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## Reflections on the French Caribbean woman: The femme matador in fact and fiction

### Abstract

A recurrent image of women to emerge in the history and literature of the French Caribbean is that of the femme matador, or the fighting woman who courageously resists life's trials. This gendered figure is frequently placed in opposition to the Caribbean male who flits about as carefree as a butterfly

BONNIE THOMAS

## Reflections on the French Caribbean Woman: The *Femme Matador* in Fact and Fiction

A recurrent image of women to emerge in the history and literature of the French Caribbean is that of the *femme matador*, or the fighting woman who courageously resists life's trials. This gendered figure is frequently placed in opposition to the Caribbean male who flits about as carefree as a butterfly. A direct product of Martinique and Guadeloupe's historical experiences under slavery, the *femme matador* developed out of the need to survive in a social system hostile to black slaves. While men in the French Caribbean reacted to the injustices of plantation society by retreating into patterns of irresponsibility (Condé 1979, 36), women assumed the role of pivot of the family and bravely battled to secure the future of their partner and children. As an outstanding example of female strength, the *femme matador* appears as a potential icon of the feminist movement. However, a brief overview of the history and sociology of the region, coupled with a consideration of the representation of these women in contemporary literature, reveals the harsh realities behind this enduring figure in French Caribbean culture. The various representations of the *femme matador* also intersect with contemporary shifts in gendered ideas of national community-building, demonstrating a renewed acceptance of the importance of women in the public realm as well as the private.

The powerful presence of the *femme matador* is nowhere more evident than in the integral role she plays in the family. While sociologists such as Raymond Smith<sup>1</sup> and Diane Austin<sup>2</sup> have demonstrated that a range of households exist in the Caribbean, including some with male heads, the majority remain matrifocal. A kaleidoscope of studies attests to the continuing prominence of women in the family, both in bringing up the children and in providing a regular income. Francesca Velayoudom Faithful maintains that women are traditionally the strongholds of the family and that the mother passes on the flame of responsibility to her daughter (112). In *Le Couteau seul: la condition féminine aux Antilles*, France Alibar and Pierrette Lembeye-Boy present the testimonies of a number of Guadeloupean women in their familial milieu. Typical recollections of a daughter towards her mother include those by Agathe, a 20-year-old woman, who says 'our family was my mother' and Gerty, a 28-year-old teacher, who remarks 'she is really a woman who sacrificed everything for her family, her children and I

think she succeeded' (Alibar and Lembeye-Boy 27).<sup>3</sup> In contrast to the strength and stability of the mother, many children remember the absence of their father and the irregularity of his involvement in the family. A further testimony comes from Georgette, a 62-year-old Guadeloupean agricultural worker, who remembers her father's lack of involvement in her life: 'My father? Well, my father didn't acknowledge me.... He never acknowledged any of his children and he had a lot of children: six to different mothers' (Alibar and Lembeye-Boy 29). Novelist and theorist Patrick Chamoiseau has also remarked on this phenomenon, noting that 'the culture of the family remains matrifocal. That is to say, the big, fundamental decisions are always made, initiated, carried out and organized by women in a more or less direct manner' (Chamoiseau 2001). As these tributes highlight, the French Caribbean woman is at the centre of the family and she is the one who provides both the material and emotional needs of her children, partner and society.

There is an abundance of Creole proverbs that attest to the strength of French Caribbean women as opposed to men. Faithful includes a powerful example in her 1996 article 'La Femme antillaise' made famous in Simone Schwarz-Bart's novel *Pluie et vent sur Têlumée Miracle (The Bridge of Beyond)* to demonstrate the fortitude of Caribbean women: 'One's breasts are never too heavy for one's chest' (116). Drawing on an evocative maternal image, this proverb highlights the idea that no matter what difficulties there are in life, women always have the strength to cope with them. Celebrated writer Maryse Condé discusses another proverb, which makes a memorable distinction between women and men by likening women to chestnuts and men to breadfruit (Condé 1979, 4). Although these two trees closely resemble each other in physical appearance, there is an important difference in the way they drop their fruit. When the chestnut tree arrives at maturity, it releases a large number of small fruits with a hard skin designed to withstand different weather conditions. The breadfruit, by contrast, spreads itself out into a whitish purée that the sun quickly turns rotten. In Condé's words, 'it means that a woman is tough and resilient, while a man is soft, spattering on the ground like a breadfruit' (Pfaff 103). This proverb pays tribute to woman's capacity, her superior ability, to adapt to changing circumstances. As Cheryl Williams asserts, in her study of women in Caribbean culture, '[c]ombine the woman's cultural role with her roles as peasant, labourer, trader, urban domestic and usually head of a matriarchal home and we understand why she is so often portrayed as the strong, survivalist Caribbean woman' (109). These illustrations from the sociology and mythology of the French Caribbean indicate the potency and persistence of this image of female strength in Martinique and Guadeloupe.

The figure of the *femme matador* can be traced back to the time of slavery when female slaves were arguably able to gain some autonomy over their lives while male slaves remained stripped of all rights. While black field slaves were

firmly relegated to the bottom of the plantation's social hierarchy, black female slaves suffered additional oppression because of their sex. Male slaves were valued only for the economic contribution they made to the plantation, yet women were expected to perform both sexual and economic tasks. These duties included sexual favours for white masters and, more importantly, childbearing, which was considered an economic event that signalled the arrival of a new slave. However, some female slaves were able to transform their oppression into a means of autonomy by using their body as a bartering asset. By bearing a child to a white master or any other white person in authority, black female slaves could sometimes find themselves in easier working conditions than if they had only black children. These relationships with white men could also lead to a lighter workload and preferential treatment for their children.

Within the plantation system, social status was inextricably linked to skin colour and therefore mixed blood slaves enjoyed certain privileges not available to their black counterparts. A nineteenth-century Haitian proverb encapsulates the importance of colour in this region where a vicious system of exploitation pivots on the shade of one's skin: 'Every rich man is a mulatto; every poor man is a black' (Leiris 31). An example of this racial prejudice is that mixed blood slaves often worked as artisans or house servants rather than doing the backbreaking work in the fields. Before emancipation, 'brown' men and women were freed as individuals more often than dark-skinned blacks and skin colour was clearly associated with the distribution of labour. Given the pervasive repercussions of skin colour, it is significant that female slaves had the opportunity of exceeding the limitations of this system through their reproductive capacity while male slaves did not. As Olive Senior asserts, 'it is the Caribbean female who has in the past carried the burden of moving the family to higher status' (27). Women were also able to gain a degree of autonomy with the opportunity to retain power over their children, a power denied to black slave fathers. By bearing a child to a white master or any other white person in authority, black female slaves could sometimes find themselves in easier working conditions. It can therefore be argued that women were in fact more valuable than men under slavery because they could offer both sexual and economic advantages for their masters while male slaves could only ever be work machines.

The plantation system eroded the possibility of slaves forming a coherent kinship system because of the uncertain status of the slave father who could be removed from his family at any time through death in the fields or by being sold to another master. As Edith Clarke explains, the master's complete control over male slaves had serious repercussions for the family: 'residential unit in the plantation system was formed by the mother and her children with the responsibility for their maintenance resting with the slave-owner. The father's place in the family was never secure. He had no externally sanctioned authority over it and could at any time be physically removed from it' (Clarke 19). In the

face of frequent paternal absence, the role of the Caribbean mother needed to expand and she became the one who provided strength and stability for her family, culminating in the phenomenon of the female-headed family. Smith has shown that the 'theme of male "irresponsibility" in marriage and fatherhood is insistent and recurrent in modern West Indian social life' (117), and this behavioural pattern contrasts dramatically with the connected and involved conduct of women within the family.

An examination of male and female attitudes to parenting reveals an important divergence that further contributes to the reduced function of the father figure. While bearing and raising children is considered a natural and desirable part of being a Caribbean woman, for men the importance lies more in the making of babies than in bringing them up: "'fathering" a child — as opposed to parenting — [is seen] as the true sign of manhood' (Senior 66). It is significant that children generally are perceived not as a joint responsibility in a family situation, but as ultimately the responsibility of their mothers. Livia Lesel suggests that this dominant maternal role has served as a self-fulfilling prophecy in which women actually exclude their partners from involvement with their children to the point where: 'L'enfant, c'est l'affaire de la femme antillaise' [children are the business of Caribbean women] (7). Caribbean women's experience of mothering, however, comes across as a process of struggle, hardship and sacrifice. In the absence of reliable male support, whether financial or emotional, women have been required to assume the role of sole parent, often coupled with that of provider for the family.

A further contributor to the low rate of male participation in the family is the lack of positive definition of the male gender role. While potential female role models surround girls as they are growing up, the frequent absence of men in the family denies young boys this formative influence. 'Boys are ... growing up in situations where female gender identity is strong, and, where a father or other older male is absent, he might not be able to absorb notions of male status and identity through role modelling in the home. On whom does such a boy model himself?' (Senior 38). The lack of direction in how to become a male in Caribbean society means that many young boys unconsciously absorb the notion that a man's role is not within the family, but, rather, that of an irresponsible figure who flits from woman to woman and cannot maintain a steady job. Barry Chevannes further observes that 'achieving and maintaining one's masculinity may be less secure in cultures where women also appropriate the same symbols that men use as signifiers of male identity' (219). While the dominant cultural expectation is for men to take up the leadership role in the home, the overwhelming pattern of female-headed households provides an additional challenge to the Caribbean man's sense of masculinity. The frequent unavailability of positive male role models creates a vicious circle where men perpetuate patterns of unreliability by passing them onto their children through lack of involvement

in their offspring's lives. The enduring result of this familial situation is that women have come to embody great strength and the will to survive while men have tended to languish in behavioural patterns dominated by irresponsibility. The figure of the *femme matador* therefore has a firm grounding in the history of the French Caribbean.

Contemporary novelists from the two islands have frequently harnessed the figure of the *femme matador* as a way to underline the trying circumstances of Martinican and Guadeloupean womanhood and to demonstrate changing trends in the role of women in French Caribbean society. The representation of women in French Caribbean literature varies from an overwhelmingly positive depiction of the *femme matador* in books such as Schwarz-Bart's *The Bridge of Beyond* and Chamoiseau's *Texaco* to Condé's more negative portrayal of the fighting woman in *The Last of the African Kings* and Chamoiseau's sensitive and nuanced portrait in his novel *Solibo Magnificent*. These contrasting images attest to the complexities of the female condition in French Caribbean society, a state born of oppressive historical circumstances and enhanced by French Caribbean men's abdication of many of their familial and financial responsibilities. They also highlight that women are increasingly taking on roles within the wider community, rather than confining their efforts to the domestic arena.

*The Bridge of Beyond* offers a heart-warming vision of female courage and tenacity presented through the luminous descriptions of the narrator, Télumée, and her female ancestors. Schwarz-Bart's narrative style, with its focus on the transmission of knowledge and wisdom between four generations of women, mirrors the Caribbean tradition of history-making by telling stories and passing them down the family line. Patrice Proulx points out that the presence of female history in the novel, expressed through the author's insistence on the Lougandor genealogy, bears witness to 'the articulation of an original community of women' (136) which helps to oppose the scattering of the Caribbean family imposed by slavery (Toureh 73). As a result of their firm grounding in their historical roots, the Lougandor women develop into characters who display strength and a resolve to survive that is not shared by the majority of men around them.

The first woman described in the Lougandor line is Télumée's great-grandmother, Minerva, who is linked to the Roman goddess of wisdom through her mythical name. Despite her direct experience of the injustices of the plantation system, Minerva displays the quality that comes to characterise all of the women in the Lougandor family with her 'unshakable faith in life' (3). This courageous attitude towards the trials of existence represents the defining philosophy of Minerva and her descendants as they encounter times of great prosperity and others of deep suffering. What distinguishes the Lougandor women from those around them is their ability to maintain this approach to life in both the good times and the bad. Their refusal to idealise life or to minimise the impact of the pain that periodically encompasses them highlights a no-nonsense approach to

existence which is directed above all by the will to survive. Significantly, these women view both positive and negative experiences as the defining facets of life and accept, therefore, that both must be lived fully. In the words of Télumée's grandmother, Toussine,

we Lougandors are not pedigree cocks, we're fighting cocks. We know the ring, the crowd, fighting, death. We know victory and eyes gouged out. And all that has never stopped us from living, relying neither on happiness nor on sorrow for existence, like tamarind leaves that close at night and open in the day. (80)

Toussine forms one of the central narrative interests in the novel and, together with Télumée, she emerges as a woman of great strength. Deeply loved and growing up in the secure domestic environment provided by her parents, Minerva and Xango, Toussine dominates the story with her mythical presence and her intimate link to the wisdom of the spirit world. However, in Schwarz-Bart's portrayal of the image of the *femme matador*, these qualities must always be grounded in the highs and lows of everyday life. Schwarz-Bart reveals that it is principally as a result of her suffering that Toussine assumes her role as the voice of courage and wisdom throughout the novel. Happily married to Jérémie, she begins her life as a woman in profound happiness. However, her world falls to pieces when one of her daughters dies in a devastating house fire. Toussine falls into a deep depression lasting three years which leads to her and her family's ruin. In a symbolic manner that highlights her link to nature, the house they live in becomes over-run by weeds and flimsy pieces of cardboard cover the windows. Shocking the people around her, Toussine languishes in sorrow until one day a man 'announced that Toussine, the little stranded boat, the woman thought to be lost forever, had come out of her cardboard tower and was taking a little walk in the sun' (14).

Beverley Ormerod draws attention to the metaphorical qualities of Toussine's transformation, emphasising the way in which boats are able to withstand the forces of nature due to their sturdy construction in wood. Furthermore, 'the boat is also an especially fitting symbol of the unpredictable course of human experience, with its quests, setbacks and sudden changes of fortune' (109). Ormerod's stress on the changeable nature of life reinforces the idea that strength is born both of hardship and of joy. Schwarz-Bart announces Toussine's readiness to embrace the full experience of life and therefore to adopt her role as a *femme matador* by describing her renewed faith in nature. Toussine plants the pip of a hummingbird orange tree, the same tree that nourished both her daughters for their afternoon tea before Méranée's premature death. Communion with nature thus becomes an empowering element and allows Toussine to face her tragedy from a position of strength rather than from one of overwhelming sorrow. The profound ramifications of this metamorphosis in consciousness surface in Schwarz-Bart's description of Toussine as 'a bit of the world, a whole country, a plume of a Negress, the ship, sail, and wind, for she had not made a habit of

sorrow' (14). The ultimate recognition of Toussine's strength of character and reinvigorated zest for life occurs in the birth of her new daughter called Victoire and her crowning as 'Reine Sans Nom' [Queen Without a Name] by the villagers around her. Reine Sans Nom thus presents a shining image of the *femme matador* in her capacity to weave together the positive and negative threads of existence in her determined quest for survival. Schwarz-Bart's book represents one of the most positive and clearly delineated examples of female strength in contemporary French Caribbean literature.

Two novels published in 1992, Chamoiseau's *Texaco* and Condé's *The Last of the African Kings*, reflect on the theme of the *femme matador* through their focus on two productive and community-minded women who forge a prominent place for themselves within their respective societies. Their important social role exemplifies the changing status of women within French Caribbean society with their proactive stance on community building and their passionate attempt to preserve their history and culture. However, Condé and Chamoiseau refuse an idealised picture of their female protagonists, revealing both positive and negative ways in which external circumstances shape their characters' approach to life. Chamoiseau, for example, highlights the manner in which personal and social hardships foster Marie-Sophie Laborieux's unwavering determination to face and conquer adversity. In *The Last of the African Kings*, by contrast, Condé depicts Debbie's triumph over her surroundings, evident in her successful career and esteemed public status, but she underlines that this power arises at a cost to close relationships. Forming two faces of the *femme matador*, then, Marie-Sophie and Debbie illustrate the manner in which the environment can generate an attitude of positive determination in one character and a desire to control in the other.

*Texaco*'s main protagonist, Marie-Sophie, is the woman who takes on the task of fighting for and recording the history of Texaco, a real-life suburb on the margins of the Martinican capital, Fort-de-France. The choice of a woman as the storyteller of Texaco is not incidental given that it was founded in reality by a Madame Sico, (McCusker 730) but it also reflects the important position women occupy more generally in Caribbean society. In an interview with Maeve McCusker, Chamoiseau explains that Marie-Sophie is a mixture of Madame Sico and his mother. When asked if his novel serves to some extent as a eulogy to the Martinican woman, Chamoiseau replies in the affirmative: 'the sociological reality in Martinique is that women are very present and they are strong women' (730). Speaking more specifically about his mother as an example of a strong Caribbean woman, Chamoiseau states that she is 'a woman with balls, a virile woman, and all Caribbean women are like that' (730–31). While there is an element of romanticism to Chamoiseau's classification of *all* women as *femmes matador*, he nonetheless draws attention to the prominent position women occupy in French Caribbean society and hints at the wider historical context of shifting

attitudes in gender transgression. While gender identity in French Caribbean literature frequently emerges in the opposition of the 'strong woman' and the 'weak man', more recent writers such as Gisèle Pineau have explored the fluid nature of gender and the way in which feminine and masculine qualities can flow between both sexes. Chamoiseau's characterisation of his mother as 'a woman with balls' is an example of a woman who has appropriated the traits of virility and assertiveness that are traditionally associated with masculinity. Such literary embodiments of gender transgression are an important indicator of social change on a broader scale.

Through the course of her existence, Marie-Sophie draws strength from adversity and develops the outstanding vigour which allows her to take on single-handedly the role of fighting for Texaco when it falls under threat. 'I had suddenly understood that it was I, around this table with this poor old rum, with my word for my only weapon, who had to wage — at my age — the decisive battle for Texaco's survival' (26–27). Marie-Sophie outlines her philosophy of a tenacious faith in life in an unambiguous manner: 'life is not to be measured by the ell of its sorrows. For that reason, I, Marie-Sophie Laborieux ... have always looked at the world in a good light' (33). While those around her may bow before overwhelming pressures, she takes the experience as a challenge and seizes upon it as an opportunity to build her character. According to Cilas Kemedjio, part of Marie-Sophie's success in withstanding the difficulties of the war she wages for Texaco is her capacity for *débrouillardise* or the ability to survive and exploit the system that oppresses (qtd in Burton 468). Her determination to triumph over public and private distress marks her out as a strong Caribbean woman and emphasises the possibility of drawing strength from arduous external surroundings.

Condé provides an alternative image of the *femme matador* through the character of Debbie in *The Last of the African Kings*. While Marie-Sophie positively harnesses the challenges of her environment for society's good, Debbie seeks to master it in what is frequently an oppressive manner. Condé's depiction of Debbie aligns her with the *femme matador* in her determination and courage regarding the promotion of black culture and racial equality in her society. Driven, intellectual and ambitious, Debbie has a rigorously organised schedule which includes on an average Sunday, for example: 'singing the psalms louder than anyone else ... rubbing the hands or sponging the forehead of a believer gripped by the Holy Spirit ... [and giving] inspired readings or [dealing] out forceful sermons to the few stubborn, sulky teenagers whose parents had managed to drag them to the house of the Lord' (19). While the author celebrates the important social role Debbie undoubtedly performs, it is evident in this description that Condé's portrayal of her character is steeped in irony and exaggeration.

Condé further challenges her character's image as a *femme matador* with her progressive revelations about the motives behind Debbie's impassioned battles

for social equality. Fuelled by the desire to possess a palpable link with her cultural heritage, Debbie's decision to marry Spéro pivots largely on her knowledge of his African royal ancestry, a factor that to her outweighs his essential weakness and ineptitude. Condé identifies the source of Debbie's obsession with historical roots as a product of her disappointment at her own genealogical background. Since childhood Debbie has idealised her father, George Middleton, a man known for his passionate dedication to the black cause. However, she discovers as an adult that he is little more than a racist and she suffers greatly from the discovery that her idol is a hypocrite. Given that '[r]everence [is] her religion' (64), she quickly abandons her literary project and becomes heavily involved in her quest for justice. When Spéro's link with royalty proves increasingly illusory, Debbie further intensifies her social campaigning and plays out her resentment at the situation through her humiliating and distant treatment of him. As Mildred Mortimer maintains, '[i]n effect, she parodies the racist tactics she abhors; Debbie becomes responsible for "putting a Nigger in his place"' (760). While Debbie draws on her considerable determination and courage to strive for social equality, she also succeeds in destroying her relationship with Spéro and contributing to the erosion of her husband's already wavering sense of identity. Condé thereby 'warns us against the danger of falling into the fictions that we have created ourselves' (Wilson 113), painting a less than ideal picture of the *femme matador*.

Alongside this unflattering portrait of female strength, Condé depicts the trying circumstances that men create for their partners as a way to explain the development of the *femme matador*. For example, one of the behaviours Spéro adopts in response to the magnification of Debbie's character is his frequent recourse to extramarital liaisons. Debbie's reaction to her husband's relationships exemplifies a collective female disappointment at the unreliable conduct of their partners, encapsulated in the parallels between Debbie and her mother-in-law. 'Debbie was sitting slumped at the table, motionless, her head clutched between her hands, immediately bringing to mind the picture he had of Marisia, his maman, crying because of Justin' (Condé 187–88). While it has been documented that Caribbean girls grow up with clearly defined examples of strong female behaviour due to the predominance of women in the family (Senior 38), it is evident in the upbringing of Spéro and his ancestors that boys absorb reduced images of masculinity as a result of their fathers' failure to assume their parental responsibilities. As they perceive the lack of male participation in the family, it seems quite natural for boys to grow up and display these same gendered attitudes towards women and their domestic obligations. Justin, Spéro's father, for example, is an unsuccessful musician who chases after women and dulls his mind with rum, a pattern that Spéro unquestioningly repeats in his own adult life. Condé thereby highlights the way in which many women have had to assume responsibilities because of male unreliability and out of the sheer necessity to

survive. The character of Debbie thus underlines both the positive and negative aspects of this figure of female strength, particularly drawing attention to the way in which external circumstances condition the development of the *femme matador*.

The character of Doudou-Ménar in Chamoiseau's *Solibo Magnificent* also highlights the role of the external environment in creating female strength, offering a vision of the *femme matador* at its most extreme, tempered by his depiction of her as a simple and innocent country girl. When the Creole storyteller of the novel's title, Solibo Magnificent, mysteriously dies, Doudou-Ménar is the first to rush off to the police to get help. Chamoiseau contextualises his character's energetic reaction to this event by reflecting on her inherent strength. In an allusion to the burden many Caribbean women must carry in life, Chamoiseau, tongue-in-cheek, recasts the Creole proverb made famous in *The Bridge of Beyond* that a woman's breasts are never too heavy for her chest, applying it instead to Doudou-Ménar: 'Her big breasts jumped up and down, but the fat woman ignored them (never burdensome for a chest, these things cannot fall, no)' (*Solibo* 24). According to H. Adlai Murdoch, this intertextual reference 'tacitly [inscribes] Doudou-Ménar as an icon of female cultural resistance' (234), an identification amplified in Chamoiseau's description of her everyday life:

[S]he drew upon the strength her long day had not been able to exhaust: getting up at sunrise to scald the grapefruit, sweep the house before waking up her son Gustave (a ne'er-do-well, my dear, who wears Pierre Cardin clothes and sings in Spanish in a band where other ne'er-do-wells pretend to be Latins), and sells candied fruit through the favor of the festivities, a way of dealing blows to her debts with the hard swing of a full purse. Her man, Gustave's father, had vanished from the midst of life's traffic, slumped in a festive stupor from which he emerged only after the Carnival, but with empty balls and the muscle all mushy. (24)

Doudou-Ménar's struggle to survive in the absence of reliable male support highlights some of the hardships common to French Caribbean women. The lack of responsibility of her partner is evident in his collapse into a drunken stupor after the Carnival, a behaviour that overflows into other aspects of their shared life. His failure to provide an adequate role model for his son because of his own irresponsibility partially explains the perpetuation of such male patterns of unreliability in French Caribbean society. The immediate consequences for Doudou-Ménar are that she must assume almost complete responsibility for the running of the home and the family and therefore must foster qualities of resilience and tenacity in order to survive. In this light, she appears as a *femme matador* who must shoulder the consequences of male irresponsibility.

Whilst the portraits of these fighting women often attract admiration and idealisation from the writers who describe them, Chamoiseau reveals a more serious consequence of this female struggle to survive. It is evident that material and emotional necessity succeed in producing a warrior spirit in Doudou-Ménar

which she draws on in her quest for survival in a hostile environment. However, the determination with which she clings to life grows to such an extent that she becomes prone to acts of violence: 'In this woman, street champion, any threat, any gurgle in the stomach, launched a desire to massacre' (26). Doudou-Ménar's considerable physical strength and bold spirit, presented with comic exaggeration, make her a force to be reckoned with and a potential danger to anyone who crosses her path. Within this framework Doudou-Ménar appears as an excessively aggressive woman, although Chamoiseau emphasises that this warrior spirit arises as a specific result of the hardships dealt to women by men.

Chamoiseau parallels the harshness of Doudou-Ménar's adult fighting spirit with his depiction of her as a naïve girl from the country. With his inclusion of a memorable love scene shared many years earlier with Bouaffesse, the Chief Sergeant in the investigation into Solibo's death, Chamoiseau stresses the innocence and sweetness of a young female who has not yet encountered the realities of Caribbean womanhood. Although he satirises Doudou-Ménar's naivety, he also shows how she is exploited. Indeed, in his poignant description of her disappointed expectation that Bouaffesse would remember her as he had promised all those years ago (36), Chamoiseau underlines her transition from the freshness of youth to the jaded and hardened woman who seeks help aggressively for Solibo. He draws further attention to Doudou-Ménar's simplicity and fundamental goodness in a humorous but poignant way with his description of her full of pride when she travels to the crime scene in a police van. Brief vignettes such as these constitute a moving and subtle tribute to the women who suffer and pay the price of their daily bid for survival. Doudou-Ménar becomes, therefore, a model of the contradictions of the female experience in French Caribbean society.

As these excerpts from French Caribbean history, sociology and literature demonstrate, the *femme matador* remains a recurrent and persistent image of Martinican and Guadeloupean womanhood. With their ability to transform the difficulties of their surroundings into a potent means of survival, French Caribbean women have effectively empowered themselves in a situation of historical oppression. This embodiment of female strength has been thrown into greater relief by the pronounced weakness of French Caribbean men as revealed in both fictional and non-fictional works of the region. While relations between the sexes in Martinique and Guadeloupe are beginning to evolve in more modern times, the persistence of images of female strength and male weakness attest to the decisive role of history in influencing Caribbean gender roles. The *femme matador* thus exemplifies some of the realities and representations of the French Caribbean woman.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> See, for example, Raymond T. Smith, *Kinship and Class in the West Indies: A Genealogical Study of Jamaica and Guyana*.
- <sup>2</sup> See Diane J. Austin, *Urban Life in Kingston, Jamaica: The Culture and Class Ideology of Two Neighbourhoods*.
- <sup>3</sup> Translations from French texts are my own unless otherwise indicated.

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