

## Politics of Memory and Re-memory in Michelle Cliff's *Abeng*

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### Abstract

This paper investigates the politics of memory and re-memory in Michelle Cliff's *Abeng* (1984). Slave memory and re-memory can only be found via folklore research, and white historiography is devoid of any mention of slave resistance. In the novel *Abeng*, Clare Savage's story of reclaiming her blackness is told, as is the intergenerational sadness brought on by the erasure of the slave history. A healing method is Clare's ethnogenesis, in which she simultaneously perpetuates colonial notions of blood purity and insists that the subject can only be healed by returning to the subjectivity that was free of slavery's stains. She is Clare's national mother because she was never enslaved and represents the spirit of resistance and bravery that Clare values. However, Sekesu, the mother of all slaves, represents a refusal to fight for one's freedom. Recovering and healing from slavery may be achieved by exploring and visualizing how enslaved women fought back against their captors.

**Keywords:** Memory, Past, Slavery, Re-memory, Women, Resistance.

### INTRODUCTION

For her attempts to recreate Jamaica's matrilineal history and establish a feminine narrative of the nation's birth, African-American author Michelle Cliff of Caribbean descent has received widespread media attention. She has written on the Caribbean migrant experiences in novels, short story collections, and prose poetry. Everything she does is infused with memories of slavery, colonial pain, and other recollections and flashbacks. Her Caribbean looks like a crossroads for diasporic migrations, a translocality of various movements and migrations. Maintaining the Caribbean's bigger image is a primary goal of her work. Through the incorporation of Caribbean folklore and customs, she rewrites colonial portrayals of cultural identity in the region's literature.

Clare, a young woman, attempting to come to terms with her family's and island's tangled past, is the protagonist of Cliff's novels *Abeng*

and *No Telephone to Heaven*. In *Abeng*, Clare, a twelve-year-old girl, attempts to piece together her mother's background from the colonial education system, her almost white father 'Boy' (a grandson of slave owners), and her emotionally detached biracial mother, Kitty. Gendered experiences of cultural transformation in a male-dominated, whitewashed, and racially-layered society are examined in this semiautobiographical book that leaves the mixed-race protagonist at war with herself and pining for her mother. Cliff echoes *Abeng*'s Outlyerist framework, which dismisses slave mothers' resistance, suffocates the process of recollection, and jeopardizes Clare's journey within herself; as Cliff observes, "She's a fragmented figure, and she doesn't have a chance to become complete at all." ("An Interview with Michelle Cliff," 601). This isn't a typo; rather, it's a tribute to the significance of the primary objective in slave memory, which Clare cannot access. "The're' of memory emphasizes the belatedness of traumatic remember while simultaneously signalling the

interconnections between individual and communal recollection," Nicola King writes in "Rememory and Reconstruction: Toni Morrison's *Beloved*." (150).

Cliff's pansophical narrator in *Abeng* emphasizes the divide between communal Maroon memory and the Savage family's individualistic memory, thereby undermining the ability to remember as a unified group. This schism results from the Savages' refusal to accept a slave history, its consequences, and their inability to repair forgotten sorrow. The Savages depicts the islanders who have adopted England's historical narrative on a larger scale. They symbolize individuals who have decided not just to reject slavery as a regretful remnant of the past but also to serve in the image of their forefathers: that of "wuthlessness" (worthlessness) (17). Kitty Savage's *Tabernacle*, for example, is largely made up of Black women who:

"Could trace their bloodlines back to a past of slavery. But this was not something they ... the grandmothers of these people sitting in a church on a Sunday evening ... had been violated again and again by the very men who whipped them." (19)

The colonial education system, which was created to erase slave memory, erase slave memory, and preserve racial superiority, is expressly implicated in this 1950s text. Jamaicans' ignorance is the fault of the masters who bewitched, intimidated or deceived their mothers into forgetting, not Jamaicans themselves.

By disseminating the notion that slavery was a "West African habit," white males sought to erase black women's capacity to recall a period before slavery, thereby naturalizing slavery and servitude for black women. These females "served. Cleaned. Mopped. and Cooked" (17). They couldn't believe things hadn't always been this way for them. They couldn't believe it when they heard, "Cared for babies lighter than their own" (17).

If there is any weakness in the colonial narrative, it is the fact that black people in Africa had a rich history before slavery and that ancestors of the Maroons who left slavery or who were never enslaved in Jamaica still exist. To dispel the notion of the black woman as a passive housewife, Cliff, motivated by Black

Consciousness, recalls the black slave lady's role as the most combative and rebellious woman in the slavocracy. This, according to Suzette A. Spencer in "Toward a Literary Theory of Outlyerism: An Outlyerist Reading of Michelle Cliff's *Abeng* and *No Telephone to Heaven*," typifies the Outlyerist stance, which "concentrates on the empowered gaze of the Outliers... who assume a more assertive posturing than the marginalized" (6). Cliff admires Jamaican women who choose to "be distinct from the mainstream culture of the slavocracy, such as Nanny of the Maroons, while neglecting the reality that slaves themselves could not choose." (6).

Nanny of the Maroons, "the sorceress, the obeah-woman... the magician of the revolution," (14) is used often throughout Cliff's book *Abeng* to subvert and invert the colonial gaze that marginalizes black women. According to the legends of Jamaica's Blue Mountains, known as Nanny Town, Nanny was a genuine person. For Jamaica's Maroons, she is a powerful symbol of resistance to slavery, and she was never captured. Cliff's novels occur before Nanny was crowned a National Hero and the Mother of Jamaica in the 1970s. Many women in the *Tabernacle* may have been known as "Nanny because they cared for the children of other woman, but they did not know who Nanny had been." because Cliff's books invoke Nanny as a national and militant mother (21). "Nanny" and "the Maroons," according to Cliff, sought more than freedom; they wanted a community free of white supremacy, where people could establish their own identities without being constrained by the racist notions of their slave owners.

Recalling that *Abeng* is a story that reflects Cliff's own forced experience of passing, the Maroon communities become sanctuaries of healing and rehabilitation for Cliff. Nevertheless, Clare Savage's quest for Mother is hampered since the slave woman's individuality and individual resistance is overlooked because only Outliers are valued. According to Maroon folklore, "there had been and two sisters, Nanny and Sekesu. Nanny fled slavery. Sekesu remained a slave. Some said this was the difference between the sisters" (18). Was rescued from slavery and reunited with her family. On the Gold Coast, Nanny and Sekesu are said to have been abducted and taken to Jamaica on the same ship.

After escaping her captors and becoming the rebels' mother, Nanny became the mother of all plantation slaves. There was an early bond between Maroons and slaves, and as Kenneth M. Bilby points out in "Two Sister Pikni: A Historical Tradition of Dual Ethnogenesis in Eastern Jamaica," "a steady flow of new refugees from the plantations continued to augment the rebel groups" for more than a century after the establishment of the first major Maroon communities (10). Maroons were sought and murdered by slaves released by British efforts to break up a union by offering freedom to those who killed them.

To us, Nanny of the Maroons has been made into the culture-bearing and strong resistance leader we know and love, but her opposite, Sekesu, has been erased since her legacy is one of conflict, pain and grief.

The national motto "Out of Many One People" recognizes Jamaica's multicultural background. However, instead of facing Sekesu and other slave rapes that formed the mixed-race people, the phrase chooses Nanny's pure identity as a uniting figure. Fake completeness and togetherness are claimed by Jamaicans who disavow their slave ancestry and hail Nanny as their mother. Reclaiming one's true self from rape is the only way to attain this false completeness.

Even though there were no physical distinctions between slaves and their Afro-Jamaican descendants, the British approach to partitioning and ruling Jamaica succeeded in placing them on the lowest rung of society in the country. Slave descendants are excluded from creating and preserving the cultural legacy, which leaves them with a muddled sense of their history. Despite this, Cliff reminds us that all island people are first cousins, or as Kenneth M. Bilby, in "Two Sister Pikni: A Historical Tradition of Dual Ethnogenesis in Eastern Jamaica," avers, "two sister pikni' - relations that, even with such a tumultuous history, cannot erase the metaphor of kinship" (17). Although Cliff does not explicitly aim to rebuild the relationship between slaves and the Maroons, her focus on the importance of kinship diminishes the effect of colonial authority on Afro-Jamaican ties and keeps their common African roots. Sekesu is a haunting character in the national psyche because of the evident link between the two. Because Sekesu is left out of the tale, Clare's

desires for a kind, magnanimous, and all-knowing mother figure are not met by Nanny's autonomy and the processes of recall and surrogation.

The coming-of-age story *Abeng* by Cliff is one in which Clare's cultural development is stifled by her incapacity to access the past. Clare's innate need to identify herself stems from her mother, the matrix of earlier relationships that provides the source of meaning and identity for Clare's development. Freeman, a red Tabernacle lady, associates her slave history with hardship and refuses to carry on the anguish or question the system that favours her lighter complexion. – Kitty Freeman To highlight Clare's racial bias, Clare's rejection is presented to enable it to go on.

Clare's recollections come from her play-white father, Boy Savage, whose English grandparents are "well-known across Jamaica for their past prosperity as plantation proprietors" (22). No mention of the slaves provided this money, the flogging of human beings and rape of human beings, the lynching of human beings, or the buying and selling of human beings that led to this wealth being depleted (29). When a sign of social standing is weakened, the Savages' sense of self-preservation is jeopardized. Therefore they maintain the mystique of whiteness. Because Boy Savage's desire to "forget about Africa" (30) is dissociated from socioeconomic mobility, Kitty tolerates the erasure of their blackness to raise Clare as a fair-skinned Jamaican, thereby separating Clare from her mother and her mother's heritage.

Red, Kitty's colour of choice, is an example of the survivalist's proclivity to forget slavery's past while illustrating the dangers associated with this act: forgetting mother and losing history. "This parent would pass the light-skinned daughter on to a white husband, so she would have lighter and lighter babies...." (129). An examination of Kitty's self-marginalization and self-denial in relation to the split of the Afro-Caribbean matrilineal line and her coldness and silence show colonial culpability in this process of self-marginalization.

Kitty and colonial authority in Jamaica are eliminated from our awareness in Cliff's novel, *Abeng*, because of indigenous knowing techniques. As Clare longs for her mother, the reclaiming of Nanny of the Maroons and critique

of colonizer indoctrination strive to retrieve black memory. In a culture where the worst thing to be - particularly for a female - was to be dark, Clare-the-child is ignorant of her Maroon ancestry, but she recognizes her mother's shade and resents her green eyes and pale complexion, which she views as "the Savage family's finest accomplishment" (77). She feels isolated from the Tabernacle's black women since she is the daughter of her father, a white man, and is obliged to live in a sphere of ideal white femininity. While Clare is ostracized from her history, she can also not participate in traditional events and rituals. The following is Cliff's take on things:

"The twelve-year-old Christian mulatto girl, up to this point, walking through her life according to what she had been told, not knowing very much about herself or her past ... the life and death of Anne Frank. She was reaching, without knowing it, for an explanation of her own life." (72)

Although a white relative was convicted of murder, Clare's father claims she is "white." She knows her mother is black, but she has no idea what her family's past has been like after slavery was abolished. Clare has no notion that her foremothers suckled their children as a sort of resistance against the white masters who attempted but were unable to take away their capacity to mother, even if just in one single act, as she imagines "sucking her mother's breasts again and again... and entering whatever dream she imagines mother and children enjoy" (80).

Although Clare is ignorant of her sad past or how it has been erased, she is attracted to tales of sorrow. As an example, Clare's instructors, for example, connect the Holocaust's treatment of Jews to the so-called inferiority of Africans, meaning that both groups of people were permanently harmed. Whitewashed logic emphasizes the injustice of Anne Frank's and millions of Jewish deaths, which Clare connects to slavery's harrowing legacy and is important to her view of racism.

Cliff describes the lives of mixed-race people to show how guilt may be passed down through generations as a result of unresolved trauma. Because of their shame, the protagonists' progenitors suppress their blackness, which shows in their descendants as a lost ideal. To build a feeling of belonging, efforts like re-

memory and memory justice may give a platform for the healing of past suffering. Slave memory and communal healing can only be achieved by mining folklore and creating our tales, memories and truths when slave memory and these stories are denied.

Cliff's heroine, Abeng, delves into her past to learn about her family's slave history. Maternity was obliterated to erode the history of slave women and their families. To prevent the loss of their culture and legacy, enslaved women were sexually assaulted, exploited as breeding stock, and forced to witness the sale of their children. Slave memory has faded, diminishing the agency and resilience of black women who clung to every fibre of their identity despite rapping, whipping, and other efforts to break them. In other words, even if slaves' memories were tried to be wiped out, they were not lost. Folklore and literature are used in studies such as Jenny Sharpe's *The Ghosts of Slavery* to "resuscitate the lives of the dead by reviving the bitter memory of slavery" (xi). Saidiya Hartman claims in her novel *Lose Your Mother*,

In every slave society, slave owners attempted to eradicate the slave's memory, that is, to erase all the evidence of existence before slavery ... Never did the captive choose to forget; she was always tricked or bewitched or coerced into forgetting. Amnesia, like an accident or stroke of bad fortune, was never an act of volition. (112)

When national narratives fail to include women of colour and slavery effectively is adamantly omitted from the rebuilding process in Jamaica, it prevents national belonging and perpetuates historical categories. Cliff points out the challenges of revisionist history and the inability to speak in the oppressor's language. "Demarginating the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics" by Kimberlé Crenshaw suggests that we have too quickly supported the "dominant framework of discrimination that has hampered the creation of an appropriate theory and practice to confront the difficulties of intersectionality" (152). Discrimination against our bodies can only be repeated if the national narrative is continually rewritten.

Rather than being consigned to the periphery of history, the slave past should be seen as

fundamental and powerful in its own right. The act of remembering does not imply a return to the past; rather, it calls on us to invent our truths and establish our languages. Our ancestors may be given a sense of closure via memory justice, which can help us heal our collective traumas. It is essential to engage in remembrance and memory justice processes to diversify resistance and centralize subjectivities that destabilize oppressors' social structures, even if only in myths and fiction.

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