

# Healing the Bruised and Mothering the Motherless: The *Ájé* in Elizabeth Nunez's *Bruised Hibiscus*

by

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This paper will explore the role and impact of mothers in their absence and presence. This discussion will be informed by an analysis of the African notion of *Ájé*, also known as The Mothers. In this story about two women who are lifelong friends separated by circumstances and brought together by a similar circumstance, each having to do with a brutality against women, the mothers play a critical role in their daughters' lives. While Zuela's (Daughter) mother is dead, her memory continues to play a pivotal role in Zuela's mothering and determination. Childless Rosa's life has been significantly impacted by the presence of her mother and Mary Christophe, her "nanny" whom she loves and rejects as a child but seeks out later in her life for help. Though proclaiming not to be an obeah woman, Mary Christophe has healing powers, and the scar on her face which Rosa once saw as a butterfly serves as a symbol of Oshun, African deity of love and fertility and head of the *Ájé*.

Embedded within Elizabeth Nunez' haunting and poignant telling of the story of two childhood friends, Zuela/Daughter and Rosa Appleton, who witness the rape of an eleven-year old girl wearing red lipstick, high heels, and a string of pearls by a man old enough to be her father who commands her to "beg for it" are the Orisha, the Ancestors, and the Mothers encoded in symbols, colors, divination, images, numbers, religious and spiritual beliefs. Every description of clothing, pain, weather, prayers, vomit, mothers, vegetation, divination, passion, wind, numbers, names, stories, motherhood, sisterhood, power, myths reflect the African spiritual tradition of Yoruba.

*Bruised Hibiscus* revolves around two murders: that of Paula Singh, a white woman, by her Indian husband, a doctor, who takes out her heart and stitches her back up, whose “head, her face protruding from the brown burlap coconut bag, gnawed open perhaps by the very fish that had nibbled away her eyes, lips and tongue” (Nunez 5), and that of Melda, a black woman, who is cut up and fed to the hogs, “a carcass chopped into tiny bits and mingled with food in their trough, with the remains of dasheen, cassava yam and rotting potatoes” (39). Not addressing the violence against women, the reporting simply relegates it to crimes of passion, described as “flagrante delicto,” “man woman business” by the husbands. The novel’s opening introduces the various themes that permeate the entire story—violence against women, passion, jealousy, and motherless daughters. Through her incorporation of Spirit, Nunez offers an alternative narrative of resistance to the colonizing impact of the European presence and Christianity. These references are not unexpected in a novel set in Trinidad, a country populated by enslaved West Africans who brought with them their spiritual beliefs and practices.

Central to the decoding of this text is an understanding of Ifa, an ancient African spiritual system that is comprised of a Supreme Being, Orisha, the Sacred Empowered Mothers/Àjé, a reverence for the Ancestors, divination, initiation, belief in the power of the spoken word, and the intimate connection between cosmic consequences and everyday living. Making appearances throughout the novel are Orisha Shango, deity of divine truth, justice, and retribution, symbolized by the double-edged axe, thunder, lightning, fire, and the colors red and white. However, most significant in this story about mothers are Oshun, deity of divine beauty, fertility, and mirrored self-reflection, symbolized by the river, butterflies, honey, gold, perfume, flowers, colors yellow and orange; Oya, deity of change, strong winds, storms, guardian to the cemetery, and deep colors purple, maroon, brown, symbolized by the number 9, wind, graves, masks; and Yemanja, deity of divine motherhood, the all-encompassing mother, symbolized by the ocean, fish, and the colors blue and white. While the Orisha make individual appearances, the primary spiritual entity is the Mothers, also called the Àjé. Teresa Washington notes, “Àjé is decidedly woman-owned and administered Female ownership of Àjé can be attributed to the life-giving, highly spiritual and sacred womb; indeed, Our Mothers’ wombs are literary doorways to our existence and terrestrial origin-sites of Àjé” (17). While the Àjé are a force of creation, they are also a force of justice and retribution, which is the role the Àjé play in the characters’ lives.

However, the Mothers is not an energy separate from the deities; the Àjé are comprised of Oshun, Yemanja, and Oya, each playing a significant role in the lives of the characters; Oshun is considered the leader of the Àjé. Oshun is deity of fertility. She’s associated with love, magic and healing. Yemanja, the “protective energy of the feminine force,” is considered the quintessential mother of all whose spiritual power and energy is located in the womb. She “communes with her children, providing balm and solace for their pains” (Bess Montgomery 112).

As guardian of the cemetery, Oya represents change. Her strength and energy are manifested in the wind, which symbolizes a “time of upheaval or sudden change of a destructive and chaotic but necessary nature.”

The novel’s motherless daughters—Zuela’s mother is dead; Rosa’s mother isn’t—need the Sacred Empowered Mothers and their healing embrace. If not for the disruption of the transatlantic slave trade, they would have known of the Àjé and how to access their energy. They would have made offerings of honey, flowers, perfume, oranges, eggplants, kiwi, plums, dark grapes, watermelon to Oshun, Yemanjá, and Oya. They would have lit red candles and made offerings of apples and hot peppers to Shango and asked for divine justice and retribution for themselves and the murdered women. There would have been no need for conjuring woman Mary Christophe, “a woman with a butterfly on her face” (18) to disavow her employment of Obeah: “I ent no obeahwoman, you know” (15). Rosa’s husband Cedric derisively dismisses its efficacy: “You believe in soucouyant and la jablesse and duene. Long after black people stop believing in foolishness like that, you Trinidadian white people still holding on” (15), Mary Christophe expresses the same sentiment: “You believe in all this: obeah, voodoo, miracles, statues, blood in communion bread. Me? I have no religion. People is my religion” (106). However, despite her proclamation, she makes a potion to heal Cedric: “I have no uses for obeah. Is something to calm him down, to cool the pain in his belly” (115). Even Ena, the woman hired to cook for Cedric, disavows obeah and evidences the devastating impact of Christianity on traditional African practices: “I don’t practice obeah no more,’ she said. ‘I am a church-going, God-fearing Christian woman” (180).

Thus without the names of their African gods, the Trinidadians call upon the Catholic gods offered to them by the colonizers. Nunez depicts this divine spiritual energy as the Catholic Our Lady of Fatima whose shrine Zuela and Rosa run to in hopes of cleansing the murderous thoughts that pervaded their hearts upon hearing their husbands’—Chinaman and Cedric—callous dismissal of the value of the murdered women’s lives. Without their ancestral deities, the two women who “had played together as girls, who had long ago witnessed behind a hibiscus bush a scene so brutal, so dehumanizing that they lost all innocence, though at the time they were just twelve, would, a day after hearing the news, each resolve separately to go make the pilgrimage” about colonial exploitation, deliberate violence, revenge, and punishment.

Each time the people call Appleton’s name, they are invoking the energy of Shango, whose favorite offering is red apples, which is fitting because they are in need of justice and retribution. As the overseer of the sugarcane plantation, Thomas Appleton represents the colonizers, their best interests, ill-gained wealth, and their arrogance. His wife Clara Appleton believes “her people, she had often said, had a right to colonize the Caribbean. They had won the islands fairly and squarely in wars. *To the victor belongs the spoils*” (199). These spoils have created rampant poverty: “Two children, a boy and a girl. . . Their bellies were swollen from malnutrition. The boy was clad only in a dirty undershirt, the girl in pink panties so big for her that they reached up to the tiny nipples on her chest” (99). Further, they have destroyed the natural economy:

That same man who try to pull you away from me is not a bad man. He work every day to feed his children, but is no use. See the flower caning on the seats? Is he that make that...He carve everything out piece by piece by hand until he finish it. Slow work, but is good work. Yet and still it take too much time you people, too much time. You want everything English time. Quick, quick. And the black people in the valley following you white people now, and what he make no good for them either. They want what English people have, what English people like—English things. (104).

Thus Appleton is responsible for much of the anger that is seething like a cauldron: “but people here tired. They tired of having nothing and then looking down on you in the valley: big cars and everything. . . . Last time people watch you with bad eye. Next time they do something if you don’t change” (104). Further, Thomas Appleton abuses his power by having sex with “only man he like—little men and young boys” (112), socializing with them “*always in the cane field, harvest time or planting time*” (113), cloaking it under the guise of “socializing it with them at night prevents strikes” (106). By dying “he had done a big favor that day for a lot of East Indian men in the cane field. ‘They will sleep better knowing he’s six feet under’” (130).

As an Appleton, Rosa suffers the brunt of people’s anger. By daring to go into the street oblivious to the seething cauldron, she evidences her complete lack of awareness of their misery and pain: “. . . but she took no notice of the pain, nor of the women—their heavy bosoms drooping low over their swollen bellies, their arms lost in white suds trailing down the sides of their washtubs—who looked up when she passed, a hardness around their mouths that should have stopped, but did not, nor the half-naked children in tattered undershirts who streamed out of one-room houses” (41). Mary Christophe admonishes her: “You people take too much for granted. . . . Not you in particular, but you in particular could feel their anger. When people tired, they don’t stop to figure out if you the particular one that broke their back yesterday. They see you all as one—one enemy. You get your blows just like the rest. They don’t know you marry one of us” (104). In a deliberate act of rebellion and revenge, “the harvest fires came soon after, though the people said the first one was not started by the planters but by an Indian man who lived with his son and a black woman in the house where Rosa and Zuela had seen a boy talking to the sky” (67). In a display of callous indifference to the pain of others, Thomas Appleton proclaims, “He knew the man. He was an ungrateful sort, he said. The most dangerous kind. He had often given him a ride on his horse to the rum factory” (67).

Also, because Rosa is an Appleton, Cedric, so ashamed of his father he changes his last name to that of his mother’s maiden name DesVignes, deliberately marries her in order to punish her, to debase her out of revenge for his brokenhearted father, who cast aside by Thomas Appleton, commits suicide by drowning: “He didn’t swim out in the wide ocean because he loved India. Somebody broke his heart, and it was not his wife nor any other woman, either” (127).

Cedric remembers with a burning humiliation the eagerness with which his father rushes to Thomas Appleton: “He signaled the Indian man to climb on the horse behind him. The man mounted the horse and wrapped his arms around the Englishman’s torso. The Englishman turned around and patted his hands. The emotion he expressed had the intensity of a kiss” (67). Because Rosa is a daughter of an overseer, Cedric hates her, “not you in particular. You people, you people that make his people suffer” (198). Rosa represents to Cedric all that he is not, despite his education. With keen insight, Mary Christophe explains Cedric’s hatred: “That husband of yours hate himself more than he hate you. And the truth is that he hate you more for making it so easy for him to hate himself. Now he looking for a way to pay you back, to make you suffer” (109). Thus Cedric “had stalked her for weeks” (124), plotting “his revenge, mapping out the best way to make Rosa pay for snarling him in that spider’s web that had now spun past his mother to his cousin Headley, who then wrapped it around his neck with a wink and a smile: *Indian men like your father. . . . Cedric began to plan her debasement*” (171).

However, Rosa is not an Appleton. While Thomas Appleton was “doing more than socializing . . . and not with women” (106), his wife was sleeping with a black man: “She ask him what she supposed to do when he in the cane field. He say whatever, but not with a black man. But it too late for that already” (113). Because of his intentional abuse of Rosa, accusing her of infidelity by comparing her to both Paula Inge and Melda, Cedric experiences Shango’s wrath first when he eats the meal prepared by Rosa: “The second the meat touched his tongue, the scenario he had tried to stage with casual indifference was shattered. Any pretensions he had to gentlemanly elegance were lost in that instant when the meat, saturated with pepper, set his mouth on fire. He lurched for the jug on the table, and not waiting to pour the juice into a glass, he clutched the sides of the jug and drank from it directly. A stream of yellow sticky liquid trailed down his arms to his elbows” (52-53). This wrath is further evidenced by the description of his pain: “blue points of fire pierced the lining of his stomach like a blowtorch. This time he could not hold back the screams that mounted in his throat” (59). Not taking note, Cedric threatens her: “If you ever lied to me like, Rosa . . . if you ever lied like that, what Dalip Singh did would look like child’s play.’ He smiled, a think, razor-thin, line across his face” (54). Cedric also ridicules Rosa for her saint name Nympha, using it to justify his accusations and to laugh at her for not knowing what it meant: “Like Paula Inge. You are all nymphs. Sly. Innocent with your siren call. Mad for black meat” (56). As Cedric begins to choke from the chunks of meat he stuffed in his mouth and pleads with his eyes for her to help him, Rosa does not move and appropriately makes herself believe that it was because she was witnessing an act of God that forbade her interference. . . . As it was, she was indeed witnessing an act of God, for only an act of God could have caused Cedric to collapse over the table in such a way that he would strike his diaphragm so forcefully against its edge that the remaining air in his lungs would push a powerful stream up his windpipe and blow the meat lodged in his throat out of his open mouth. (57)

Reminding Rosa of their presence and blessings, Shango and Oshun reveal themselves in the weather: “The morning brought rain and the sweet smells of sugar cane, guava, and soursop. The night before, Rosa had slept in her bed alone listening to the thunder grumble across the dry cane fields and the thirsty cicadas screech for water as they birthed themselves from their brittle shells” As Cedric paces the floor all night, the rain comes as if to wash away Cedric’s vile accusations: “All that night, too, she had heard Cedric pacing the floor beneath, back and forth, back and forth, until just before dawn, just before the rain shower came down, he shouted, ‘Bitch, it was pork. Bitch, you fed me pork.’ Then sleep came to her, sweet and peaceful. She felt her power restored” (57).

Like Cedric, Chinaman/Ho Sang is visited by Shango in retribution for his cruel treatment of Zuela. Violating his promise to her father to care for her, Chinaman rapes her when she’s eleven. Despite their ten children, he refuses to provide enough beds or food for them or even new shoes for Daughter when she outgrows hers. Addicted to opium to mitigate the memories of his murdered wife and child whom he left unburied in order to escape, Chinaman even forces his son to blow opium into his mouth. Once, while in a drug-induced state, he fails to recognize his daughter and rapes her believing her to be Zuela. Accompanied by Oya, Shango punishes Ho Sang: “He had not blown out the candle. Its yellow flame guarded him, insulated him, protected him from their fury then a wind—quiet, deceptive stalking the ground like a hungry cat . . . . The candle flame flickered and dimmed” (254). He’s visited by the ghosts of his unburied wife and child: “*You should have come for us. You should have taken us with you . . . . Our blood is on your hands*”(256). Falling deeper into the hole of his tortured memory, Shango’s “fire licked his heels. Was he to burn for her too? The fire scorched his thighs. It reached past his waist. Somewhere in his braid he heard Tong Lee’s voice. ‘The blood will never leave you till you ask for forgiveness.’ Now the flames engulfed him; the fire ravaged him . . . . Smoldering, ashen gray on the outside, bubbling red in the inside, Ho Sang groped for his pipe on the wooden box, relit it, inhaled, and sunk into the welcoming arms of Death-still-living. . . . Chinaman’s scream was bloodcurdling” (257).

Making her first appearance in the breeze that blows across the Port-of-Spain harbor and down Nelson Street lifting the heat and refreshing, Oya arrives at the precise moment the “germ lodged in Zuela’s soul broke loose and sprouted roots”(8). This moment marks a major shift in Zuela from passive acceptance to a determination to change her life and the lives of her children. Oya’s breeze also provides a welcome diversion that provides a shield of protection for Clara from her husband’s deliberately cruel accusation of infidelity: “The next moment she was grateful for the wind that had left Nelson Street and blown through the cane field, banging shut the kitchen windows, so hard they they sprang open and struck the walls again, making their own echoes. For Cedric didn’t see the blood rush from Rosa’s face” (13). Offering her embrace, Oya’s “cool salt wind that blew off the Gulf of Paria across the filth of Nelson Street turned fresh and took on the odor of candy sweet stalks of sugar cane “(12). Oya’s meandering wind in what can be described as an embrace “curled softly around palm-roofed mud huts, picking up the stink of manure, to be sure, but also the pungent odor of curry and dahl from black cast-iron pots and the rich, earthy smell of the land” (12).

When Rosa remembers her childhood friend Daughter, she does so only after the memory “loosened the connection in nine days of rosaries to the Blessed Mother, buried Daughter the child now a woman called Zuela, in a righteous resentment of Cedric three years deep” (43). That she remembers Daughter after nine days of rosaries reflects the presence of Oya, who is symbolized by the number 9.

Upon Chinaman’s learning of the murder of Paula Singh, it is appropriate that Oshun makes her appearance, for it is this moment that Zuela, called so after her home Venezuela, determines to run to the hill to the shrine of Our Lady of Fatima. Chinaman stops counting in the middle of the metal pole and his fingers clutched “the yellow bead in the middle of the metal pole” (7). Tellingly, it is the on the yellow bead that he stops counting. The sugar cane plantation that employs Clara’s father, Thomas Appleton, is aptly named Orange Grove, a name that is evocative of Oshun’s sweetness and color. During its heyday, like Oshun’s flower, “Orange Grove bloomed” (17). The cane fields, for the motherless Daughter, were a “magical place for Zuela...There, lulled by the heat of the sun and the intoxicating perfume of sugar, they told each other nursery stories” (65). While Rosa’s were fairy tales she had read: *Red Riding Hood*, *Cinderella*, *Beauty and the Beast*; Zuela’s, no less fictional (for so she believed, in those spellbound days), of a little girl who planted marigolds on her [deceased] mother’s grave. ‘They shone like the sun’ she said. ‘Even in the night’, so the mother had light to see where the little girl was” (66).

While Orange Grove is indeed a real place, its name serves as a reminder of Oshun’s existence for her diasporic sons and daughter. Rosa’s seeming uncontrollable passion, a desire that “consumed her and terrified her, too, for the power it had given her since she was twelve, when she used to lie on her belly at nights rubbing her bare skin against the hardness of her stiff mattress” (19) suggests her as a daughter of Oshun. Further, Rosa’s hair is described as “honey brown” (26).

Rediscovering each other during their desperate journey up the hill to the shrine of Our Lady of Fatima, Rosa and Zuela’s meeting reflects the presence of both Oshun and Yemanja. Subtly referencing Oshun, Zuela is wearing a faded yellow dress, and echoing Oshun, Rosa’s remembrance of her childhood friend is framed by the sound a bell, Oshun’s instrument: “She shoved her way through the masses of sweaty bodies thronging up the hill, pursued by that one split second of recognition, clear, precise, and sharp. Unmistakable. She had seen those eyes before; she had known that face well once before. *Daughter. Daughter.* The sound clear as a bell resounded in her ears. *Daughter. Daughter.* Her child’s voice calling” (41). Zuela’s thin body hosting a stomach the size of a watermelon—a traditional offering for Yemanja— from bearing 10 children in as many years suggests Yemanja, the all-encompassing mother. Like Yemanja, Zuela lives for her children. Vowing to protect them from her life and from their father Chin, whom she calls Chinaman, she is, like Yemanja, the quintessential mother:

'I don't say no when you do it to me,' she began. 'Seventeen years. I let you lift up my dress when you want to and I don't say no.' Her voice was soft and steady. 'Seventeen years you take me as a child and you make child with me. You call me Daughter and then you make me your woman. Seventeen years I say nothing. I never refuse you. Even you make me do it right up till the night I making baby, I never say nothing. . . . I let you take your thing and jump on me like a dog. . . . But when you make Alan a zombie like you . . . I make hell for you like you make for me, a hell like that hell you see in your sleep.' (88-89)

Having lost the protection of her mother and thus sold to Chinaman, whose hairless eyelids remind her of the iguana, Zuela uses her memories of her beloved home to provide a "barrier to separate her world from his, to shield the paintings she had stored in her head of her home in Venezuela: Thick-waisted trees that mounted the sky; vines, the color of emeralds, twisting around wide branches: specks of gold from a dazzling sun filtering through the slits between the leaves down on a rich black earth" (63). The iguana, Zuela's mother taught her, was harmless, encouraging her to touch it and discover that for herself. However, life with Chinaman taught her that iguanas, like snakes, were not always harmless: "Soon she barely remembered a mother who showed her that iguanas can be harmless, that the spikes on their backs would not hurt her. Soon she learned that snakes not only lived in the forest but in cities, too" (63). Zuela's love for her children and her determination to provide a better life for her children gives her the power to stand up and fight: "She was conscious of a strange power growing within her. It frightened her, yet it left her indifferent to what the Chinaman said, what he demanded, what he could do to her" (87). Thus Zuela swears to herself that her life would not be her children's life: "Her girls would not be trapped by a man they could not leave despite his cruelty. Her boys would not be apprenticed to some white man to whom they owed their livelihood. She worshipped at the altar of the god Education. She begged Jesus, Mary and Joseph to intercede for her, too. Her children would be free. Her children would be able to fend for themselves" (37). Realizing Tong Lee, Chinaman's spy, was sweet on her, Zuela determines she "would get him to free her daughters" (93). She vows to protect her children in a way her deceased mother could not from the iguana who once called her Daughter but also gave her a daughter: "Daughter. Hija. Daughter. Hija,' he said, pointing at her until she understood. 'Your name is Daughter. Same as Hija. Is Daughter now.' Two years later when he had given her a new name, Zuela, he still counted her as daughter to him, though by year's end, she would give him a daughter" (62).

In this novel that is as much about mothers as it is daughters, the Mothers/Ájé play a central role. The novel itself seems to be a meditation on mothers and motherhood and the impact of their presence and absence. For Zuela, her mother while she lived was a source of protection, advice, and love. She knows that had her mother lived, she would not have been sold to Chinaman. She does not blame her mother for the lessons not taught for she knows that "her mother had lived to teach her only a part of that lesson, the part before the iguana was a snake (136).

Zuela remembers, too, “the magic mothers created for their young daughters, bargaining for one more day in Eden before innocence is snatched from them forever” (136). Because of her mother’s tender love for her, Zuela also knows that “if my mother was alive, Chinaman would have no power over me. I am sure if she were alive, I could go back to her in Venezuela” (183).

However, despite her presence in Rosa’s life, Clara Appleton is profoundly absent, leaving Rosa in need of the *Ájé*. This absence causes Rosa to meditate on mothers: “she thought a long time about mothers: about the mothers of Trinidadian white women like herself; about the mothers of poor black people like the maids who were mothers to her; about the mothers of poor people of any color like her friend Zuela; about the women who took the place of mothers for motherless children like Zuela; about the mother of God. *She* had stayed to the end trying to protect her son” (133). Unlike Zuela who knows she could have counted on her mother, Rosa knows she couldn’t. It didn’t occur to her, either, to go to her mother’s house. . . . From whom did Clara Appleton try to shield her?” (133). Clara Appleton “could not take the shame” (78), a reality that disturbs Zuela: “What shame? What shame is it for her to help out her child? *Her mother would have protected her from the Chinaman if she were alive*” (78). Clara Appleton’s search in England for suitable white husbands for two of her daughters left Rosa subconsciously feeling unloved and abandoned: “Until now Rosa would not have used the word abandoned to describe what her mother had done to her, though sometimes she thought it” (133), a belief that renders her vulnerable to Cedric’s mental abuse. She’s grateful that “when I needed to be married, he married me” (182) because marriage legitimized the intensely burning passion that compelled her to desire him always: “It was never enough for her when he took her twice a day, sometimes more, without asking” (20), even when she resisted, her body betrays her. Had she her mother’s love, Rosa would have recognized her beauty and not been so grateful to Cedric. Further, she would not have incorrectly interpreted the girl’s rape as evidence of her power: “The power you think you see that girl have behind that hibiscus bush is only because she soft and smooth. Only because she pretty. Remember the lipstick? Remember the pearls? But that man use her until he don’t need her no more. She have no power to say yes or no. He use her when he want to use her” (185). Upon learning the truth of her black father, Rosa realizes that it was not her Clara Appleton was protecting but only herself for she feared the surfacing of Rosa’s Black blood: “She had been protecting herself . . . Clara Appleton wanted a safe place for Rosa, a marriage to a man who would not be surprised if his baby was brown” (134).

Thus in this meditation on motherhood set in a place where all things African are rejected, including its ancient spiritual traditions, the *Ájé* are represented by Our Lady of Fatima, for it is Our Lady who provides balm for the women’s wounded and terrified spirits: “Their first hope was Our Lady. She could protect them” (49), so the “people poured out of the valley on the feast day of Our Lady for two women said they saw Our Lady come down in a circle of bright light over the shrine of Fatima near the little chapel on the top of the Laventille hill” (39). Nunez’s vivid description of Laventille appropriately reflects the energies of both Yemanjá and Oshun:

Yet to go uphill was also to ascend, to reach such splendor it blinded the eye. For there, at the top, the sun gilded the roofs of the shrine and the tiny blue and white chapel next it and made the blue of the blue sky bluer and the white of the white clouds whiter. And if one look up, as always one was compelled to do, one followed the dazzling arc of the sky to a sea shimmering gold and silver on clear days, gray and still magnificent when it rained. (38)

For Rosa, it is not to her mother or the church or the priest she turns to: “She decided she no longer needed human intermediaries; she would go straight to Our Lady Herself” (133). As she desperately ventures up the hill and remembers her childhood friend Daughter: “everything was obscured in that tangle of photographs in Rosa’s mind. Screened out, too, was the blaze that had sent her racing to Our Lady for her cooling waters” (43). Successful in her quest, Rosa is blessed with an epiphany: “For out of the dark despair that enveloped her then, came an epiphany. It left her dazed, burning, smoldering in the brilliance of its searing clarity as it must have left those who had witness the Vision, Our Lady descending in a blaze of light: She had her miracle. Our Lady had made one for her in Laventille. Her revelation” (44). Our Lady grants Rosa three miracles; the first is Rosa’s remembrance of Daughter, her childhood friend, “Daughter. Our Lady’s miracle for her in Laventille. Daughter” (60); the second is Cedric’s healing, and the third is her mother’s visit that serves as a catalyst to liberate Rosa from her obsessive need for her mother and Cedric, and she vows “never again” (188). Zuela runs to Our Lady only because she has no mother. She knows that had her mother been alive, she would have protected her: “*Her mother would have protected her from the Chinaman if she were alive. . . Her mother would have brought her home, if she were alive. She would not have left her to the cobra’s fangs*” (78). For Zuela, “only Our Lady in the shrine at the top of the hill in Laventille could extinguish the fire burning in her breast, only she could cool her hatred, only she erase the sinful thoughts in her brain: man-woman business” (37).

Serving as a surrogate mother, Mary Christophe also represents the *Ájé*. Noting that “people are her religion” (106), Mary Christophe takes care the community, providing necessary healing and help. When Rosa runs to Zuela for safe haven, it is to Mary Christophe she sends her: “Remember that woman you tell me used to take care of you and your sisters? The one with the butterfly on her face? Mary Christophe? She living in Laventille. You go to see her. You ask her to give you something to help your husband. Then when he feeling better, he don’t think you trying to poison him. Then maybe he change” (79). She has been the mother to Rosa that her own mother has ever been. Thus Rosa runs to her, wanting her to “shield her, to protect her the way she used to protect her as a child” (108). Ever the mother, Mary Christophe advises Clara Appleton how to rear her daughters: “Teach them to love her, teach them to make their own way here. They Trinidadians now. Their people come same time with my people. All of us are Trinidadians, different color, but Trinidadians now” (111). While Clara Appleton tried to “cut out the love your sisters have for black people, for black men, (112), she gladly gives Rosa to Cedric, a black man to cover her secret.

Although Mary Christophe loved Rosa, she names her Nympha out of anger towards Clara Appleton's mistreatment of her and her children: "I tell her because I was sick and tired of her she treated me. How she treated your sisters" (111). Had Rosa been born black, Mary Christophe promised to take her and rear her as her own. In return, Clara Appleton promises her comfort and a place to live in retirement. However, Rosa is born white, and Clara Appleton dismisses her promise when Mary Christophe's butterfly becomes a wolf on her face and terrifies little Rosa, who called upon her because she was lonely: "She saw her body first, full and rounded as it was then when she loved her—before the wolf had dug its claws in her face. She saw the fat hips that had cradled her even when she was too big to be carried. She saw the soft stomach she had laid her head on many nights, the breasts she cuddled against. Then the light crossed the face and the butterfly flew away. She screamed with terror for what remained behind" (106). Accused of Obeah, Mary Christophe is fired, separated from Rosa who forgets her after a while. Nevertheless, in need of mothering, Rosa runs to Mary Christophe who dismisses her resentment and helps her. In addition to giving her a potion for Cedric, she also gives her the truth when Rosa acknowledges her mother "never cared for me" (115). Rosa learns, like Celie in *The Color Purple*, "pa not pa!" Her father is not Thomas Appleton: "She know if you marry a white man, your black blood could show up in your children. They know what she do and that your daddy not Mr. Appleton. That your daddy is a black man, which mean you black, too. She had to find a black man for you so if your children come out black, everybody say is because their father black. Then you could still be white and they never know for sure" (116).

As an Appleton, Rosa suffers the brunt of not only Cedric's anger but also the people's anger. Despite Mary Christophe's admonishment that she not come see her alone or climb the hill, Rosa dismisses the warning: "And although she did not doubt that what Mary Christophe had told her would one day come to pass, that, without warning, without announcement, without apparent motive, resentment would turn hearts to stone, would explode chests like gunfire, she did not think it would be aimed at her. For having discovered that she was not a pure white woman, she was certain they knew it, too. . . . No, she had not feared them" (242). So engrossed in her prayer of thanks to Our Lady and ensconced in her knowledge of her blackness, Rosa doesn't notice the first stone thrown, nor did she hear "For Melda', he said, 'for the innocent man you have locked up in the jail. For the guilty man you let roam free" (244). As Rosa shifts mentally to a place of safety, appropriately the place described echoes Oya: "She found it was better to look up at the grieving sky of draped purple with the embers of the dying sun, and at the pitying gaze of Our Lady, who, nevertheless, did not turn her head when they dragged her thorough the dirt and into the slime in that clearing behind her" (244). Gang raped, Rosa feels the only the "dull pressure of rods ramming back and forth between legs, but no pain, no pain until the mouth above hers shaped a word, beg: 'Beg. Say you want it. Beg. Say you want it or I beat you.' Then the pain was excruciating" (245). That command reminds Rosa the rape of the eleven-year old girl she had witnessed when she was twelve and of Cedric's command that ceased her desire for him, and the "memory was blinding" (245).

The “purple turned to black in the sky above her” (245). Immediately she thinks “Mother,” asking herself “*where was that little girl’s mother? Where was she when her daughter put on red lipstick on her mouth, a string of pearls around her neck?*” (245), a question she could easily ask of Clara Appleton, whose emotional absence brought Rosa to that particular place at that particular moment. When Rosa is publicly accused of murder by Cedric, her mother comes not to her defense but only to assure herself that it is cancer that’s killing Cedric. She leaves for the beach, not staying to provide comfort for her daughter. When Rosa is gang raped, *it is not her mother’s embrace that comforts her but Mary Christophe’s*. In fact, it is a woman who had come out of the tenebrous stillness of the falling dusk, whispering a prayer, “I’m sorry. We’re sorry.’ Then she disappeared into a line of silent women that had formed along the sides of the street in that town of tears—a corridor of women sobbing so quietly they could not be heard” (245). Perhaps daughters of Oshun, “ten of them wore flowers on their arms” (245). Ever the mother, “Mary Christophe was cradling her in her arms when she woke, rocking her like a baby, saying over and over again, ‘I tell you not to come up here. Not always Our Lady save you...The butterfly on her face fluttered its wings and then closed them” (245). Although both Rosa and Zuela run to Our Lady of Fatima for comfort, saving, and healing, it is, most significantly, the Iyami who provide these for them instead. This healing, then, by the Iyami clearly evidences the power of traditional African belief systems, despite the colonialist disavowal of it. In Nunez’s telling, Our Lady remains only a statue, unable to bless or heal.

Rosa’s fairytale interrupted, Rosa retreats to her childhood dream of a man on white horse who rescues her and takes her to “tiny blue house white picket fence, where red, red roses climbed through the pretty white trellises” (246). Like the child she used to be, Rosa is comforted by Mary Christophe who cleanses her with rainwater to wash away “the stink of the animal sweat, so she could cleanse the sweat of animal thighs that had hammered the last nails in the coffin of a pubescent dream that never was realized” (246). As the *Ájé* incarnate and Rosa’s surrogate mother, Mary Christophe performs the ritual of healing, which soothes and restores Rosa:

First she wiped the dried blood from Rosa’s mouth and then she bent her legs in the crook of her arm and lowered her body into the tub of rainwater and shining bush leaves. She soaped and rinsed her hair and her neck and her arms and her breasts. . . . And when she was finished, she whispered in her ear that she loved her. She had always loved her from the moment the midwife had put her in arms. Still whispering this her to her, and about the times they had spent together, she washed her in her secret place, in the place where the men had violated her (246).

One of the rapists takes Rosa from the comfort of Mary Christophe's bed, angered by Rosa's refusal to beg, at Mary Christophe, "the old wolf was willing to be a beast of burden, a donkey for a white woman" (274), the "line of tears—the other women crying for her" (274), and at the memory of the many mornings his mother had left him and his brothers alone at home to care for the white babies in the family. Although Rosa is not guilty of infidelity like Paula Inge, she suffers her same fate: "Suddenly he saw in his mind's eye the image that terrified her. . . . He saw the human head protruding through the burlap bag. . . . Before he could conceive it, she had known the middle and end of his plan" (277). Despite his innocence, like the rapist's brother is accused of Melda's murder, Cedric is accused of twisting a rope around her neck and strangling her before dumping her body in the sea. When discovered, there were huge black and blue marks on her neck, and the clotted blood making a "pattern on her neck like the petals on a flower. Like the petals of a hibiscus bruised blue" (280). After uttering Mother as her final word, Rosa is appropriately thrown into the sea and thus returns to her spiritual mothers Oshun and Yemanja.

Given the love denied to Rosa, Zuela survives Ho Sang and lives in the "pretty blue house where red roses climbed a white trellis a few feet behind a white picket fence" (281), envisioned by Rosa in her childhood fairy tale. In honor of her friend, Tong Lee uproots the orange and pick bougainvillea and replaces them with rose bushes because Rosa was the first name of "Zuela's best friend, and Zuela was the woman he adored" (281). He plants the hibiscus tree as a memorial to Rosa, for it was "a hibiscus bush that had pulled them apart, a hibiscus bush that in the end had brought them together" (282). Upon Ho Sang's death, Zuela gets his cash box, finally achieving the financial independence she never received during his lifetime. Looking out the window at Tong Lee and her children, Zuela thanks God for "her good luck, not just that morning, but the months before when Tong Lee opened his house to her and promised marriage if she wanted it" (282).

Having loved Rosa, mothering Mary Christophe with "the butterfly on her face stood across the street breathing in the scent of roses and warming her heart with the picture she had prayed to find" (281). Zuela warms Mary Christophe's heart by telling her Rosa loved her: "She said when her mother went to England, you was a mother to her. . . . You was a better mother to her than her mother was" (285). In return, Mary Christophe makes Zuela's heart race with happiness when she calls her Daughter: "Her face glowed. It was the right name. In spite of what she had said to Tong Lee, it was the name she wanted, the name that named her rightly, the name her mother had chosen for her because she loved her. Its meaning got lost when Chinaman translated it from Hija. It became obscene when he planted the seed of her daughter in her" (285). Echoing Oshun, "the butterfly fluttered its wings on Mary Christophe's face. It seemed it would fly" (286).

In embracing Daughter, Mary Christophe understands her purpose: “I see my purpose now,’ she said. I see why I come here. Is to get back my Rosa. To finish being a mother to her by being a mother to you” (286). Acknowledging Rosa as her sister, Zuela becomes D/daughter again. Squeezing Zuela’s hand, Mary Christophe “claimed her. *Yes. Daughter.* Zuela sighed. She was a daughter again. She had found a mother. She loved a man who loved her. Her children were free of Chinaman’s prison. Soon she would have a house that was hers.” (286). Ensnared in the love of the Ájé, Zuela “breathed in deeply and slowly let the air of her lungs” (286).

Despite not openly acknowledging Obeah and Yoruba, Rosa and Zuela benefit from their practice. Patrick Hylton writes that African religions in the Caribbean, like Obeah, have provided some semblance of social order, dignity, and self-respect in the face of some of the harshest types of treatment ever inflicted on human beings (218). The Ájé provide solace from the brutality of colonialism. That Zuela lives and ultimately finds love and happiness while Rosa experiences a brutal rape and a horrible death might suggest a simultaneous success and failure of the Ájé’s embrace and protection. Despite Rosa’s inherited blackness, she has been reared as white woman which more firmly situates her within the Catholic faith even as she believes in Obeah. Clara Appleton’s emotional absence severed the invisible umbilical cord between mother and daughter; fortunately, Rosa reconnects with Mary Christophe and thus the Ájé. Therefore, while it may appear that Rosa’s brutal death places her outside the protection of the Ájé, it is significant that it occurs only after she embraces her inherited blackness, feeling, finally, complete and at peace. Despite her mother’s death, Zuela, unlike Rosa, remains attached to her mother. This connection intimately informs her relationship with the Ájé, providing her a deepened understanding of the role of and need for Mother(s). Further, as a Venezuelan, Zuela is a part of the African diaspora, which is reflected in Nunez’ colored description of both Venezuela and Zuela that emphasizes the natural—nature, beauty, and love. As such Zuela represents a newer recognition and acknowledgement of African spiritual beliefs.

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