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## Swimming through Blood and Horror: A Reading of Edwidge Danticat's *The Farming of Bones*

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### **Abstract:**

*The Farming of Bones* (1999) is a fictionalized recast of the 1937 genocide, of Haitian émigré population which was orchestrated by the Dominican President, Generalissimo Rafael Trujillo Molina. It revolves around the sugarcane fields, where the Haitians are made to work like beasts of burden. The novel describes the physical injuries and disfigurements of the Haitian cane cutters. It bears witness to the atrocities committed in the name of racial intolerance and political power by the Dominican nationalists. It exposes the violence, horror, despair and unbearable loss, of people who endure the ravages of the cane fields and the viciousness of the massacre. Despite these bloodsheds and horror, many Haitians survive as they have the resolute will power to survive. Danticat's novel is a testament to the Haitians' resilient spirit.

**Keywords:** *The Farming of Bones*, Haitian, racial, violence, massacre, Danticat.

Racism is not just about being black and white as there are other ethnic issues, like Hitler's hatred for the Jews. The former ruler of the Dominican Republic, Generalissimo Rafael Trujillo revered Adolf Hitler and wished to "whiten" his country as he was convinced that the Haitians threatened the complexion of his countrymen and by becoming ingrained in the fabric of Dominica, the Haitians would marry and mongrelize the natives. In fact, Haiti and the Dominican Republic are populated by people who descended from Africa as slaves and have nearly identical ancestries. However, on account of their lighter skin, many Dominicans tend to view their darker skinned Haitian neighbours as inferior. Trujillo claimed that the Dominicans came from the mighty Spain, whereas the Haitians came from the darkest Africa.

*The Farming of Bones* (1999) is a fictionalized recast of the 1937 genocide, of between 15,000 and 18,000 Haitian émigré population in the Dominican Republic, which was orchestrated by the Dominican President, Generalissimo Rafael Trujillo Molina. To escape their country's abject poverty, Haitians poured out into the Dominican Republic to work as cane cutters or domestic helps. Amabelle Désir, the narrator, orphaned at a young age, is a housemaid for the Dominicans, Don Ignacio and his daughter, Señora Valencia. Señora Valencia's husband, General Pico Duarte is a staunch supporter of Generalissimo Trujillo. Amabelle's life revolves around her lover, Sebastien Onius, a Haitian sugarcane cutter in the Dominican Republic. Owing to the massacre, Amabelle and Sebastien are separated. Unsure of what has happened to her lover, Amabelle makes her journey back to Haiti, accompanied by Yves, Sebastien's friend. Yves takes her to his home but she finds no solace in Haiti and

after twenty years, returns to the Dominican Republic. Notwithstanding her reunion with Señora Valencia, Amabelle is distraught and she succumbs to the Massacre River as she looks for a new beginning. Danticat in the novel tries to recreate the collective identity of Haitians by remembering and revisiting the past. She challenges the conformist construction of the colonial identity by engaging with the voices of the oppressed.

*The Farming of Bones* revolves around the sugarcane fields, the “colonial gold”, where the Haitians are made to “work like beasts who don’t know what it is to stand” (154). The Dominicans loathe involving in the arduous and low wage work of cutting canes, but the poor economic conditions and the deterioration of the agricultural lands in Haiti lure the Haitians to cross the border. However, once they reach the Dominican Republic, their dreams become nightmares as they are forced to work amidst obnoxious working and living conditions. Wexler in an article on the net opines that the novel is

. . . an exploration of grief, of how loss can become the defining motif of people's lives. It is an investigation of the idea of borders, of how a particular river can divide one country from another, and the living from the dead. Amabelle is kin to that dividing river. She exists as the river does, in a half-life between Haiti and the Dominican Republic, between life and death. And Danticat tells us something history should have already taught us: at borders, there are only stories of loss. (Laura Wexler)

The novel is full of descriptions of the physical injuries and disfigurements of the Haitian cane cutters as their bodies are “crushed, pulped like the cane in the presses at the mill” (48). The “map of scars” (62), which is spotted on their backs gives “a powerful visual symbol with roots in the nineteenth-century slave trade, when the scarred back became one of the most potent and recognizable corporeal signifiers of the violence within the institution of slavery” (Hewett 125). Amabelle knows well about the depredation of the cane field as the sugarcane harvests have hardened Sebastien’s arms. Besides “. . . the cane stalks have ripped apart most of the skin on his shiny black face, leaving him with crisscrossed trails of furrowed scars” (1).

The Dominicans need the labour of the Haitian black peasants to sustain the economy of the Dominican Republic and therefore they facilitate the entry of the Haitians into their country - “However, such an entry does not naturally signify the integration of the black Haitian workers into the social life as a whole. Nor does it connote the dissolution of the class and racial stratification patterns” (Dhar 190). Trujillo wants to mark the Haitians as second class citizens and though there is overwhelming evidence to prove the mixed origins of the Dominicans, he attempts

. . . to reconstruct Dominican nationality by disavowing any and all claims to an African ancestry. Dominicans were reconstituted as White and/or Indian, despite the existence of large populations of dark-skinned Dominicans whose ancestry was clearly linked to the presence of African slaves in the former Spanish colony. (Weir-Soley 167)

Trujillo devises a way to distinguish the Haitians from the Dominicans by forcing them to say the Spanish word *perejil* for ‘parsley’. Those, who are not able to trill the “r” or pronounce the “j” are forced to swallow mouthfuls of parsley and are viciously murdered.

Amabelle bears witness to the atrocities committed in the name of racial intolerance and political power by the military regimes and by the Dominican nationalists. Women are not exempted and they have to face tremendous sufferings. Amabelle loses Sebastien as well as her adopted Dominican family and in the perilous journey back to Haiti, “Amabelle ages – both physically and emotionally. Her loss is great: she loses her lover, her adopted Dominican family, her health, beauty, trust and hope” (Francis 171). She arrives on the Haitian side of the border maimed and mutilated and does not completely recover from her injuries, both physical and emotional. She becomes one of the “‘living dead,’ refusing to live” because she cannot forget the past that has constructed her social and national identity (Martin 249).

Though *The Farming of Bones* is a story of furious violence, horror, despair and unbearable loss, it exposes the fact that life can be a strange gift for people who endure the ravages of the cane fields and the viciousness of the massacre. In the article on the net “The Killing Cane Fields”, Jacqueline Brice-Finch remarks that in “*The Farming of Bones* Danticat portrays the resilience and fortitude of a much-maligned but steadfastly heroic people” and the novel is a tribute to the valour and doughty spirit of those who escaped the nightmarish experiences. One understands the terror, persecution and despair of those who are maimed, slaughtered or deported. Though one sympathizes and empathizes with Amabelle’s plight as she survives unimaginable atrocities, one admires her spirit and mourns her losses and applauds her endurance.

Amabelle is a gritty survivor because when her parents became victims to the river, she survives and secondly during the massacre when thousands of people are killed, she survives but she is only a shell of her former strong and beautiful self. After Amabelle loses Sebastien to the mayhem, she is fortunate to have got Yves as a replacement. Amabelle grieves “for who I was, and even more for what I’ve become” (99). Although Amabelle and Yves try to move on from the past during their daily lives, they cannot escape the reality of their nightmares.

When Amabelle and Yves are healed, Yves offers to take Amabelle to his home. Actually Amabelle gets protection from Yves and his mother Man Rapadou. Upon arrival in the city, Amabelle and Yves settle in the home of Yves and try to rebuild their lives. While Yves finds solace by working in his father’s fields, Amabelle takes up sewing to support herself and to fend off the painful memories. Sewing is used in the novel as a metaphor for memory and for survival. She stitches threads of memory together, piercing together the narrative and at the same time sewing together the fragments of her life in order to understand what has happened and thereby she survives. Each stitch, she sews into a piece of fabric brings her closer to the word ‘survival’. Over the next decades, Amabelle and Yves survive and endure, but never recover fully from the horrors and losses of the massacre.

In any catastrophe, survivors like Amabelle carry the greatest burden. She often wonders why she has survived and why the others have not and for the rest of her life, she tries to figure out a new purpose for herself. In the end, she surrenders to the river and Weir-Soley notes that Amabelle begins “her healing process and reactivate her spiritual life-force that had been driven underground by the trauma of the massacre” (180). Weir-Soley further states:

Amabelle's return to Alegria signals a desire for healing. But first she has to confront the past, make her peace with it, and surrender it in the telling of her story to Metres Dlo. Amabelle's ability to tell her own story, instead of having others tell it for her and to her, is a symbol of her reawakened spirituality, her psychological healing and her growth from girl to fully actualized woman....The same river that holds the bones of her murdered people, her drowned parents, her friend Odette, must be where she goes to find wholeness. (180)

By entering the water, Amabelle accepts the past, remembering who she is and where she comes from. As the past is painful, she remembers her dream that Sebastien once said, “it takes patience....to raise a setting sun” (283). Now after twenty-four years of darkness, she patiently looks for the dawn. In spite of having undergone a lot of sufferings, she waits to see the rays of the rising sun. She seems to have forgiven what has been done to her and wants to see a dawn and a new day. She is accompanied to the river by a mad professor, whose life has been irrevocably changed by the massacre. Amabelle recognizes a kindred soul in him and speaks the final words of the novel, “He, like me, was looking for the dawn” (310). Amabelle recognizes him as a survivor and like her, he wishes to move forward amidst the aftermath of trauma. Hewett feels that a new identity has been created and a new self is created out of the loss and though she succumbs to the Massacre River, she gives birth to a new self.

Despite their agony, the other survivors too show great strength. One of the survivors even states, “I'm one of those branches whose roots reach the bottom of the earth. They can cut down my branches, but they will never uproot the tree. The roots are too strong, and there are too many (212). Regardless of their experiences that could have broken their spirit, the survivors feel they should go on living. Yves tells Amabelle “...the more I see people die, the more I want to guard my own life (239). Despite the strength of the human spirit, the human body is fragile. The marked, scarred bodies of the wounded and disabled prevent them and those around them from forgetting what has happened. Among the handful of those who put up a strong fight is Tibon. In “At the Crossroads: Disability and Trauma in *The Farming of Bones*”, Hewett writes, Tibon's story is

. . . a story of strength and survival: when the Dominicans attacked him, he survived a jump off a high cliff. His limp, we learn, is caused by this fall, when the sea, “more like a big machete than water,” slices his ankles (175). He evades yet more Dominicans by swimming to a sea cave and hiding until nightfall, when he begins his long walk to safety. Tibon's mantra is one of survival: “I say now and until my last breath, if I die, I die on my feet” (175).

As a survivor, he is also a fighter. When Amabelle and her fellow Haitian travelers are attacked by a crowd in Dajabon, he viciously charges his assailants, sinking his teeth into a teenager's neck and refusing to be pried away. His attack is unexpected, and although he is killed, he dies fighting – once again disrupting any expectation that being disabled means weak. (139-40)

Father Romain is another victim who endures a lot of agony. Jailed for helping the Haitians to escape to Haiti, he suffers madness because of torture in prison. Father Romain explains:

“It took more than prayers to heal me after the slaughter.... It took holding a pretty and gentle wife and three new lives against my chest.... It took a love closer to the earth, closer to my body, to stop my tears. Perhaps I have lost, but I have also gained an ever greater understanding of things both godly and earthly.” (272)

*The Farming of Bones* is a vivid documentation of one of the worst human rights abuses that the world has witnessed. The various tortures, the Haitians suffer range from stuffing their mouths with peppered parsley, to hanging them. In addition, the Haitians are offered the choice of leaping over a cliff, facing soldiers with bayonets or being beheaded by a machete. Despite these unbearable atrocities and spitefulness, many Haitians survive and they bear witness to the courage they have shown in overcoming so many obstacles as they have the indomitable will power to continue to survive. Thus Danticat's novel is a moving testament to the Haitians' resilient spirit and a celebration of their survival notwithstanding the horrendous and unbearable agonies.

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