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# Mother Imagery in the Novels of Afro-Caribbean Women, by Simone A. James Alexander

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## Peer Reviewed

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## REVIEWS

### *Literary History and Criticism* edited by Catherine Slawy-Sutton

ALEXANDER, SIMONE A. JAMES. *Mother Imagery in the Novels of Afro-Caribbean Women*. Columbia U of Missouri P, 2001. ISBN 0-8262-1309-X. Pp. 214. \$32.50.

Alexander's work explores the recurring themes of motherhood and mother-daughter relationships in the novels of three Caribbean women authors, Jamaica Kincaid, Maryse Condé, and Paule Marshall, who stand at the forefront of Caribbean writing in the West. Sharing blackness, femaleness, and Caribbeanness, the works of these authors are not only firmly grounded within the black diaspora, but they attempt to give voice to women throughout the world. Alexander appropriately remarks that Kincaid, Condé, and Marshall reside in the United States—ironically in the “colonialist” camp—while maintaining their connections to their homelands—respectively Antigua, Guadeloupe and Barbados. Based on solid scholarship, the author of *Mother Imagery* offers a comparative and critical analysis of these black women's quests and struggles. She argues that in their fiction, the daughter, in search for her own identity and self-realization, is faced with the tensions of “a trichotomous relationship,” that is, a triangular relationship “between the mother and the birthplace, the colonizing territory . . . and the (mythical) existence of a ‘true’ motherland, Africa” (18). In most texts, the relationship of the powerless daughter with the powerful mother is perceived as a colonized one, fraught with alienation and fear, because the mother is equated with the mother country, i.e., the colonial power represented by England, France, or the United States. However, the daughter finally “returns home” to celebrate the mother's culture and the mother's land.

Alexander's study is divided into five chapters of unequal development. The first one analyzes the creativity of these women writers who give voice to their female protagonists through their own personal histories and experiences. Alexander argues that they are creating a new literary genre or “womanist” tradition, which she refers to as “fictional autobiographies.” By transgressing the linearity of the Western narrative structure and by blurring the boundaries between reality, myth, fiction, and history, these fictional autobiographies speak collectively to black women. The subsequent chapters address the complicated relationships between mothers and daughters in narratives mostly written from the perspectives of the daughters, whose authority of authorship, from which depends the development of their identity, is bestowed by the mothers.

Thus the second chapter explores, in Kincaid and Marshall's writings, such aspects as the daughter's denial of sexual initiation, her severance from the mother, her literary training, the kitchen as the metaphor for freedom, etc., within the political context of colonialism. Alexander specifically studies the negotiation for a space of female bonding which, she argues, is “facilitated by a mother (figure), noticeably an older woman, who equips the daughter with life teaching” and frees her from colonial paternalism (48).

The third chapter offers a discussion of Condé's *Heremakhonon* based on a conflicting interpretation of Anderson's well-known concept of "imagined community." In Condé's novel, the absence of a nurturing mother sends the daughter to a desperate quest for an ideal home-space, an "imagined homeland" that Alexander views as devoid of spiritual essence and communal relations.

The fourth chapter focuses on Marshall's novels, and discusses the spiritual return to Africa, the Motherland or mother's land, via the Caribbean. Such return allows the daughter to achieve spiritual "wholeness" against Western cultural practices. In the final chapter, Alexander shows how the three authors, like their protagonists, finally claim their respective mother's lands—"call their nations"—by reviving the historical past through African oral traditions. In calling one's nation, each author not only redefines her new self, but also retraces her family lineage that includes all the peoples of the diaspora.

Although the themes of motherhood and mother-daughter relationships have been much analyzed before in the Afro-Caribbean fiction discussed in *Mother Imagery*, Alexander adds depth and broadened perspectives to the present scholarship. By characterizing these Caribbean women's writings as acts of resistance against Eurocentrist and patriarchal values, Alexander proves that these authors share a common geographic and intellectual Caribbean motherland, and a female cultural space, or mother's land, crucial to our perceptions of a Caribbean cultural unity.

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VIERNE, SIMONE. *Rite, roman, initiation*. Nouvelle édition. Grenoble: PU de Grenoble, 2000. ISBN 2-7061-0952-1. Pp. 192. 110 F.

Simone Vierne, known especially for her work on George Sand and Jules Verne and as a former director of the Centre de recherches sur l'imaginaire of Grenoble's Université Stendhal, has published a new, updated edition of her classic 1973 study, first revised in 1987. Even though some of the sources that the text terms "recent" now date back thirty years or more, the book is a "must read" for anyone interested in the question of initiation.

In the impeccable scholarly documentation (footnotes, bibliography, index), rarely this complete in volumes published in France, Vierne acknowledges her considerable debt to Mircea Éliade. She does not, however, hesitate to disagree with the pioneer in the field: "Mais c'est ici que nous nous séparons en particulier des indications de M. Éliade, au sujet de la 'présence initiatique' dans la littérature" (133). She also refers to a vast array of sources beyond Éliade—sources, for instance, on alchemy and freemasonry.

The main contributions of the Vierne book fall into three categories: the rigorous analysis of the stages of initiation common to its diverse manifestations, a summary chart of these common characteristics, and the assessment of some of the most striking examples of literary appearances of the motif.

Simone Vierne has taken as her corpus examples from many times and places: ancient rites; secret societies; rites of passage at puberty; alchemy; Gnosticism; magicians, blacksmiths, medicine men, or shamans; *compagnonnage*; and freemasonry. From them, she has derived, for this direct contact with the sacred, a "scénario initiatique" (15) in three acts. First comes the preparation of the future