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VIRGINITY TEST: TRAUMA OF MISOGYNISTIC CULTURAL PRACTICES IN EDWIDGE DANTICAT'S BREATH, EYES, MEMORY

FRANCIA P.A

Assistant Professor PG Dept. of English NGM College, Pollachi

Culture consists of the beliefs, values, behavior, and material objects that define a people's way of life. Culture is a "lens" by which we view reality, an orientation to the world. Culture also plays an important role in shaping the human personality. While culture reflects the characteristics that describe a society at a particular time, Tradition is the passing of those beliefs or behaviors from one generation to the next generation. Traditional cultural practices reflect the values and beliefs held by members of a community for periods often spanning generations. Every social grouping in the world has specific traditional cultural practices and beliefs, some of which are beneficial to all members, while others have become harmful to a specific group, such as women. Some of the harmful traditional practices imposed on women include early and forced marriages, virginity testing, widow's rituals, female genital mutilation (FGM), breast sweeping/ironing, and witch-hunting. Despite their harmful nature and their violation of national and international human rights laws, such practices persist because they are not questioned or challenged and therefore take on an aura of morality in the eyes of those practicing them.

Literature, being the image of man's inner life, has its autonomous impulsion and rights, since it has the social function of making a bridge between man and society. It cannot wholly ignore the claims of the outside world. Literature generally evolves out of a people's historical and cultural and traditional experience. Edwidge Danticat, a Caribbean – American writer has emerged as one of the most important author in contemporary literature. Born in Haiti Danticat's works explore Haiti's troubled and violent past as well as her own ambivalent experience as a Haitian living in Brooklyn. She is also considered as a talented and insightful Haitian- American author. She has been praised by critics for her complex characters and her perceptive observations of the diasporic experience as well as the political, socio economic and cultural realities of life in Haiti and the United States. Danticat ploughs an independent furrow, and her work gets stronger and more confident with each book.

In her novel *Breath, Eyes, Memory* a Haitian woman, Sophie, tells her life story, which begins from her childhood in Haiti, where she lives in a small village with her aunt, Atie. When Sophie is twelve, she has to move to New York to live with her mother, Martine. In New York Sophie faces racism for being Haitian and has to live under her mother's strict rules. Little by little Sophie learns about the traumas that affect her mother's life. One of the most significant of these traumatizing experiences is the practice of "testing," an examination to make sure a girl is a virgin, described as painful and humiliating, to which both Martine and Atie were regularly subjected. Another traumatic event in Martine's life was when she was raped as a young girl and became pregnant to her rapist, whose face she never saw. In Haitian culture, losing one's virginity before marriage was a horrible shame for a girl, which is why Martine was sent away to have Sophie. After this Martine flees her memories to New York, but never truly recovers. When Sophie falls in love with a jazz musician, Joseph, her mother starts to test her, which ends only when Sophie uses a pestle to break her hymen and runs away. Years later Sophie still struggles with her own sexuality and having sex with her husband. She

makes both a physical and a mental journey to come to terms with the different constituents of her identity at the intersection of the two cultures, the free minded American ideal and the strict Haitian mind set.

Cultures have long been obsessed with women's virginity. Women are forced to be cultural vectors. In the middle Ages, virginity was a sought-after commodity, primarily because it was the surest method to guarantee paternity. "The god of virginity is popular in world wide. It doesn't matter if you're a person of faith or an atheist, Muslim or Christian – everybody worships the god of virginity. Everything possible is done to keep the hymen- that most fragile foundation upon which the god of virginity sits – intact" (Eltahawy 114). At the altar of the god of virginity, we sacrifice not only our girls' bodily integrity and right to pleasure but also their right to justice in the face of sexual violations. The purity culture that exists across the middle east and North Africa burdens girls and women with the responsibility for their own safety from several violence. Sometime we even sacrifice their lives: in the name of honor, some families' murder their daughters to keep the god of virginity appeared. When that happens, it leaves one vulnerable to the wonderful temptation of imagining a world where women are more than hymens. In some countries, communities do the next best thing and cut off perfectly healthy parts of girls genitalia (the parts intended for pleasure), to curb sexuality until the girl and her intact hymen are handed over to a husband

In *Breath, Eyes, Memory* the testing starts in preteen age. The mother puts her little finger in the girl's vagina and tests whether the girl's hymen is intact and how far the finger can go. This causes pain, shame and humiliation to the girls. A non-virgin girl is seen as soiled, dirty and she has no worth in the eyes of the community and society. Sophie and Ifé continue the discussion when Sophie asks whether Ifé knew her daughters hated testing and states that it was the most horrible thing she ever had to go through and that Sophie still has problems because of it (Danticat 156). In the end of the discussion, Grandmè Ifé tells Sophie: "My heart, it weeps like river [...] for the pain we have caused you" (Danticat 157). Ifé was tested as a girl, and knows well how it felt, yet she continued the tradition, the violence against girls. This violence is a form of oppression of women, which ensures they are left powerless. If the mothers did not test their daughters, they would face the danger of being disgraced. The misogyny leads to the repression of female sexuality. The women should not enjoy sex or sexuality, or atleast not before marriage, because those are things that are solely for the pleasure of their husbands. The misogyny affects the way the women think and see their own sexuality, and they see it as something dangerous. This is why mothers feel the need to keep their daughters as virgins, or pure, as they see it

In *Breath, Eyes, Memory* doubling is a survival strategy that is taught to the girls from early on. It serves a double function in the sense that it renders the traumatizing ordeal more bearable but simultaneously makes the girls easier to control. For Sophie, doubling is a way to push away the traumatic event happening right now. The event becomes too much to bear and she needs to shut herself out of that situation. Although Sophie has lived in America for years, she is still influenced by Haitian ways of thinking. Sophie does not enjoy sex, but sees it as her duty as a wife. She just had stitches and is in pain, yet she still has sex with her husband Joseph. Sophie thinks that as a woman, she has no control over her own sexuality. She has to take care of her husband's desires no matter what. The Haitian patriarchy has influenced her way of thinking so profoundly she only thinks of her husband's benefit. Interestingly enough, when thinking like this, she is forcing her American husband, Joseph, into the old stereotypical Haitian model of masculinity that might not suit him, or probably most Haitian men. Haiti is a patriarchal society that largely follows Catholic ways of thinking. Men typically occupy the dominant position in Haitian households and control the lives of women, who are rendered powerless and voiceless. This subordination of women is where the trauma of female sexuality originates, because the possibilities of women to challenge male dominance are limited. This is what forms a breeding ground for the sexual trauma. Women are silenced and denied any sense of agency concerning their sexualities. Sophie thinks that the problems with sex are hers alone, and do not concern Joseph. This is why there is a lack of communication between the spouses. As a consequence, they are incapable of sharing these problems, which renders them impossible for them to fix. Because of her preconceived idea of sex as dirty, discussing any problems concerning it is impossible for Sophie.

In *Breath, Eyes, Memory* the women have to face the same choices. Both cultures, the Mestiza and Haitian, are affected by the Catholic Church and its values, which were imposed on people, especially on

women, through colonialism. The fact that Martine becomes pregnant after she is raped is so shameful that her mother has to send her away to give birth to Sophie. There seems to be very little compassion towards the young girl who has been through such a violent act. The rape shames the whole family because they were unable to keep their daughter a virgin, and it does not matter that it was against Martine's will. Martine's is traumatized by the rape as an act of violence, but for her it is also traumatizing to lose her virginity, especially in a society that values sexual purity so highly. She has been taught that virginity is the most important thing for an unmarried girl, and all of a sudden an unknown man takes it away violently. As a consequence, Martine loses the support and appreciation of her family and whole society.

Martine starts to regard herself as worthless. Because she is no longer a virgin, she cannot get married and become a respectable woman, although she already is a mother. Furthermore, she is seen as soiled and sinful, so even the Catholic Church rejects her, thereby denying her the possibility of becoming a nun. The only option for her in society would hence be to become a prostitute. The functions of woman, a mother, a nun and a prostitute, are so profoundly infused in the minds of the women, that they become a part of their identity. Now Martine cannot identify herself with the first two choices, so starts to see herself as unclean, which adds to her feelings of worthlessness. The three functions women have in society deepen the trauma of sexuality even further, because they narrow down the options for women and label her. What renders the issue even more problematic is the fact that women lack all power and agency in the formation of these choices that they are, in effect, products of the patriarchal order of society.

It is every mother's duty to preserve her daughter's sexual purity until marriage. The women keep passing on the values of the church and society to their daughters, in order to ensure good marriage and life to them. The trauma of female sexuality is imposed on the girls by women. The women could break the cycle, yet they choose to transfer the rules to the next generation in fear of social shaming of the family. In the end, the women do not possess a true freedom to choose whether to keep the traditions of female sexuality alive or not, because the rules come from the patriarchal society which forces the women to obey under cover of shame.

In *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, the female sexuality is not in the possession of the women, because it belongs to their husbands. The cultural conundrums effect on women are very personal and intimate. As in all patriarchal societies in Haiti, men have power over women, because they determined their functions in society and even what female sexuality is. Thus, Haitian women suffer from traditional and cultural values. *Breath, Eyes, Memory* clearly informs the readers about the strict traditions and suffering of the people in Haiti. Though testing is one of the harsh customs, it is hard to believe that it is still followed today.

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