



## CLARA'S "SEXT" : WRITING THE FEMALE BODY IN LEONORA SANSAY'S SECRET HISTORY

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### ABSTRACT

The paper examines Leonora Sansay's *Secret History* with view at highlighting the unique way the author has tackled the issue of woman. Unlike mainstream feminist work, Sansay's text does not merely dwell on the oppression women face from the patriarchal community; rather it highlights women's agency in combating such oppression. Sansay's female characters prove to possess considerable level of power and agency that enable that enables them to resist both the patriarchal as well as colonial subjugation they face. This power comes basically from the female body. In line with Helen Cixous' call on women to celebrate their bodies as a sign of empowerment, female characters in Sansay's work clearly use their body and sexuality as a means of deconstructing the colonial-patriarchal agenda that govern their lives.

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## INTRODUCTION

Leonora Sansay's *Secret History* was published in 1808 under the title, *Secret History; or, the Horrors of St Domingo, in a Series of Letters, written by a Lady at Cape Francois, To Colonel Burr, late Vice-President of the United States, Principally During the Command of General Rochambeau*. As its original title indicates, it is an epistolary novel set in the French colony, Saint Domingue, what is now Haiti, and highlights events in the aftermath of the slave revolution in 1791. In more particular terms, the novel takes place in the period between 1802 and 1803 as the revolution turned into a war for independence. These events highlight women's plight within postcolonial and patriarchal oppression. However, Sansay's work does not tackle the issue of woman in an orthodox manner. In other words, the author does not merely embark on reflecting the plight of subjugated women under the shackles of patriarchy. Rather, she provides a unique reading of women in which she identifies the existence of a considerable level of power and agency which is primarily located in women's bodies. This paper aims at elucidating how, through utilizing their bodies; Sansay's female characters are capable of controlling their male counterparts, attaining their independence and subverting patriarchal hegemony.

## Theoretical Framework

In "The Laugh of the Medusa" (1976), the French critic and philosopher, Helen Cixous, assertively claims that women have been trained to negate and hide both their bodies and their voices by virtue the "superegoized structure in which she has always occupied the place reserved for the guilty" (880). The patriarchal society instills in women the feeling of "guilt" regarding their bodies and sexuality in order to hinder them from expressing their sexual desires, thus depriving them of the major source of their empowerment. She bluntly contends that that the rarity of female writers' texts comes from the fact that "so few women have as yet won back their body" (886). In rejoinder she calls for women to reject the ban body and voice, and thus exhorts them to write their bodies, producing what she calls as the woman's "sexts," which she describes as "insurgent writing" (880). Cixous contends that this model of exploring the female body with words would empower women by changing gender constructions in the "phallogocentric" discourse and by creating multiple languages for women to express themselves. By writing through the female body, women underscore the significance of the phallus and its abominable ramifications on women's status.

Within this discourse, the woman becomes the subject of the text rather than the object. Additionally, the female body, which has always been a source of entrapment for women, is employed as a means of emancipation from the patriarchal limitations. That is why Cixous says: "Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies" (875).

## DISCUSSION

Although it was published much before Cixous' text, Sansay's novel is a best embodiment of women's empowerment as described by Cixous, thus proving to be a text that is ahead of its time. The novel is written by a woman, about women, who in turn perform the act of reciprocal writing. In more particular terms, the novel consists of letters sent basically from Mary to Colonel Burr. In the same vein, part of these letters also comes as an exchange between the two sisters, Mary and Clara. This epistolary tradition strikes a chord with Cixous' ideas as she calls for "writing, from and toward women". She affirms that "it is by writing, from and toward women, and by taking up the challenge of speech which has been governed by the phallus, that women will confirm women in a place other than that which is reserved in and by the symbolic, that is, in a place other than silence" (881). In exchanging letters and telling their stories, the two sisters do clearly "write" their bodies and "put (themselves) into the text – as into the world" (875). Clara is the best example on this aspect. It is her sense of the power of her body that empowers her to escape her husband and attain emancipation. She recognizes that she has great potential that has been usurped by her husband. That is why she escapes him and goes on to use her bodily wiles against men. Instead of being a subject of desire for her husband and General Rochambeau's attempts, she turns her body into a weapon to use it against them. As she becomes a coquette, Clara proves to possess latent powerful nature that she skillfully uses for her benefit. She invests in her feminine power to turn the table on men and attain self definition. Clara's body, which is originally viewed as a colony to be occupied by the men around her, becomes a point of strength through which she turns men into puppets in her hands seeking her.

Clara's journey in her body concurs with Cixous' call on woman to "return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her ... to her sexuality, to her womanly being, giving her access to her native strength" (880). Clara does possess this "native strength" which victimizes men, especially her husband, St. Louise, and General Rochambeau. For both men, Clara becomes the one and only concern so much so that they neglect their other targets. In this regard, Mary says that St. Louis found an enemy in "every man that approached (Clara)" (Sansay 1808, 186). His major concern was possessing Clara and fighting the "enemies" that were competing with him for Clara. In the same vein, General Rochambeau ignores his concern of managing the colony and dedicates his time to possessing Clara and fighting her husband. Ultimately, his obsession with Clara leads to the loss of huge number of his men and the success of the slave's rebellion. Clara's power compels General Rochambeau to find seclusion in another town where he has no power or even voice. He admits that her "power" turns him into slave and that she possesses "all the powers of magic to enslave" (Sansay 1808, 94). In conformity to General Rochambeau's belief, Clara is aware of her power, which she uses against him;

creating a change in the master-slave paradigm between them. Rather than being the slave, she evolves as the master, enslaving her own superior. As a result of Clara's power, General Rochambeau ignores everything related to his task and focuses on one major goal, that of possessing Clara, ironically turning himself into a property for her. This goes in line with Nancy Armstrong's (1987) argument that "sexual relations (are) the site for changing power relations between classes and cultures as well as between genders and generations" (10).

In the same vein, the English critic, Kathryn Ledbetter (2009), contends that the major source of women's "queenly power" comes from her "beauty". She argues that "a woman's beauty can produce such bondage in men may empower women readers in ways that some feminists would like to ignore" (120). Clara is superbly competent in employing the power of her beauty. It is this feminine aspect that empowers her to climb the ladder of success and achieve a sense of self-actualization. That is why she is distressed that "the beauty of the bosom....is lost." (Sansay 1808, 109). Clara is not happy that the dress hides an essential part of the feminine "beauty" of her body. She is aware that her body is a weapon in the face of male hegemony; hiding it will reduce her power. Evidently, in her deviant sexuality, Clara is far from serving patriarchal agenda or meeting men's need. She uses her feminine wiles for her own purposes, and by doing so she victimizes many men. In addition, in her journey for self-definition through sexuality, Clara is never supervised by any male. She chooses her path independently of any influence of man. In this regard, it is indicative that, in speaking about the influence of Clara's body, Sansay uses military language. Love becomes "colonial warfare (which) ultimately offers Clara a surprising escape route from her husband" (qtd in Dillon 2006, 81). Noticing her sister's influence, Mary observes Clara's delight "with a conquest she now considered assured" (Sansay 1808, 32).

By highlighting the way a woman can use her body for her own personal purpose, *Secret History* provides ripe environment for elaborating on the issue of celebration of the body as proposed by Cixous. As mentioned above, Clara does "write" her body, which becomes a text that she authors and presents for men to explore. In this exploration, men do not interpret or rewrite this body; on the contrary, they become as part of it. Clara's "sext" appropriates and affects its audience to create in them the desired influence. In the language of Cixous, it is the "emancipation of the marvelous text of her self "that makes her the example of the "New Woman" (878,880). Having fully realized her agency and independence from man, Clara strongly believes in her ability of living alone, or alternatively with female company. That is why, in the first place, she escapes her husband and chooses a female companion in Cobre, where there is "the image of the Virgin (and) the faith of these people in her power is implicit" (Sansay 1808, 195). Dillon (2006) elaborates on the significance of the image of Virgin Mary as it "embodies an ideal of female social reproduction without the assistance of men" (99). Evidently, Clara manages to distance herself from men and establish her own homosocial community with women, represented by Virgin Mary. As such, Clara attempts to create a counterpart to the phallogocentric society. Hers is a society that positions the woman as the center of the power relation between the two sexes; it is matriarchy rather than patriarchy. In this way, the novel creates a society that is

predominantly female; a maternal society that has own codes and beliefs without any influence from man.

On the other hand, Clara's influence is so palpable on other women. Her revolutionary power clearly influences her sister, Mary, who exhibits a considerable level of agency and yearning for independence. To begin with, the majority of the events of Clara's story come through the voice of Mary. Just like Clara leaves St. Louis to live with a female company, Mary leaves St. Jago de Cuba to go to Jamaica with a woman. More importantly, she defends Clara's status as a coquette. Mary speaks of Clara as "proud and high spirited" and a woman who "will submit to no control" (Sansay 1808, 45) and clearly states that her "fate is ... intimately connected with that of (her) sister." (62). As Dillon (2006) points out, Mary creates a "a revolutionary ethos of social reproduction that is predicated on feminized Creole values of mobility and internal sensibility" (99). Mary's trenchant indictment of male hegemony and female dependence on man comes later as she becomes privy to the story of Clarissa's mother and father. Commenting on the father's harshness and sense of carelessness to the mother, she says "How terrible is the fate of a woman thus dependent on a man who has lost all sense of justice, reason, or humanity" (Sansay 1808, 130).

Similar to Clara, Mary's heartfelt desire for female independence and solidarity is palpable as she writes to Clara asking her to about the possibility of going back to Philadelphia, "where, in peaceful obscurity we may live, free from the cares which have tormented you, and filled myself with anxiety" (Sansay 1808, 184). Mary is not merely echoing her sister's voice, she is also becoming a leading voice for Clara. That is why once her upcoming rejoinder with her sister is impeded by Don Alonzo, she writes to Clara warring her to "fly from the danger that surrounds (her)" (215). Sansay links this patriarchal "danger" with the colonial one. That is why a clear parallel is made between women's revolt against the constraints of both patriarchy as well as colonialism. For example, the text is replete with diction indicating struggle, like "powers," "enslave," and "conquest," interchangeably referring to women's struggle against male oppression and the slaves' struggles against the colonizer. More interestingly, it is not a mere coincidence that Clara leaves St. Louis in the middle of the slave's revolt. In addition, the first time the slaves recognized their "their own strength" (Sansay 1808, 34) comes after Clara's "victory" over General Rochambeau.

Within this context, it is clear that Clara's resistance to male hegemony is parallel to women's rebellion against the colonizer. Just like Clara realizes her power over her male

oppressor, the slaves acknowledge their own strength against the European colonizer. As such, Sansay shows that women are endowed with much power and courage that may help them in combating oppression. These women are totally independent of man and encourage each other to repudiate male hegemony situated within the phallogocentric as well as the colonial ideology.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, unlike common stream feminist texts, *Secret History* does not embark on lamenting the misery of women within the man-made society. Rather, it locates a strong sense of agency and potential within women. Through employing the female epistolary environment, Sansay shows how writing and the free expression and practice of female body and sexuality empowers women and contributes to their emancipation. This power enables women to extricate themselves from the shackles of the debilitating society and define themselves in the center of all aspects of life. It is through the free expression and writing of her bodily desires that Clara achieves self definition and creates a reversal of gender roles. Along with her sister, Clara writes her body; and by doing so, she rewrites patriarchy. This is reiterated towards the ending of the novel where the two sisters unite together, and Burr is only acknowledged as a friend; in other words, he is an equal rather than a master and an oppressor. This all proves Cixous' thesis that through celebrating their bodies and the free practice and expression of their sexuality, women may turn the table on men and thus emerge as the real master in the game of power between them. In the language of Cixous (1976), what Sansay does in her novel is "invent the impregnable language that wreck(s) partitions, classes, and rhetorics, regulations and codes" (886).

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