necessity and not] a dangerous tool” (p. 50).

Addressing female empowerment in Chapter 3, Marouan argues that Morrison creolizes Candomblé and Gnosticism by reconstructing and reappropriating them in order to empower women. In Chapter 4, she argues that Condé engenders creolization through the blurring of European and African models of witchcraft. Despite repeatedly concluding that Tituba was initiated in “white European magic,” Marouan fails to establish the distinction between this practice and African religious practices, equally engaging in the act of blurring (p. 17). Further, Condé’s inclusion of native Bostonian Judah White—a witch who has never left Boston but has a formidable kinship with Mama Yaya, who has never ventured to America and vows never to do so—begs the question of whether Condé is engaging in the simplistic act of blurring. Here, it seems as though the analysis would have been better served by the theory of diaspora and diasporic continuity and community. Further, by placing a preponderant weight on Tituba borrowing from or being inundated in white European magic, Marouan repeats the same mistake of which she accuses other critics: “situating [Tituba] within the European literary canon, as if [she] can only be legitimate if [she is] seen in relation to European literary foremothers and forefathers” (pp. 23–24). Indeed, Condé discloses that she found the recipes Tituba uses in seventeenth-century books. Even so, the intertextuality that is at play here engenders an alternative and discursively effective reading as Condé is arguably reappropriating that which has already been reappropriated. The reference to the Western (Harvard) educated Doctor Zerobabel who appropriated African religious practices as his own legitimizes this claim.

Marouan chides Tituba for being irresponsible: “Tituba’s role as a revolutionary and a martyr in her afterlife is undermined by a self-indulgent and irresponsible Tituba” (p. 120). Although it is not clear what constitutes irresponsibility, this reading is puzzling, especially in light of the fact that Tituba's celebration of black female sexuality intimates her resistance to patriarchal notions of black