

# Reading Haitian Literature in Postcolonial and Ecocritical Perspectives

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## Abstract

The Haitian novel, especially Marie Vieux-Chauvet's trilogy *Love, Anger, Madness* (1968) makes a link between exploitation of nature and human beings. Marie-Vieux Chauvet is a Haitian writer who fervently criticized the Duvalier regime. Connecting her political attack on the Duvalier regime and ecofeminism, Vieux-Chauvet delineates how the American occupation destroyed her country. She was not only author to voice the exploitation of nature in Haiti; Jacques Roumain, whose *Gouverneurs de la Rosée* (1944) is still the forerunner of Haitian literature that sought to reclaim the nature and landscape into for the peasants in Haiti. However, this paper primarily focuses on Vieux-Chauvet's *Love, Anger, Madness*. Both novels describe the environmental destruction in Haiti during the occupation era, yet *Love, Anger, Madness* launches a fiercer criticism of Haitian politics, and rebels against the continuous oppression of women and the environment.

## 1 Introduction

In his *Slow Violence and Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011), Rob Nixon considers Caribbean literature may be an important area for the dialogue between environmental and postcolonial thought, because human beings and the environment have been violently exploited in the Caribbean (235). In fact, well before Nixon's argument, Caribbean writers had already foregrounded the link between colonialism and the conquest of nature. In this paper, I argue that Haitian novel, especially Marie Vieux-Chauvet's *Love, Anger, Madness* (1968) foresees what Nixon and current scholars of postcolonialism and ecocriticism are now endeavoring to do: to make a link between exploitation of nature and human.

The particularity of Caribbean stems from its plantation culture, regarding which, Sylvia Wynter argues in her article "Novel and History, plot and plantation" as follows:

The Caribbean area is the classic plantation area since many of its units were planted with people, not in order to form societies, but to carry on plantations whose aim was to produce single crops for the market. That is to say, the plantation societies of the Caribbean came into being as adjuncts to the market system; their peoples came into

being as an adjunct to the product, to the single crop commodity – the sugar cane – which they produced (99).

Wynter underlines that the plantation culture was the main characteristics of Caribbean society, where people are regarded as production tools for the cash crop – in this sense, people were rather treated more like animals than human beings – required for producing cash crops to be consumed in metropolises. She argues that with the discovery of the New world and its vast exploitable lands, “Man was reduced to Labor and Nature to Land” (99). In plantation system, “Western Man saw himself as the lord and possessor of Nature” (99). In other words, with the commencement of plantation system, “one-way transformation of nature began”, however, as “man is a part of Nature”, “a process of dehumanization and alienation” was also set in motion (99). In other words, she points out the introduction of capitalist system symbolized by plantation system, turned human beings into capital, forbidding them to maintain their bond with their original communities and nature.

Moreover, in her essay, Wynter contrasts plantation system against plot system. Plot is a tiny patch of a land that a slave is allowed to cultivate. Wynter considers the notion of plot as a system of resistance, and she extends it to a plot of a novel, because even though novels were the products of capitalism– a form of entertainment for the bourgeoisie–, they also offered a form of resistance to capitalist society that created it. In other words, like plot system, literature has a potential to subvert the dominant system and change the world.

## 2 Marie Viex-Chauvet: A Forgotten Writer

Haitian writer Marie Viex-Chauvet employed novel as a revolutionary weapon, and fervently criticized the Duvalier regime in her 1968 trilogy, *Love, Anger, Madness*. Marie Viex-Chauvet was born in Port-au-Prince, the capital of Haiti in 1916 as the daughter of a politician. She was born after the United States had invaded Haiti in 1915. The occupation that lasted until 1934 established “a system of compulsory labor for poor Haitians”, and resulted in the loss of “more than fifteen thousand Haitians had lost their lives” (Danticat X *Love, Anger, Madness*). The U.S. occupation was severe. Haiti was the first black nation, and therefore considered by Southern countrymen as the threat to their racial superiority. Hence, Franklin Delano Roosevelt said that “Haiti was a bad example for the twenty-six million black Americans” (Esther I Rodriguez Miranda 3-4). Even after the withdrawal of American troops, U.S. economic influence remained until 1947 (Danticat X *Love, Anger, Madness*). In her writings, Viex-Chauvet heavily criticizes the U.S. occupation and the politics of assimilation for violating the country and its people. Yet she had to endure another hardship under the dictatorship of the Duvalier, who promoted black consciousness

into his politics and shunned the intellectuals of the mixed racial descent like Vieux-Chauvet. Vieux-Chauvet was active in literary circle, however, since she attacked the Duvalier regime, she lived in exile in New York in 1968 and struggled to survive as a domestic servant until her death at the age of fifty-six in 1973.

In her *Love, Anger, Madness*, she delineates how the American occupation destroyed the country and further launches her political attack on the Duvalier regime for exploiting the land and the people of Haiti. She was not only one to voice the exploitation of nature in Haiti; Jacques Roumain, whose *Masters of the Dew (Gouverneurs de la Rosée)* (1944) is still considered to be the forerunner of Haitian literature that sought to reclaim the nature and landscape into the hands of peasants. In this novel, Roumain portrays the life of the peasants in Haiti, the forgotten figures in the Haitian literature, through the story of Manuel and his village. His novel is considered to have ignited the Indigenist movement in Haiti, where writers sought to break away from the previous tradition and desired “a return to Haitian cultural origins, and the development of a strong national pride” (Esther I, 9). One of the representative writer of the Indigenist movement is Jean Price Mars, who ironically contested the racial divide, exerted influence on Chauvet and wrote the preface for *Love, Anger, Madness* (Esther I, 8).

In this paper, I shall primarily focus on Marie Vieux-Chauvet’s *Love, Anger, Madness*, a long-forgotten novel despite its fascinating content. Jacques Roumain’s *Masters of the Dew* and Chauvet’s *Love, Anger, Madness* both describe the environmental destruction in Haiti in the occupation age. However, Vieux-Chauvet’s *Love, Anger, Madness* launch more fierce criticism of the Duvaliers and the Haitian politics, and rebels against the continuous oppression of women and of the environment. In some regards, Vieux-Chauvet’s writings are more challenging than the Indigenist movement’s, because she resists the reduction of the world into a simple binary opposition of white and black. Although the Indigenist movement did not explicitly promote racial ideology, their idea was used by Francois Duvalier. He believed that “the true Haitian soul was black, and the fairer the skin, the less Haitian one was”, and promoted Indigenist ideals in education, religion, and culture to conserve their continuity of their “race” (Munro 47). Vieux-Chauvet’s outright denial of the rigid racial politics was radical and dangerous at that time. Moreover, her uniqueness lies in foregrounding the female protagonists, because the main writers of the Indigenist movement, such as Jean-Prince Mars and Jacques Roumain portray their male characters as heroes while the women can only have value in relation to them. In this respect, Vieux-Chauvet is more concerned with connecting violation of nature to that of women, which brings her conceptually closer to ecofeminism.

### 3 Vieux-Chauvet's *Love, Anger, Madness*

Vieux-Chauvet’s *Love, Anger, Madness* had not received critical attention until

recently. The book was not explicitly banned nor censored by the Duvalier's regime; Vieux-Chauvet gave into her family's wish to halt the selling of the book because her nephew, twenty-year-old Raymond Convington and his cousin Micheal Corvington "dissaperered" a few months before the publication of the book (Spear14). The traumatized family seized copies of the book, bought the copyright and forbade the prestigious publisher, Gallimard, to reprint the novel. According to Thomas C. Spear, the rediscovery of Vieux-Chauvet's writings had to wait for the end of dictatorship in Haiti, marked by Jean Claude Duvalier fleeing the country in 1986 (Spear14). Despite the belated discovery, Vieux-Chauvet's prophetic writings warn against human's broken relationship with the land.

Haiti was once a proud nation that achieved the abolishment of slavery and independence from colonialism. Yet the indigenous natives melted after European colonialism and the black population brought as slaves lacked the administrative system. After the independence, power concentrated on the former landowners and elites, while the majority of the struggling peasants were left in poverty just as before. The former slaves continued to cultivate the land once held by the slave owners – but they lacked an organized system to facilitate and ameliorate their production. The majority of people survived hand to mouth daily lives by selling their products and trees, or whatever was handy.

Consequently, by the second half of 19<sup>th</sup> century, Haiti lost many of its trees to foreign export. (Arthur 150). What made matters worse was the US occupation of Haiti that lasted almost twenty years, from 1915 to 1934 (Chancy 48). The occupation army abolished the Foreign Land Ownership Law and leased out 250000 acres of land to American companies. Moreover, the occupation army forced Haitian peasants to work and construct roads and bridges to develop more land to be leased to American companies (Arthur 151). According to the research of Lizebeth Paravashini-Gebert's research on Vieux-Chauvet's *Fonds de Nègre* (1960): in the early 1920s, over sixty percent of Haiti's land was covered by forests; in 1945, following the American occupation (a period of intensified lumber exportation), this number was reduced to twenty-one percent. Ten years later, the number was eight to nine percent (Paravashini-Gebert 79). This suggest that the destruction of nature did not end with the occupation but continued during the Duvalier regime. Vigilant of possible revolts, the Duvalier cut trees so that their opponents would not have a place to hide (Arthur 151).

#### 4 Love

In her earlier novels such as *Fonds de Nègre*, Vieux-Chauvet shows concern for the environmental loss as examined by the critic, Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert in her "All Misfortune Comes from the Cut Trees" (74-91). *Fonds de Nègre* is a name of a town in Haiti. The story is about the villagers' resistance against a greedy plantation owner to

protect their land. In her novel, *Vieux-Chauvet* suggests the danger of landslide by the loss of top-soil. Likewise, in her *Love, Anger, Madness*, she clearly connects the exploitation of nature and humans, as the first story of the trilogy, "Love", delineates the loss of Haitian trees to American export:

I often walk past the sea and the mountains that frame the horizon in complete indifference. And yet, devastated as they are by erosion, the mountains are heartbreakingly beautiful. From a distance, the dried –up branches of the coffee bushes take on soothing pastel tones, and the shore is embroidered with foam. A smell of kelp seems to rise from the depths of the water.... Once a week, we hear the American ship blow its horn, the only one moved in our port now, it leaves loaded with fish, coffee and precious wood (*Vieux-Chauvet* 8-9).

Not only are mountains eroded, but American ships leave ports filled with wood from trees that consequently causes soil erosion. Children die at a young age and beggars in dirty clothes are looming in the streets. Against this landscape, the author narrates a predicament of Claire, the eldest daughter of an aristocratic family, whose father was a planter who owned six hundred acres of land planted with coffee.

When the Americans invade Haiti, her father dies and Claire is left alone in raising her sisters as the head of the family. However, being the only person with darker complexion in her family, she cannot find a suitor; she is confined within her house, and eventually, she is reduced to selling the land to a German planter. First, Claire is concerned with her siblings and her unattained love for her brother-in-law, but as she becomes aware of what is happening outside, she slowly inclines to be political. The novel portrays the oppression under the Duvalier regime through the figure of Commandant Caledu, "a ferocious black man who terrorizes" Claire and her family (*Vieux-Chauvet* 8). Caledu rapes lighter skinned middle-class women as if to "avenge his own past of color discrimination (Munro 50). Caledu's portrayal is also evocative of the racial politics of Duvalier, which defined the superiority of the black over the white. Alongside Caledu, M. Long, an American landowner is portrayed as the man in power, and their close relationship suggests the link between American occupation and the Duvalier regime in destroying the country. As Paravashini-Gebert demonstrates, *Vieux-Chauvet* is concerned with the environmental damage in her country, and she blames the occupation as well as the Duvalier regime:

For fifteen days, we have heard the whine of M. Long's electric saw without interruption. A tree falls every five minutes.... Immense tress fell to the ground with what sounded like a great roar before their dying breath. .... Avalanches of soil slid down the mountain and piled around their feet. Coffee is nothing but a memory for us. Timber export has replaced that business. When the wood is gone, he will go after

something else. The slave trade, perhaps. He could easily ship hundreds from among the beggars (Vieux-Chauvet, 129).

In the above passage, the American businessman, M. Long's act of cutting trees causes the landslide that destroys coffee plantation as well as people's lives. Further, Vieux-Chauvet suggests that timber export could possibly lead to a form of new slavery. Meanwhile, Commandant Caledu is killing many people like Claire who wish to have more education. When she loses her estate to the American who cut all coffee trees on the mountain, she realizes the necessity to rebel against those who are destroying the country. In the end, Claire accidentally kills Caledu by a paper knife, and then confines herself in her room and seeks consolation in writing. Claire's accidental murder of the "ferocious" Caledu may complicate and signify the limitation of the race politics that clearly distinguishes back from white. Claire may appear as a black person, but in fact she is the head of the lighter skinned middle-class family whom Caledu despises. The end of the story, stabbing the Caledu by a paperknife also seems to symbolize the victory of art over violence, in other words, victory of the plot over the plantation systems. In this sense, "Love" foregrounds a new image of woman who is neither a victim nor oppressed but is strong enough to rebel against the violence.

## 5 Anger

In the next story of the trilogy, "Anger", portrays the family of Normil, a middle-class landowners in the capital of Haiti. For years, the grandfather of the family had earned his income by selling the lemons from the trees on their land (Vieux-Chauvet 163), but one day, they wake up to find men in black uniforms intruding in their property and cutting their lemon trees. The author does not explicitly call these men in black uniform by their name, but they are Duvalier's secret army, the *tontons macoutes*, and their appearance on the Normil property foretells the tragic fate of the family. The story portrays the cowardice of the father who has her daughter Rose sleep with the leader of the *tontons macoutes* to save his property (Vieux-Chauvet 244). Rose accepts her fate, and let herself be raped by the "Gorilla", the leader of the leader of the *tontons macoutes* for an entire month, making the reader stand witness to the political corruption and violence towards women during the Duvalier Regime. Through the suffering of Rose, the author questions the meaning of ownership of land:

We are reaping what we sowed, the curse of our ancestors will disappear with our line. We must be hated and love to the same extreme. I admire my father's moderation. He's the only one who stand out amongst us. How could Grandfather love him? Keep the sheep far away from us? ... We too, belong to a race of wildcats and

raptors, that's why struggle fiercely against those who've taken our lands, And the history of our property is quite murky. I heard my mother and father talking about it when I was six years old. My mother was saying: "Grandfather insults me, he calls my father a drunk and good for nothing; if I were mean I would throw in his face what people say about his father." "And what do people say?" my father asked "They say he murdered a man to secure ownership of the land. ...One day, I had fallen sleep under the oaks. A man came to me in a dream wearing a bloody shirt that he took off to show me two gaping wounds on his back, and he said to me: "Look, he stabbed me with his knife to make his own justice. I will get my revenge when I put a weapon in the hand of one of his descendants, who will kill a man just as he did" (Vieux-Chauvet 250-251).

Rose considers her suffering is the "reaping" of the sins committed by her ancestors: her grandfather's possible murder to secure their land. She admits that since her family is "a race of wildcats and raptors", they are obsessed with the idea of protecting their land even if they have to sacrifice her in return. In Rose's long monologue, the author reveals the violence in acquiring the land is connected to the violence towards women, and the cutting of trees on their property signals her death in the end. However, Rose is resigned to her fate, because she denies the ownership of the land as the class system based on the exploitation of the others:

What right do we have to property? What gives us the right to such privilege while others wallow in poverty? The poverty of the people my peasant ancestor must have exploited, the misery of the poor who looted his garden and whom he had whipped without mercy, the poverty of the beggars taking on the uniform, the poverty of the man avenging himself through me for having been rejected by the woman he desired (Vieux-Chauvet 251).

It may be farfetched to say, but Rose's question of the property is resonated in Édouard Glissant's notion of *rhizome*. Glissant considers European civilization as the "civilization of root", while he names Caribbean culture as "the culture of rhizome". The root kills all around it, however the rhizome is a network spreading in the ground has no predatory rootstock. The notion of the rhizome maintains, therefore, the idea of rootedness but challenge that of a totalitarian root. Glissant claims the European concept of ecology is centered around the mystification of the Earth and its exclusiveness, whereas ecology in the Caribbean is relational, as no one can really possess or claim the land. In this sense, Rose's doubt about whether one can possess land can be connected to Glissant's notion of rhizome. Rose sacrifices herself in repentance of her ancestor's sins. Her martyrdom not only reveals the atrocities people suffered during the American Occupation and the Duvalier Regime but also the continuous negative effect of colonization that is

founded on the logic of conquest of property, both land and women.

## 6 Madness

The protagonist of the third story, “Madness” is a male, impoverished poet called René. Although of different gender, René also has mixed racial heritage like other two female protagonists in the previous stories. Through René’s monologue, racial and religious tension in Haiti are demonstrated, and with the atrocities, the boundary between human and animals is disturbed, questioning the meaning of civilization. René is joined by three other poets with different racial and social background, but they are equally persecuted by the “devils”, or the *tontons macoutes*. The story does not introduce women in the beginning, but from René’s long monologue, readers learn that he was conceived through rape:

“Look” my mother said to me one day, pointing out a man as light-skinned as a white man with a soft felt hat on his hand, beautiful polished shoes, and on his arm a beautiful lady who looked like she could be Fanfreluche’s sister...” That’s your father” ... A great landowner, who also had buildings in the Grand rue, he wouldn’t give me an inch of thread for a pair of pants, My mother had been brought to him when she was fifteen by some of the farmers who had settled on his land and who wished to get in his good graces. These farmers happened to be my mother’s own parents. Poverty forces poor blacks to grovel like dogs before the rich. They offered him their only daughter as a house slave, making her a “*restez-avec-monsieur*” in exchange for a plot of land to cultivate. One night, the “monsieur” jumped on her and raped her (Vieux-Chauvet 308).

Again, the third story reveals that René’s mother was exchanged for a plot of land by her parents who needed a land to cultivate. Women are depicted as a commodity that can be exchanged for land. In some sense, Vieux-Chauvet’s deliberate repetition of this theme is considered as a criticism of the Indigenist movement (which Prince Mars was member of), where women’s suffering is more abstract rather than real. As Myrian Chancy states; “The cultural and geopolitical rape of a feminized Caribbean is linguistically and imaginarily rendered in a way that has the effect of sublimation and denying the violence perpetrated against women on both public and private spheres” (108). Vieux-Chauvet’s stories reveal that women are indeed raped and sold by their own family to protect or acquire land in Haiti.



## 7 Conclusion

The dominance of the poor by the rich and the perpetual dependence economy are what plantation system left as legacy in Haiti. Just as Wynter explains the plantation system founded upon the notion that man can possess nature, Vieux-Chauvet demonstrates that the reducing nature to land leads to violence and subjugation of women. Reading Caribbean literature from ecological perspective makes one realize that colonialism, domination of gender, and the conquest of nature are all interconnected.

Yet, through literature, one finds the possible ground for subverting the system. Through Vieux-Chauvet's novel, readers see the images of Haiti that one might not have seen otherwise. Nearly forty-three years after the publication of Vieux-Chauvet's *Love, Anger, Madness*, Edwidge Danticat, who admires Vieux-Chauvet as her literary parent, declares the importance of writing, as well as reading, in her *Create Dangerously*, after the devastating earthquake that hit Haiti in 2010.

Create dangerously, for people who read dangerously. This is what I've always thought it meant to be a writer. Writing, knowing in part that no matter how your trivial your words may seem, someday, somewhere, someone may risk his or her life to read them (10).

Danticat's determination to write seems to respond Vieux-Chauvet's message in her *Love, Anger, Madness*, the writing published in exchange of Vieux-Chauvet's life. Yet, Vieux-Chauvet text is still prophetic and opens our eyes to the consequences of the broken relationship between nature and people.

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