

Black Female Bodies and Radical Acts of Agency in *The Polished Hoe*

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Abstract

The award-winning novel *The Polished Hoe* (2002), written by Austin Clarke, explores the way that black Caribbean females construct a radical identity by resisting sexual victimization and reach a complex understanding of the self by simultaneously occupying various subject positions. This paper addresses Mary-Mathilda's experiences of sexual exploitation and the reconstruction of her identity with the function of her black female body. Narratives of sexual violence, commodification and objectification of black female bodies in the patriarchal context are exposed through the intersectionality of the vectors of race, class and gender. The notion of performativity of the black female body comes to the forefront. What is innovative in this approach is that Mary-Mathilda's body symbolizes disempowerment and empowerment simultaneously from the perspective of Peirce's semiotic theory, juxtaposing within the multifaceted and nuanced subject positions she occupies. In addition, the definitional boundaries of the black female body are explored through a phenomenological approach. The transformation of Mary-Mathilda as radical subjects through subversive acts of agency is finally revealed in this paper.

Keywords: *The Polished Hoe, Austin Clarke, radical, agency*

1. Introduction

Austin Clarke is a Barbadian-Canadian author who explored the immigrant experience and being black in Canada. His masterpiece *The Polished Hoe* (2002), written as

Mary-Mathilda, a West Indian former servant and mistress of a plantation manager, won the 2002 Scotiabank Giller Prize and the 2003 Commonwealth Writers Prize. The narrative unravels through Mary-Mathilda's voice in the form of a 24-hour murder confession. Through the figure of Mary-Mathilda, Austin Clarke explores the way that black Caribbean females construct a radical identity by resisting sexual victimization and reach a complex understanding of the self by simultaneously occupying various subject positions, such as that of the field laborer, the mother, the mistress, the sexual worker and the murderer. The focus of *The Polished Hoe* is the trauma inflicted on the Caribbean community and specifically on the black female body. The traumatic events, to which the female figures were subjected, were emotional and sexual abuse in a highly racialized context. A space needs to be created to address the erotic and the issue of sexual agency in relation to the quest for subjecthood. In this context, the black female body is the center of sexual politics.

Mary-Mathilda enters the locus of sexual politics and manages to resist patriarchal oppression and acquire agency through exposing her story. The legacy of slavery points out that the black female body was a site where violence was enacted, as it was subjected to sexual crimes, most commonly rape. Through Mary-Mathilda's personal narrative, her journey of reaching freedom from sexual oppression and the shackles of patriarchy are depicted as her subversion of the stereotype of the oversexualized black female. By resisting to be merely depicted as a performer of sexual favors, she attains a more nuanced sense of self, challenging the objectification of the black female body. Clarke manages to voice the great unwritten story of the black female bodies that are forced into silence and are rendered unseen. This paper aims to explore the ways of how the black female bodies symbolize disempowerment and empowerment simultaneously, as well as perform the function to assume radical acts of agency. It starts by exposing the narrative of sexual exploitation of the black female body and addressing the issue of incest imprinted in the fabric of the narrative. Then, it analyzes the question of how a woman that comes from a lineage of sexual abuse can renegotiate her sexual desires and disrupt the narratives of self-objectification. The struggles that this woman goes through are validated as experiences worthy of scholarly attention. What is innovating in this approach is that this paper addresses these questions of positionality of the black female body in the structure of a power hierarchy within a specific geographical space through phenomenology. The theory

will shed light on the complexity of sexual relations in that system. Mary-Mathilda is a liminal subject whose transition to agency is marked by the spatiality of the plantation and the temporality of the night. The plantation she lives on is connected to her rebellion and the confession of the crime she is accused of. She recognizes the significance of the plantation as a locus where culture and history are intricately connected. In this context, Judith Butler's phenomenological criticism of the diasporic subjects attaining sexual agency through a radical act is relevant. In her book, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, Butler exposes "the limits of the historical scheme of things, the epistemological and ontological horizon within which subjects come to be at all" (2005, p. 17). To delineate the context within which the subject emerges exposes the subject's critical relation to existing norms. The contribution of the paper to existing scholarship is the attribution of masculine traits to Mary-Mathilda. Through killing Belfeels, she asserts herself in a way that subverts traditional notions of femininity. The murder of Belfeels consists of a strategy of resistance to oppression which identifies Mary-Mathilda as taking up a position of black masculinity, since by killing Belfeels she takes up his manhood. Her act mirrors a reversal of gender as she puts into question gender identification. The female rage and violence are identified as traits of masculinity in this case.

2. Exposing Sexual Victimization

The Polished Hoe depicts the plantation society of Barbados during the 1940s, focusing on the lives of black women, mainly Mary-Mathilda and Ma. In order to explore the power dynamics of twentieth century Barbados, Clarke employs the post-slavery plantation system of Bimshire. Bimshire is a fictional island in the Caribbean, a place where colonialism has heavily imparted its influence. Mary-Mathilda, the novel's protagonist, wavers among the history of her ancestors during the seventeenth century and her own personal history during the 1950s. *The Polished Hoe* does not evolve around a sequence of events that take place chronologically, but instead, events are revealed through the protagonist's recollections expressed in a detached way, exposing her unique history. Clarke places the sexual exploitation of Caribbean black women into perspective, exposing the unique context of their struggle. Mary-Mathilda experiences flashbacks from the lives of her foremothers while revealing her personal

story. Through non-linear narration, Mary-Mathilda's story of sexual victimization is unraveled and recorded into history.

Through the narrative, the black female body is exposed as a sign of mere object reduced to its performative aspect. From the semiotic perspective of C. S. Peirce, "a sign, or representamen, is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity" (1932, p. 228). In other words, the sign contains profound meaning in some special circumstances. In the social context in *The Polished Hoe*, the black female body is symbolized as the victim of racial and sexual prejudice. According to Peirce, the symbol is one of the three kinds of the sign¹, which "signifies its object by means of an association of ideas or habitual connection between the name and the character signified" (1931, p. 369). Clark depicts Mary-Mathilda's body as the symbol of a private property on the plantation. This is illustrated by Mary-Mathilda, who at the age of eight, was under Belfeels's protection, out of "his natural arrogance of ownership, as a part of the intricate ritual and arrangement of life on the Plantation" (Clarke, 2004, p. 426). He made her sing and dance on Saturday nights, rendering her as a spectacle. She fulfils his demands at first without questioning them because she does not put them under scrutiny, "nor did she bend her behavior under the critical eye of self-reproach and doubt" (Clarke, 2004, p. 424). She does not take into consideration the deeper implications of her acts. Later, Belfeels tells her that the songs she was dancing to "were sung by 'Nig-roes', and by slaves" (Clarke, 2004, p. 425). Mary-Mathilda at that time "had no thought nor feeling for those Negroes and those slaves; for she was in Bimshire, in this solidly built Great House" (Clarke, 2004, p. 425). She was detached from the experiences of those people as she did not experience those hardships herself. She had a false sense of security and liberty as she was the mistress of that great house whereas other black people were toiling away on the plantation. She suddenly realizes that she was rendered a spectacle as her body was merely reduced to its performative aspect. Her body becomes a symbol of commodity in Belfeels' possession which provides her with outwardly high status.

Mary-Mathilda comes to the realization that the man who fathered her was also sexually abusing her. The textual representations of race, gender and sexuality in relation to the formation of identities of the Caribbean subjects is thus fully explored in this novel. Patricia Hills Collins in her book *Black Feminist Thought* undergoes an exploration of the experiences of black women from their perspective and claims that:

rape and other acts of overt violence that Black women have experienced, such as physical assault [...], domestic abuse, incest, and sexual extortion, accompany Black women's subordination in a system of race, class, and gender oppression. Violence against Black women tends to be legitimated and therefore condoned. (2014, p. 177)

Therefore, the abuse of the black female body was considered as something typical and acceptable. Springer confirms that black females had to learn the strategies of "how to survive in interlocking structures of race, class, and gender oppression while rejecting and transcending those same structures" (2012, p. 176). Hilary Beckles also attests for the sexual victimization of black female bodies due to their race and gender; she argues that "slavery in the islands led to the legal and customary institutionalization of the slave owner's right to unrestricted sexual access to slaves as an intrinsic and discrete product" (1989, p. 22). Thus, the female body was marginalized and rendered merely as an object in the possession of the slave owner. This applies to Mary-Mathilda as it is stated explicitly that Belfeels: "put[s] his riding-crop under [her] chin...he passed the riding-crop down [her] neck, right down the front of [her] dress, until it reach [her] waist. And then he move the riding-crop right back up again, as if he was drawing something on [her] body" (Clarke, 2004, p. 11). This action was indicative of the plantation owner-patriarch's indictment of her becoming his mistress. Based on the semiotic theory, the riding crop has a relation of "imputed character" (Peirce, 1931, p. 558) to the subjection in patriarchal context. It is the symbol attached to a person who is not free. Additionally, it symbolizes a form of sexual sublimation, and the medium that positions one in the condition of servitude and subjugation. It could also be viewed as a symbol of the male will. With the riding crop, the black body is forcefully placed in the zone of undifferentiation between human and animal. Within this context, human life is seen as taking the shape of animal life and vice versa to the extent that it is not clear anymore of what part of the animal is more human than actual humans and which part of the human is more animalistic than the actual animal in regards to the metaphorical consideration of slaves.

The discovery of the incestuous nature of Belfeels's relationship with Mary-Mathilda results in intricate ramifications in Mary-Mathilda's psyche, leading

to traumatization. Mary-Mathilda suffers trauma upon discovering that she is Belfeels's daughter, which makes her the sister of her son. At first, she is unable to utter what she has discovered. Incest is a major issue and sexual relationships are permeated by incest. Paternity is imbricated with incest. As Judith Butler, a prominent scholar in performativity, suggests, Mary-Mathilda is "left to fictionalize and fabulate origins [she could not] know ... [Her] account of [herself] is partial, haunted by that for which [she] can devise no definitive story" (2005, p. 37)². Mary-Mathilda discovers that Belfeels is her father through a collection of pictures where Belfeels, their son Wilberforce and she herself are depicted. She refers to these pictures as the "Wall of History" or "Wall of Shame" (Clarke, 2004, p. 291). She realizes that Belfeels is her father when she notices her similarity to Wilberforce at the age of five and seven. A thought "of a mark, of a silent sin, ... entered her mind" (Clarke, 2004, p. 431), as the concept of erased paternity perplexed her sexual relationship with Belfeels. Mary-Mathilda's discovery that Belfeels is her biological father further complicates her position as a performer of sexual favors. She is traumatized because she has been sexually exploited by her own father. This impedes her narrative "as a woman who successfully makes it to the top of the island's social strata by pimping herself" because she is the victim (Springer, 2012, p. 184). Her sexual engagement to Belfeels has turned into an act of incest, which can be regarded as a deviant act of sexual violation committed by Belfeels. Thus, Mary-Mathilda is traumatized and suffers from a shock. She feels that she has been abandoned as a child, as she has not been fathered like Belfeels's other children, namely, Wilberforce, and Belfeels's daughters, Euralie and Emonie. She was not publicly acknowledged as his child and has suffered from mental anguish.

Incest encumbers the route towards the attainment of sexual agency. Mary-Mathilda has been traumatized by being sexually exploited by her own father. Stephanie Li confirms the "complexities and contradictions of delineating agency and personal identity in circumstances charged with complex issues of intimacy" (2006, p. 131). In the case of Mary-Mathilda, there is an intersection between abuse and desire. Mary-Mathilda's statement functions as her traumatic narrative, riven with contradictions. On the one hand, she suffers from trauma as she was raped as a child, and on the other hand, she places emphasis on her decision to sleep with Belfeels. There are inconsistencies in the fabric that constitutes her identity, as her body

symbolizes disempowerment and empowerment at the same time, juxtaposing within her multifaceted and nuanced subject position. In this discourse, shame and guilt are intricately connected to the subject that is being sexually exploited in that the individual is drawn to the abuser while experiencing feelings of guilt and shame. Mary-Mathilda desires Belfeels because his social position can elevate her own social standing. Other people in Mary-Mathilda's community were aware that Belfeels was her father, but nobody told her as they feared that Belfeels had the means to cause damage to anyone who was willing to tell her the truth. Belfeels says, "Be-Christ, how would it look, for people to hear that I fooping my own daughter! You want to sendme- up to Glandairy? Or cause a fecking scandal on this Plantation? You hate me summuch" (Clarke, 2004, p. 430). He is aware of the scandal that he would have raised if he had admitted the incestuous nature of his relationship with Mary-Mathilda. Thus, Mary-Mathilda feels that there is much ambivalence about the incest during the life.

The Polished Hoe falls into the genre of neo-slavery literature, a genre which emerged during the mid-twentieth century and gained a renewed interest in black matters and in the black female body. The black female body is symbolized throughout the narrative as an object, a commodity, and a tool of labor specifically for procreation. Mary-Mathilda has no chance to claim her own agency because her enslaved body is doubly colonized. Not only is she forced into labor alongside her male counterparts in the fields but also she is subjected to sexual exploitation such as incest. Thus, there is a dire need for the reconceptualization of the connection among slavery, gender and subjecthood.

3. Engaging in Empowerment

Mary-Mathilda utilizes the function of her black female body and engages in empowered acts to escape the disempowered status with the help of her mother, Ma. Ma does not embody the traditional trope of the mother as she prompts her daughter to attain a more nuanced sense of self and become a radical subject. The notion of motherhood in *The Polished Hoe* is perplexed. Beckles, a theorist who explored the lives of black slave women in Barbados, argues in his book *Natural Rebels* that "black motherhood [...] was conceptually and legally tied to the perpetuation of slavery [...]"

as black women's maternity could not be separated from [...] degradation" (1989, p. 176) and debasement. However, this notion is subverted as Ma was afforded a chance, an opportunity to mother Mary-Mathilda in a different way. Ma is a radical subject as she is the one that prompts her daughter to attain sexual agency and leads her to a new radical understanding of her body.

Ma enables Mary-Mathilda's body to perform the function as a means of empowerment. Mary-Mathilda believes that her mother had seen the whole abusing scene without intervening because of powerlessness. However, she later forgives her mother when she becomes aware of Ma's intentions. It is noted that the phrase, "Ma chose Belfeels", validates Ma as a subject that enacts her decision. (Clarke, 2004, p. 367). Ma argues that "if it wasn't you, Marygirl [...] it woulda be somebody else daughter. And even though it is what it is, I feel more better to see that it is you getting some o' the sweets that goes along with it, if you know what I mean" (Clarke, 2004, p. 426). Thus, even if it was not Mary-Mathilda, somebody else would have benefited from Belfeels' advances. Mary-Mathilda turns her body consciously into a "piece of land"³ (Springer, 2012, p. 181), which highlights Mary-Mathilda's understanding of her body as a tool necessary for her survival and later as a medium for the attainment of a better life.

Ma functions as a mechanism of deviation from the cultural norms of respectability. She acts defiantly to become empowered. Cathy Cohen notes that one employs a deviant behavior to attain a "greater autonomy over one's life, to pursue desire, or to make the best of very limited life options" (2004, p. 178). Thus, Ma uses the limited resources available to her to attain agency and to "create autonomous spaces absent the continuous stream of power from outside authorities or normative structures" (Springer, 2012, p. 178). Mary-Mathilda wants to become a teacher or a seamstress, however, she is not able to accomplish her dreams due to her triple oppression. Ma says to Mary-Mathilda, "If I was a woman o' means that I wish I was, you would have your own hairdressing place. Or a dressmaking place. Or even be a teacher. But this is our lot" (Clarke, 2004, p. 428). Ma is a field worker with no opportunity for social ascendance. She is aware of the position she is in and believes that she cannot transcend her social position. Her statement exposes that there is a lineage of perpetuation of female victimization due to the triple oppression of women. However, the conventional structures of class, race and gender are challenged

when Mary-Mathilda performs sexual favors as a way of empowerment instead of as a way of victimization. Mary-Mathilda knows that her body has turned into a “a source of income, stability, and perhaps an inroad to securing the socioeconomic ‘high brow’⁴ status her familial lineage does not afford” (Springer, 2012, p. 180). By using her body, her sole resource, she escapes “her subjugated and disempowered impoverished status” (Springer, 2012, p. 181), securing economic stability. She attempts to create a new space of identity in which she has control over the trope of the body and can function beyond patriarchy’s restrictive norms. In this space, she is able to regulate how her body will be used and manages to ensure economic stability. In this context, she defies patriarchy’s commands on respectability by engaging in the empowering act of sex work. Consequently, Mary-Mathilda attains a new consciousness on the matter of the body.

Mary-Mathilda’s identity forms through the churning network of the constraints of patriarchal society. The body of Mary-Mathilda is marketable as she has light skin and nice hair. She is a mixed-race woman and has a lighter complexion than most black people and could pass for white. Therefore, Mary-Mathilda is positioned in an advantageous position due to her features. She passes for white and obtains a power that “was not monolithic and operated at a number of levels, not always with negative consequences” (Springer, 2012, p. 178). She chooses to define herself by employing a self-defined identity as a performer of sexual favors and refuses to be branded by others. Subjectivity and agency are intricately connected, as one’s identity is one of the sites that operates as a way for others to construct his subjecthood. Identity is socially complex as it categorizes certain characteristics as optimal and others as not. Rahul Gairola explores the assumption of radical subjectivity⁵ by subaltern women in his article. He suggests that Mary-Mathilda reshapes “the socio-political atmospheres” where she assumes this identification. This gendered individual goes through an internal act of transforming her identity that is nevertheless informed by her societal surroundings. By performing sexual favors, Mary-Mathilda becomes aware of “the power of the man who [is] turning her into a force-ripe woman”. As she states, “I wasn’t so young not to also know that the man fooping me by force was a man of means, and privilege, able to put me in a category which not one of the boys I grew up with, and who, later on as men, were after me, could” (Clarke, 2004, p. 67). Mary-Mathilda is aware of the danger to which her body was subjecting her, as she

was susceptible to sexual victimization. In order to escape this condition, some black women willingly form “working relationships with other black women to confront race, gender, and class injustices” (Springer, 2012, p. 179). Thus, Ma and Mary-Mathilda form such a relationship. Wendy Chapkis says that “practices of prostitution, like other forms of commodification and consumption, can be read in more complex ways than simply as confirmation of male domination” (1997, pp. 29-30). They may be seen as

sites of ingenious resistance and cultural subversion [...] [T]he prostitute cannot be reduced to one of a passive object used in male sexual practice, but instead [prostitution] can be understood as a place of agency where the sex worker makes active use of the existing sexual order. (1997, pp. 29-30)

Within the scope of radical subjectivity falls one’s ability to occupy more than one subject positions, as these loci are not fixed but rather fluid, enabling the subject to attain self-awareness and grow as an individual. Mary-Mathilda becomes a radical subject when she realizes that her agency does not lie outside the locus of her sexuality and so she needs to embrace her sexual nature and thus assume a fluid identity. Her sense of selfhood is riven with contradictions as she embraces “a radical subjectivity through sex work” (Springer, 2012, p. 172).

Mary-Mathilda occupies multiple subject positions that are complicated and contradictory in essence. She navigates among these positions by “escaping the traditional dichotomous existence of a limited femininity” (Springer, 2012, p. 180). Among the multiple subject positions she occupies, she has the position of the “cultured ‘high brow’” woman of a mansion who is well respected in the community, a “woman of substance” (Springer, 2012, p. 180). She is called “Mrs. Belfeels in public but Belfeels’s ‘whore’ in private” (Springer, 2012, p. 182). This discrepancy exposes the fluidity of her status. Yet, Mary-Mathilda is aware of the limitations of what her sexual self-empowerment affords her due to the stigmatization inflicted on her.

The term “hoe” employed in the novel’s title has a double entendre⁶. It is the tool used to weed out the fields, and at the same time, it is used metaphorically as a symbol of sexualized characterization. In the context of patriarchal society in this novel, the “hoe” has become the symbol of oppression towards women like Mary-

Mathilda from the simple garden tool. They have to do the farm work with the hoe in the family, and what is worse, they suffer from domination and abuse, sharing the same destiny of property with the hoe owned by male characters. However, the adjective “polished” is used as the symbol of attributing value to Mary-Mathilda, as she is a woman who is well respected on the island. She is well read and is the mother of Wilberforce, the well-respected doctor of the island. Although she has been the mistress of Mr. Belfeels, she is now called Mrs. Belfeels, a title of respect. Through the employment of her sexual agency, Mary-Mathilda becomes an empowered subject with radical agency. She internalizes this dialectic within herself as she says that “there is a distinct difference in the way Mr. Belfeels see me, and the way he was brought up to see me, from the way he see Mistress Dora Blanche Spence Belfeels. Yes. One is wife. The other is harlot. One is Mistress. The other is whore” (Clarke, 2004, p. 118). The fluid femininity that Mary-Mathilda embraces wavers along the continuum of the wife and the mistress, or whore, polarizing representations of feminine identification. However, she wonders about “how pure then is [her] body to take this release?”, if she is able “to bring about [her] full release with [her] own hands” and if she is “a woman tainted by her experiences” (Clarke, 2004, p. 241). Mary-Mathilda embraces her personal moral worth as a diasporic subject being handled by other men, which places her in the position of a “polished hoe”.

Clarke disrupts the existing black female body politics. He suggests a “re-visioning of the black female body politic” (Springer, 2012, p. 177) as the body can be functioned as a trope of empowerment even when it gets abused. Ma has a body that has been formerly raped but has turned into a subject that challenges patriarchal structures by instructing Mary-Mathilda to use her body as a means to attain a better life. Ma stands for a counter-hegemonic response to the strictures of female respectability in the patriarchal society by challenging the traditional norms of female respectability. She attains agency by controlling who has access to Mary-Mathilda’s body. Mary-Mathilda turns into a woman with social and economic capital. Performing sexual favors functions as the space of agency and empowerment for Mary-Mathilda who reclaims her body not only from Belfeels but also from her own mother, who forces her to engage in sexual activities with him. Her mother might have prompted her to engage in performing Belfeels’s sexual favors but Mary-Mathilda herself becomes a subject who does so willingly.

4. Regaining of Agency

Mary-Mathilda is a liminal subject whose transition to agency is marked by the spatiality of the plantation and the temporality of the night. The plantation she lives in is connected to her rebellion and the confession of her crime. She recognizes the significance of the plantation as a locus where culture and history are intricately connected. By using Butler's *Giving an Account of Oneself*, a phenomenological criticism can be imparted on Mary-Mathilda, a diasporic subject exposing "the limits of the historical scheme of things, the epistemological and ontological horizon within which subjects come to be at all" (2005, p. 17). The cane fields were parallelized to the ocean as "the forces of history and colonization", as Mary-Mathilda realizes that "everything changed, time itself changed" (Clarke, 2004, p. 455). Eve Stoddard in her book *Positioning Gender and Race in (Post)Colonial Plantation Space: Connecting Ireland and the Caribbean* poses a phenomenological criticism of the positionality of sugar plantations and draws a parallel between the ocean and the cane fields where the narrative takes place. She mingles "the physical landscape of the Barbados to the epistemological and ontological horizons that have structured Mary-Mathilda's life possibilities" (2012, p. 164).

Space plays an important role in the course of the action as Mary-Mathilda finds the opportunity to kill Belfeels the moment he is looking out towards the sea. She describes explicitly the scene when she committed the crime. Mary-Mathilda approaches Belfeels, who is "slouched in rum' in 'his favorite Berbice chairs', on the verandah of the Plantation Main House with the hoe" (Clarke, 2004, p. 395). At that moment, this instrument is not used anymore to plow "the thick black soil" of the plantations but it becomes the symbol of fighting "against the oppressor" (Plasa, 2013, p. 154). Mary-Mathilda kills Belfeels with the shining handle of the hoe, mutilating him with its sharpened blade. First, she gives Belfeels a deadly strike to his head and then causes a "spoiled slaughtering" of the circumcised head of his penis. Mary-Mathilda's polished hoe is "the material avatar of her wishbone" (Stoddard, 2012, p. 175). It is the instrument that brings about change, as the subject "dissolves its inwardness and reconstitutes it in its externality" (Stoddard, 2012, p. 175). Mary-Mathilda claims that when she killed Belfeels she had her wishbone "tucked into [her] cotton petticoat... taken from the body of a pullet killed

by a lorry carrying sugar cane to the factory” (Clarke, 2004, p. 461). She has been carrying this wishbone for years in the canes of the North Field as it carries the message of good wishes. As Peirce states that “a Symbol is a sign which refers to the Object that it denotes by virtue of a law, usually an association of general ideas, which operates to cause the Symbol to be interpreted as referring to that Object” (1932, p. 249). Mary-Mathilda’s wishbone could be viewed as symbolic to her entrapment, as well as her hope to escape her confinement. She carries with her for ten or eleven years a wishbone that represents her

wish never-ever to forget Mr. Belfeels; and how he moved the riding-crop over [her] entire body, as if he was taking off [her] clothes, and then taking off [her] skin, And every time [her] hand touch that wishbone [she] take[s] a oath to [her]self to never forget to give him back. (Clarke, 2004, p. 22)

Both the wishbone and the hoe constituted obsessions of hers—“I had an obsession about that hoe. And an identical with the wishbone” (Clarke, 2004, p. 58). Her hoe is metaphorically a weapon, an instrument through which she challenges the hegemonic notion of the plantation. The hoe that Mary-Mathilda polishes and ultimately uses to kill Belfeels “is refashioned as an instrument” of liberation (Plasa, 2013, p. 166). She was preoccupied with these two objects which expose the memory of her sexual victimization. These two objects later function as tools that conduce to Mary-Mathilda’s disassociation from the action of killing Belfeels.

Mary-Mathilda enters masculine territory by going to visit Mr. Waldrond. The hoe whose wooden handle was made out of cherry wood might be a family heirloom passed down from the grandmother to the mother and then to the daughter, but the chemicals that Mary-Mathilda wants to purchase to make it shine place her in a space that is identified as purely masculine. The hoe exposes the lineage of Mary-Mathilda’s family as it places her in the position of a whore, and it is an element essential to her identity. She asks Mr. Waldrond “for a drop of oil and a daub of the stain or polish he uses on mahogany”. He laughs and says “Never...in all my born-days, and during my time as joiner and cabinetmaker to this Plantation, plying my trade in this Village, have a girl, a woman, axe me to lend she the tools of my trade!” (Clarke, 2004, p. 65). Gender roles are inverted

as Mary-Mathilda embraces male traits. This instance reflects the transgressiveness of gender boundaries set by patriarchy. Her sense of self is at odds with her gender identification. She poses “a threat to the hierarchies of race and the norms of gender alike” (Plasa, 2013, p. 160). Mary-Mathilda’s attainment of masculine traits is reflected in murdering Belfeels.

By killing Belfeels, Mary-Mathilda fully engages her position as a radical subject with the function of her body. Belfeels’s death and specifically his genital mutilation compensates “the sexual pain both he and the system he represents have historically inflicted upon the mixed-race and/or black female body” (Plasa, 2013, p. 156). The way that Mary-Mathilda decides to kill Belfeels exposes defiance of the structure of a system that perpetuates the sexual violation of the black female body. Mary-Mathilda decides to kill Belfeels due to the anger she experiences from discovering that he is her father. She functions as the silent accomplice to the perpetuation of slavery without being aware of the situation. Interracial sex in the context of slavery was symbolic of incest due to the purported maternal role of black women as the Mammy. The circumscription of slavery denied from black women the sense of choice in any meaningful sense. She moves in and out of her traumatized state, experiencing some moments of clarity. The personal is turned into the political as the trauma of the individual is turned into collective trauma. Many people in the village wanted to kill Belfeels:

“Who in the village did not know, and wish for, and hope that ‘the son of-a-bitch who inhabits the Main House, don’t deserve his throat slit; and the sooner, be-Christ, the better? And who would raise a hand of censure, or answer a call from the Plantation or the Solicitor General, to take the oath and give evidence against Miss Mary-Mathilda.” (Clarke, 2004, p. 412)

The people who wanted to kill Belfeels lacked the means to do it.

At this point, it would be useful to direct Mary-Mathilda in relation to the space she occupies while applying a phenomenological critique of her action, which depends on the spatiality and temporality of the locus in which it takes place. Anim-Addo deals with the theories of creolization of Brathwaite and Glissant to examine the gendering of creolization. In his book *Gendering Creolisation*:

Creolising Affect, he employs the phenomenological concept of the “demonic ground of Caliban’s⁷ woman” to demarcate the space within which the creolized women were placed (2013, p. 9). This space was marked by the categories of race and gender as well as by a specificity of history. This latter category signifies a demonic ground which could be viewed as the space in which “‘Caliban’s woman’, the black woman (before or after the master’s attentions), unsettles the prevailing power dynamics by performing counter to them” (Anim-Addo, 2013, p. 9). Foucault argues that “to make visible the unseen can also mean a change of level, addressing oneself to a layer of material which had hitherto had no pertinence for history and which had not been recognized as having any moral, aesthetic or historical value” (Spivak, 1994, p. 81). It is necessary to render the individual vocal. It is difficult to voice something that is ineffable and non-transcendental such as the subaltern. Mary-Mathilda disrupts the dialectic of silence through the performance of her ultimate act and confessing the deed. She does not render her feelings and self as completely readable as she does not want to be castigated, even though she is a colonized subject. Thus, in this context the concept of the “demonic ground” can be viewed as a perilous zone which operates between the sites of oppression and resistance. In order to form resistance and move beyond the shackles of oppression, Mary-Mathilda employs her repressed affects, despite her confinement. So, the “the space of rape for the master” is turned into “a space of his death” (Anim-Addo, 2013, p. 9). This space has already been creolized as it is permeated by her affects. This act is “the source of a counter-politics, a counter-imagining, a counter-metaphysics, not originating from the master (and his world) but from the outside space she possesses as the ‘other’” (Anim-Addo, 2013, p. 9).

Mary-Mathilda has the status of the other, as her identity is riven with tension and conflict. Gorton claims that desire “affects the lives of characters; it marks their bodies, forcing them to move, act or react differently; and it transforms people, radically alters their being-in-the-world” (2008, p. 13). Her act is connected to what is repressed by the master’s reason, as he is unable to “fully possess the body, as a site of the sacred, of opacity and liminality” (Anim-Addo, 2013, p. 9). She abides by the demonic binary, as she finds the strength to commit murder, despite her existence within the dehumanizing conditions. Meanings of this space lie outside of the “governing systems of meaning” (Wynter, 1990, p. 356). Wynter employs the

term “demonic ground” in order to expose “the contradictory relation of Sameness and Difference” (1990, p. 363). The gendered creolized body in and out of the locus of the plantation is a body at risk. Mary-Mathilda has undergone some transformation as she desires to speak out. She challenges the legacy of the gendered body as she moves from silence and enters discourse. She is aware of the limitations on the expression of her emotions and thus she expresses her pain in “an affective register resistant to instant decoding” (Anim-Addo, 2013, p. 14). Central to the rhetoric of creolizing one’s affect is that the enslaved is deprived of the power of discourse. To speak is hazardous as the enslaved subject would undergo scrutiny. In order to protect itself, it masks its affects with silence. Silence could be viewed as a strategy for self-preservation and self-protection. Ma’s silence could be viewed as “a maternal fracturing symptomatic of the plantation” (Anim-Addo, 2013, p. 14). She only breaks her silence when she is about to die to place the mandate upon Mary-Mathilda to not forget. Thus, the issue of memory comes in the forefront.

Mary-Mathilda attains a new sense of selfhood through her final act of mutilating Belfeels. She is not a victim anymore but an agent who enacts a violent act of resistance to oppression. It is interesting to note at this point that throughout the novel the Bajan dialect of English is used, so there is no distinction between the present tense and the past tense and it is not clear whether Belfeels is dead or not. At the very end, Mary-Mathilda states precisely that she “did” kill Belfeels, making use of standard English. Her action could be viewed as an act of resistance to all her suffering from the patriarchal society. Mary-Mathilda chooses to redefine herself through violence. Belfeels embodies multiple roles: he is her biological father and at the same time her husband, her lover, a rapist, her source of financial stability, and also the father of her son. The fact that Mary-Mathilda chooses to kill Belfeels by mutilating his genitalia exposes that their sexual relationship has not been consensual but rather criminal, as the nature of their relationship has been incestuous. She is a body that is able to think beyond the ravages of her sexual exploitation. His murder is a life-changing act which empowers her. According to prevalent gender norms, “the gender specificity of control” (Shepherd, 2002, p. 18) encompasses “enforced sexual relations with white masters and gendered resistance to such practice” (Anim-Addo, 2013, p. 9). Thus, control over the body is central in this discourse. Mary-Mathilda had to proceed in

this action in order to attain a radical subjectivity. Mary-Mathilda claims that she did not murder Befeels but rather saved her soul. Her action does not fall in the colonial system thus “[she] may risk intelligibility and defy convention, but then [she is] acting within or on a sociohistorical horizon, attempting to rapture or transform it” (Stoddard, 2012, p. 176).

Mary-Mathilda’s action to kill Befeels is an act of radical resistance to victimization. Through her action she moves from a state of enslavement and degradation to subjectivity and agency. Even though she was placed in a liminal position, having little agency, she manages to assert herself. Mary-Mathilda attains a resurrection by achieving the death of her oppressor. In his book *Judith Butler in Conversation: Analyzing the Texts and Talk of Everyday Life*, Davies also supports Butler’s assertion that the emergence of the subject is central to the making of Mary-Mathilda’s story. She “create[s] [her]self in new form, instituting a narrative ‘I’ that is superadded to the ‘I’ whose past life [she] seek[s] to tell” (Davies, 2008, p. 37). As Butler says, “This struggle with the unchosen conditions of one’s life, a struggle—an agency—is also made possible, paradoxically, by the persistence of the primary condition of unfreedom” (Butler, 2005, p. 19). Mary-Mathilda states that “if you play your cards right, you will have [...] abundance in your direction” (Clarke, 2004, p. 275). This phrase has to do with performance within the sexual realm in order to attain self-preservation. “Playing your cards right” points at “performance as strategy” (Springer, 2012, p. 186). Mary-Mathilda consciously kills Befeels in order to challenge patriarchal structures.

Through narrating her personal history, Mary-Mathilda constructs her subjecthood. In the context of her confession, Butler’s theory about the relationship between morality and subjecthood comes into being. Butler ponders upon how “subjectivity and moral agency are performed or constructed” (Stoddard, 2012, p. 165). One of her strategies suggests that “we become reflective upon ourselves, accordingly, through fear and terror” (Butler, 2005, p. 11). This lens fits into Mary-Mathilda’s attempt to justify her final act of killing Befeels. She constructs her action as a means of attaining justice “to save her soul” (Clarke, 2004, p. 450). Butler claims that “morality per se avoids violence, particularly violence as retribution” (2005, p. 113). There is ambiguity in the relationship between the agent of the violent action and his responsibility for his action. Butler says that “confession does not return a

self to an equilibrium it has lost; it reconstitutes the soul on the basis of the act of confession itself” (2005, p. 113). Thus, Mary-Mathilda confesses her crime not just to bring balance to her life but also to render herself accountable in front of the law. There are many “ways to account for the emergence of the ‘I’ from the matrix of social institutions, ways of contextualizing morality within its social conditions” (Stoddard, 2012, p. 155). Butler claims that a subject’s “ethical deliberation is bound up with the operation of critique. Critique finds that it cannot go forward without a consideration of how the deliberating subject comes into being [...] social theory, if it is to yield nonviolent results, must find a living place for this ‘I’” (2005, p. 8). Thus, there is the need to place her experience in the framework of Caribbean enslavement and rebellion. She is a “deliberating subject” who is able to act and does act (Stoddard, 2012, p. 154). Butler states that “morality is neither a symptom of its social conditions nor a site of transcendence of them, but rather is essential to the determination of agency and the possibility of hope” (Stoddard, 2012, p. 155). She was struggling to position herself in the world because she lacked formal education, as she embodied the subaltern. Through the confession of her action to the Sargeant, Mary-Mathilda tries to locate herself in the Caribbean diaspora.

Clarke aims at rectifying the historic invisibility of the enslaved black female body as he tries to give it a voice to expose its sexual traumatization. The emergent dissenting possibilities of the subaltern as a free individual and a radical subject are exposed. In *The Polished Hoe*, Mary-Mathilda becomes a radical subject by performing her ultimate act of agency, killing Belfeels by mutilating his genitalia. She rejects being the property of Belfeels by engaging in a subversive act of agency. Mary-Mathilda with her final act of mutilation of Belfeels, rewrites the fabric of patriarchy.

5. Conclusion

This paper is an exploration of the ways that Mary-Mathilda’s identity is constructed in *The Polished Hoe*. The narrative exposes how she occupies various complicated and contradictory subject positions. The black female body in the novel symbolizes disempowerment and empowerment at the same time according to Peirce’s semiotic theory, juxtaposing within the multifaceted and nuanced subject positions she

occupies. It is evident that victimization and agency can co-exist and define one another as part of one's sense of self. This paper contributes to the field of body politics as it exposes Mary-Mathilda's ability to occupy multiple subject positions simultaneously. The intersectionality of class, race and gender plays a major role in the formation of her sexuality. The paper addresses the issue of sexual exploitation of the black female body, which is rendered as the symbol of an object. It unravels the narratives of incest and rape and examines how Mary-Mathilda's personal history is permeated by these narratives. In the meantime, it exposes the ways that it is represented as a commodity and as a slate for the inscription of the desires of others and then subvert this discourse, as well as the discourse of the oversexualized black female body. Mary-Mathilda has the ability to renegotiate her identity and discover her own sexual desires. The paper shows how she overcomes victimization by making the decision to participate in sex work, utilizing the function of her body as the primary method to become an empowered subject. It analyzes how Mary-Mathilda attains radical subjectivity, escaping marginalization and makes a discovery of an alternative way of being. She attains a new sense of selfhood through her final act of mutilating Belfeels. In this way, she acquires freedom from patriarchal oppression and embraces her fluid identity by murdering her oppressor. By speaking for herself, Mary-Mathilda speaks on behalf of the women who were oppressed by Belfeels, like Ma, as well as the ones who are anonymous and more distant figures, who are part of the island's history. Killing Belfeels was the only way for her to attain a new understanding of herself and become a radical subject. Through the lens of phenomenology and the employment of the concept of "demonic ground of Caliban's women", this paper sheds light on the complexity of the formation of Mary-Mathilda's sexual identity in the plantation system.

Notes

- 1 The sign is divided into three kinds by C. S. Peirce who is credited with the founding of semiotics. The first is diagrammatic sign or icon; the second is the index; and the third is the symbol.
- 2 This obscurity in regards to the accountability for the identity of one's self is reflected through language. Mary-Mathilda uses repeatedly the pronouns "I" and "me" in order to convey her crisis of identity and assume agency.

- 3 This phrase derives from Sandra. C. Duvivier's essay. See Duvivier, S. C. (2008). "My Body Is My Piece of Land": Female Sexuality, Family, and Capital in Caribbean Texts. *Callaloo*, 31(4), 1104-1121.
- 4 The characterization "high brow" is used as an accompaniment of Mary-Mathilda's characterization as "the polished hoe". The attribution of the term "high brow" to Mary-Mathilda denotes that she is an empowered female figure who is in an advantageous position. She lives in a big house while having her own servants, she has the opportunity to travel and play the piano and was respected in the community she lives, things that were not typical of the lifestyle of a black female in that era. She is strategic in her manipulation of Befeels to maintain these affordances that she would no longer sustain herself. In exchange, she engages in sexual activities with Befeels.
- 5 The concept of "radical subjectivity" derives from Gayatri Spivak's essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?". Spivak questions whether women of Indian origin have any rights over their existence and the limitations they encounter as their agency is imbibed by the gender position they occupy. She suggests that in order to escape this position the subaltern needs to attain radical subjectivity. This paper uses this concept of radical subjectivity but applies it on women of Caribbean origin, like Mary-Mathilda.
- 6 Elizabeth Walcott-Hackshaw also attributes to the term "hoe" a double entendre. She makes the distinction between a "hoe" in Standard English which is "a plantation tool" and a "hoe" in Caribbean which refers to a "whore". See Walcott-Hackshaw, Elizabeth. (2006). *The Polished Hoe* (review). *Callaloo*, 29(2), 680-682.
- 7 Caliban is a figure created by Shakespeare in his play *The Tempest*.

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