

Anguish of the Depressed: A Study of Edwidge Danticat's *The Dew Breaker*

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Abstract:

This paper attempts to focus on the sufferings and hardships of the Haitians due to the dominant upper hand of the power dynamics in Haiti. The Haitians are left to suffer and are depressed under the influence of the dominant people. This paper also examines the narratives of Haitian history under the Duvalier regime and discusses the terror instilled by the Tonton Macoutes. The researcher concentrates on the poor Haitians' anguish and pain in this novel. It also points out the scar the past traumatic experience has left in their minds. This novel reflects the miserable condition of the marginalised society and the researcher wishes to bring a solution to their state of mind.

Keywords: Haitians, dominant, marginalised, Tonton Macoutes

Danticat, a prominent figure in the literary world, acclaimed by her people as their voice, is herself an immigrant from Haiti. She has beautifully woven the historical narratives of her homeland. This brings uniqueness to her writings and worldwide recognition for her works. She focuses both on the brighter and the darker side of her nation, to make it so true and real. As Tal remarks, "Literature of trauma is written from the need to tell and retell the story of the traumatic experience, to make it 'real' both to the victim and to the community. Such writing serves both as validation and cathartic vehicle for the traumatized" (21). This novel *The Dew Breaker* is an obvious example of such beautiful art. It highlights the political oppression of the dominant powers, especially Tonton Macoutes who are popularly known as dew breakers.

Mr. Beiaime is a former dew breaker who has settled in New York with his wife Anne and daughter Ka. The once dew breaker and a terrible man has now transformed to live a peaceful life in the other world far away from his native Caribbean land. He has changed his identity for his peaceful living as it is described:

Besides, soon after her husband had opened his barbershop, he'd discovered that since he'd lost eighty pounds, changed his name, and given as his place of birth a village deep in the mountains of Leogane, no one asked about him anymore, thinking he was just a peasant who'd made good in New York. He hadn't been a famous "dew breaker", or torturer, anyway, just one of hundreds who had done their jobs so well that their victims were never able to speak of them again" (76, 77).

This passage talks about the dew breaker's effort to change his identity as he opens a barber shop in New York. He has changed his name, and the place he belonged to in the past, and also has lost eighty pounds.

In her daughter's eyes, he is "like the Madonna of humility, contemplating her losses in the dust, or an Ancient Egyptian funerary priest, kneeling with his hands prayerfully folded on his lap" (19). Ka, being a sculptor, produces an amazing sculpture of her father as a victim of his entire past trauma. She describes:

I had never tried to tell my father's story in words before now, but my first completed sculpture of him was the reason for our trip: a three-foot mahogany figure of my father naked, kneeling on a half-foot-square base, his back arched like the curve of a crescent moon, his downcast eyes fixed on his very long fingers and the large palms of his hands. It was hardly revolutionary, rough and not too detailed, minimalist at best, but it was my favourite of all my attempted representations of my father. It was the way I had imagined him in prison. (6)

Ka gives her perspective on her father as she has believed that he was in prison. She makes a very sympathetic representation of what she has known about him. But the truth is, her father was once a torturer and a killer and had doomed the lives of many innocent Haitians. As he says, "Ka, I don't deserve a statue," he says again, this time much more slowly, "not a whole one, at least. You see, Ka, your father was the hunter, he was not the prey" (20). He confesses to his daughter since his conscience troubles him as her daughter believes him to be a poor victim under the terrible clutches of Macoutes.

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The dew breakers are considered brutal and cruel militias in the Duvalier regime. Every victim of the dew breaker has a different story to tell about them. Danticat is aware of Caruth's notion regarding the past traumatic experiences. As Caruth puts it, the reaction to the traumatic event is "occur in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena" (11). Dany, one of the victims of the dew breaker identifies the torturer despite his transformation of being a barber or losing eighty pounds. He hates him so much that he wants to do the same thing to him as they did. When he returns to his homeland to meet his aunt Estina, he tells her that he has seen the murderer of his parents in New York. He also finds her having "nocturnal habits" just like him (98). As he observes, "They were both palannits, night talkers, people who wet their beds, not with urine but with words" (98). They both carry the same kind of wounds all these "twenty-five years" of living (88).

Beatrice Saint Fort, a bridal seamstress is another victim of the dew breaker. She suffers from the past traumatic experience she had encountered by one of the dew breakers. She recalls, "They'd break into your house. Mostly it was at night. But often they'd also come before dawn, as the dew was settling on the leaves, and they'd take you away. He was one of them, the guard" (131). When she was in Haiti, she was asked "to go dancing with him" (131). As she refused him to join, she was arrested and punished by him brutally. She remembers, "He tied me to some type of rack in the prison and whipped the bottom of my feet until they bled. Then he made me walk home, barefoot. On tar roads. In the hot sun" (132).

Aline, the intern from *Haitian American Weekly*, was appalled to find "people like Beatrice existed, men and women whose tremendous agonies filled every blank space in their lives" (137). She is depressed by her past trauma and starts imagining things. She believes that the dew breaker is residing in the same street but when Aline inquires she comes to know that the house has been empty for many years. She is psychologically so disturbed that she stresses "Of course it's empty," Beatrice said ... "That's where he hides out these days, in empty houses" (137).

In the story "The Funeral Singer", the three immigrants Rezia, Mariselle, and Freda share what made them immigrate to New York. Each shares their bitter experiences resonating with the dew breaker or other political powers. Mariselle left her hometown because her husband being a painter "had painted an unflattering portrait of the president" and was shot (172). Rezia was sexually abused by a dew breaker as she remembers, "One night when she was sleeping, a uniformed man walked in. she dug herself into the bed, but it did no good, so she passed out" (173). For Freda, one of the macoutes had taken her father's fish stall and another one took him away. She recollects, "When my father returned, he didn't have a tooth left in his mouth" (172). Such was the cruelty done to the innocent poor lives by the dew breakers or those who are in power.

The preacher was also targeted and killed by the dew breaker since he didn't stick to the script of "The more you suffer on earth, the more glorious your heavenly reward" (184). His wife has been poisoned by someone because of his boldness to stay against the superior power. When he was captured, he was beaten up by the militias and later shot to death by the dew breaker. His life is not valued by anyone even though he is a priest. Thus the poor Haitians are so badly treated by the Macoutes who are otherwise known as dew breakers. As Laub, "the speakers about trauma on some level prefer silence so as to protect themselves from the fear of being listened to – and of listening to themselves" (58)

They are suppressed under their dominant hands and are expected to stay silent. It brings us to the conclusion that these people are made to believe by the Duvalier regime in the concept that the more you suffer on earth the more your heavenly reward will be. Despite their sufferings and hardships, they have this belief of hope for their future. They might have experienced so many trials and conflicts, but they are resilient. They keep going on in their lives after knowing very well that they are bruised and badly beaten up by in their lives. They have the ultimate hope to somehow their lives will change one day.

References:

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