

## MARGINALIZATION THROUGH RACE, CLASS, AND GENDER IN DOLORES JOSEPH'S "ADINA"

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### RESUMEN

El siguiente artículo analiza, en el cuento "Adina" de Dolores Joseph, la marginalización de las mujeres negras debido a aspectos de raza, de clase social y de género. Adina, la protagonista, es retratada como una víctima que lucha por sobrevivir en un medio desigual y hostil del puerto caribeño de Limón en los inicios de este siglo.

### ABSTRACT

The following article analyzes the role of Black women's marginalization through race, class, and gender in Dolores Joseph's short story, "Adina". The protagonist, Adina, is portrayed as a victim who struggles for survival in an unequal and hostile environment of the Caribbean Port of Limón, during the early part of our present century.

The heart of a woman goes forth with the dawn,  
As a lone bird, soft winging, so restlessly on,  
Afar o'er life's turrets and vales does it roam  
In the wake of those echoes the heart calls home.

The heart of a woman falls back with the night,  
And enters some alien cage in its plight,  
And tries to forget it has dreamed of the stars,  
While it breaks, breaks, breaks on the sheltering bars.

*By Georgia Douglas Johnson*

Black women's hearts have a great need to escape from the "alien cage", symbol of the the triple bind imposed by race, class, and gender, in order to achieve wholeness in a world of male dominated ideology.

In Dolores Joseph's "Adina" Black women are caught by this triple consciousness: the protagonist, Adina, is not only black and female, she is also an "inferior" subject because of her situation as a poor maid working for the White boss and mistress.

In 1984, Dolores Joseph published *Tres Relatos del Caribe Costarricense (Three Costa Rican-Caribbean Tales)*, a collection that was sponsored by the O.A.S. (Organization of American States) and by the Costa Rican Ministry of Culture, Youth and, Sport. This small yet valuable book is composed of three short stories: "Limón on the Raw," "Nancy Stories," and "Adina." These three short stories in one way or another, register an important part of Limón's Black population's cultural heritage. It is a past that has its roots in the West Indies, especially in the island of Jamaica, and even further back, in the African ancestry of myths and of beliefs, all of which constitute the ultimate source of this particular culture. Nevertheless, *Tres Relatos del Caribe Costarricense* includes not only the important aspects that have already been mentioned; it is also the history of Limón's Black cultural marginalization and the recounting of Black women's oppression in a society where a strong ideology has dictated her subordination because of racial, class, and gender considerations. The force of a given ideology within any society is stressed by Kavanagh, who, prefers to explain how it functions and thus enlightens the reader concerning what it is:

Ideology designates the indispensable practice - including the 'systems of representation' that are its products and supports- through which individuals of different class, race, and sex are worked into a particular 'lived relation' to a sociohistorical project (Kavanagh 1990: 319).

Among the three short stories in this particular collection, "Adina" is certainly the best example for illustrating how ideology has determined that she - a Black female - should be the "other," the marginalized text in opposition to the dominant "one" text. Human perceptions are shaped by social conditioning in matters of race, class, and gender. Insomuch that what might seem to be just a story dealing with black pride is far more than that, for even though Dolores Joseph might not have meant to posit the gender question, it is almost absolutely impossible to understand the wholeness of human relationship within a given society without taking into account the aspects already mentioned by Kavanagh - race, class, and gender - since they are basic for the maintaining of the binary opposition of power/submission. This fact in Limón's particular context, makes women in general, and especially Black women like Adina, to be considered a subculture in opposition to the ruling white patriarchal culture. This unjust situation of not only Adina but of all women, who are treated as a minority and whose importance is systematically diminished by the ruling ideology, is analyzed by Gerda Lerner, who speaks harshly against this old practice:

Like men, women are and always have been actors and agents in history. Since women are half and sometimes more than half of humankind, they always have shared the world and its work equally with men. Women are and have been central, not marginal, to the making of society and to the building of civilization (Lerner 1986: 4).

Adina is therefore part of the "less important majority" because of her condition as a woman, which is even worse in her case, being a Black woman. This is why racial factors will also have a strong influence in further crushing her as a human being.

This interesting story, brief though it might be, narrates the complete lifetime story of Adina, who works as a maid for the Ulrich family: Dr. Kurt Ulrich, his wife Katrinka and their son, Karl. The story takes place in the little Caribbean port of Limón, where foreigners and natives all seem to get along peacefully while First World War rages in Europe.

Adina does the domestic work and takes care of little Karl, whom she accompanies to the "Vargas Park" so that he might play with other children of his own age and class, while the waves of the Atlantic ocean roared, a few meters away across the "tajamar" or sea-wall. She usually took advantage of these outings to chatter with the other maids and especially to entertain her lover, Willie.

During one of these many trips to the park, while Adina was busy with her boyfriend, little Karl probably fell over into the sea and drowned. No one ever knew what really happened, not even the "policía" who was supposed to be watching over visitor's security: he was also too busy noticing an attractive "Mulatita." Panic-stricken, Adina escapes from her hometown along with her "beau" in a tense run-away; they linger for some time near the Panamanian border, and then finally take refuge in Colón, Panamá.

Meanwhile an enraged Doctor Ulrich desperately searches for her in order to take revenge, but in vain. Safely over the other side of the border, Adina continues to do hard work all by herself, since she and Willie separated from each other shortly after they crossed the border line. Several years later Adina still recalled little Karl Ulrich's face...

Adina's presence in Limón is explained by the fact that the generation before hers left native Jamaican soil and came to the Atlantic coast of Costa Rica at the end of the nineteenth century, when this Central American country was in need of strong workers for the construction of the railway that would link this important Atlantic port to the capital, San José. "Ticos" first called them "Chumecos" as a mispronunciation of Jamaicans; later on, it took on a racist connotation to which Blacks retaliated by calling them "Pañas," a pejorative and also mispronounced form for Spaniards. Despite this rivalry, some sort of mixing of races began, which of course gave birth to mulattoes, such as the "mulatita" that attracted the policeman's attention. It is clear, however, that there has always been a confrontation between whites and non-whites in a struggle for supremacy, in a continuous challenge of the dominant group, in an effort to demystify the "superior" race by trying to subvert the imposed hierarchy. On the other hand, the dominant group uses skin color as an insult for the "inferior" race: when the enraged Dr. Kurt goes in search of Adina to revenge his son's death, he shouts for the "negra" and threatens to kill the "black bitch" (Joseph 1984: 65).

On a surface level, Dr. Kurt's rage is more than justified: this would be the story of a careless nurse-maid who permitted the death of a child through neglect. Fear of the master's anger leads her to undertake a dramatic flight along with her boyfriend, who feels he is also to blame for what happened. Along with these two, if any responsibility should be established, the "policía" can also be blamed, since he was much more interested in peering at the different couples and in trying to get closer to the "mulatita" than in his job as a public caretaker. But owing to the fact that he belongs to the white race, certainly Dr. Kurt's rage would not go in his direction.

This story permitted me to establish an intertextual relationship because it reminded me of a similar episode that took place years ago while I was very young; at the end of the year, our "Spanish" school teacher took our group on a final outing; she was accompanied by her boyfriend in this "paseo", and surely enough, she neglected her students. While she was "busy" with her lover, one of the kids, a Black boy, fell over into a creek and drowned. The incident was reported as a fatal accident, and of course, his parents never even thought of taking any re-

venge, because it occurred to one of the members of the “inferior” race, and therefore they did not expect any justice.

Racial differences have always proved to be very important in the labelling of human beings, through space and time. Limón was not the exception to this rule, and the ruling white ideology considered Blacks to be an inferior race because they were different in color. Adina’s dark skin made her inferior in the eyes of the “one” and was therefore the object of oppression. Western culture made this practice one of their chief dogmas, and it has been widely developed during several centuries; from the very beginning of the present century this racist ideology had been reinforced in spite of some tolerant minds that have rejected and continue to reject the association of dark skin with inferiority. In his article on this same topic, Appiah states that:

While the Christian tradition insisted on the common ancestry of all human beings, and the Enlightenment, even when it was critical of official Christianity, emphasized the universality of reason, by the middle of the nineteenth century the notion that all races were equal in their capacities was a distinctly minority view. Even those who insisted that all human beings had the same rights largely acknowledged that nonwhite people lacked either the intelligence or the vigor of the white races: among which the highest, it was widely agreed, was the Indo-European stock from which the Germanic peoples emerged. In England and North America, there was a further narrowing of focus: the Anglo-Saxons were the favored offshoot of the Germanic stock (Appiah 1990: 280).

According to racial conventions, people in Limón were seen as pertaining to two different racial categories: Germans, French, English, Chinese, Serbians, Turks, belonged to the superior “one” while the Black population was classified as the “other.” This is the panorama in which Adina evolved in the years previous to and during World War I. The narrator thus depicts Dr. Kurt Ulrich representing the “one’s” supremacy ideology:

Dr. Kurt Ulrich was one of the old school Prussians, an ardent scholar of Bismarck philosophy, an ardent believer of the might of the German nation and even now as he serves humanity in this god forsaken place, he cherished the hope that Germany will govern the world. Weren’t they the superior race? (Joseph 1984: 58)

In this unbreakable chain, one thing must lead to another, and distinctions in race must, in the well organized ruling hierarchy, make a difference in class. In this aspect, Adina is also in disadvantage since she belongs to the inferior class of the nurse-maids. This subclass confronts an existence that is full of hardships because they have to bear with mistresses who are proud and cruel foreign women that are thoroughly convinced that ill-treatment is what must be handed down to these servant girls.

The girls, therefore, live in the fear of their masters and mistresses, who even treat their dogs better than their nurse-maids: “De dinner, wat dem gib we, nat fit fi de daug, far dem hab a german terrier dat doant eat any and anything. De food must be well cook, an the only thing dem dont gib dat daug is knife and fark” (Joseph 1984: 57). This lower class can only take revenge by indulging in malicious talk concerning their master’s cruelty towards their wives, and about the wives’ infidelities in return (Joseph 1984: 56). Seated at their “session spot” in the park they would also complain bitterly about their own exploitation through low wages, hard and long labouring and the mean nourishment they got:

...what is senty colones, whilst dem people getting den hundred of dollars, when the month come...

...me doant like living in, far youh work till dem people go to bed, an sometimes when dem mek parties, youh stey up till de party finish, den de cleaning...

But fi we dinnah, Lard Gad, sometimes me feel like throwing it in the face ob that white wretch... (Joseph 1984: 57)

This was also a way for them to exchange a certain feeling of solidarity by sharing their distress one with another. When Adina's misfortune occurred, her fellow nurse-maids were the ones who advised her to escape for her life away from the German's wrath: "Dina mi chile, if I was you ah would get out as fast and as far as ah can. Dont stay here crying, fat crying wount help you. Dat German will certainly kill you, ef him catch up wid you" (Joseph 1984: 61).

The higher status of all these foreign women and men (Prussians, Serbians, English, French, Turks) has been achieved mainly through economic standards, but also because of education: Dr. Kurt is an eminent doctor, he speaks German, English and of course he has some knowledge of Spanish. Jamaican-descents were not allowed to go to "Spanish school" and continued to talk only in their native language, the creole, they brought with them from Jamaica; while the other foreigners quickly learned Spanish, the Chinese for example, so as to be considered among the "superior" class. Adina is aware that this class difference is due to economic standards and that it does not depend on the better manners that her people certainly have. The narrator tells us that:

These three months working with them, she had known how to understand these rough people, not like her mother and father, understand one with the other, Papie not hogging at Mamie, not snapping at the children, as poor as we are, we are a very happy family, with the only difference, we have to seek domestic chores (Joseph 1984: 58-9).

These servants were able to get through their distressful situation by making use of a wry sense of humor and also by leaning on religion, which gave them the power of long-suffering and patience to endure discrimination because of class. In her distress when Karl's corpse was discovered, Adina implores the Lord's mercy: "Jesus Crist, have pity pon me, Lard Gad, help me...Wah mus ah do? Wat a guine tell the mistress? Lard Gad, Hab mercy pon me" (Joseph 1984: 61).

The ruling ideology would not have its force if it had left out gender, which is the last but not the least of the points present in Adina. Quite on the contrary, it is a major point since it covers all women, no matter their race or their class. Gerda Lerner makes this clear when she remarks that:

The point is that men and women have suffered exclusion and discrimination because of their class. No man has been excluded from the historical record because of his sex, yet all women were (Lerner 1986: 5).

Because of race, Black people -men or women- are considered equally inferior to the ruling ideology; nevertheless, Black men can sometimes be the "one" when it comes to gender questions, while Black women even in this aspect will be the "other." As we have already seen,

Joseph tried to develop some sort of Black pride, and then gender appeared implicitly. While there is no questioning of the "one's" identity, women are identified as the "other" but in a subordinate position in relation to the "one". Myra Jehlen thus comments on this phallo-dependence of women in her article on "Gender":

Sexual orthodoxy is not self-contained but dualistic, a matter of relations, This interdependence between self-definition of the opposite gender is especially true for women, whose more restricted horizon is entirely spanned by masculinity (Jehlen 1990: 263).

Certainly enough, gender does not mean women alone, since the "one" does not exist without the "other," yet the ruling ideology has effectively, and in the most subtle manner, reinforced differences by privileging male over female, which combined with racial and class differences among women impede a common women's culture because women are also discriminated against by other women. Thus women, especially Blacks, have been forced to struggle alone, even against their own Black mates.

In this difficult context for black women's evolution as a being, Adina, like all other members of this "minority club" has been forced to strive within the realm of ambiguity. She is quite conscious, as we have seen, of racial and class differences, yet she accepts in her early stage of life, a certain dependence on Willie, her boy friend, who is supposedly in love with her. She, nevertheless, retains a certain degree of autonomy over her body, since she does not want to become a woman-breeder, reminiscent of slavery, when Black women were forced into motherhood in order to produce strong male babies that would later on do the work in the plantations belonging to the white masters:

She had heard the sad tales of many of the working girls who had placed faith in these clandestine love making, only to result in these abandoned nurse-maid betrayals, little potential nurse-maids were in the making, children of nurse-maids. Adina did not want that, she really did not want to make more carers of white women's children... (Joseph 1984: 59).

The reader, however, wonders if this is Adina in full knowledge of the dangers she will encounter if she is tricked by any young lover, or if it is not the omniscient narrator speaking for her from a 1980 perspective.

The narrative voice is important all along the recounting of this story and the intrusions are many, directed toward trying to manipulate the reader: the children of the "one" are "little brats" (Joseph 1984: 55); little Karl is a "little devil" (Joseph 1984: 60); foreign women are not only "nagging and miserable mistresses" (Joseph 1984: 55), they are also "hoggish" (Joseph 1984: 57); and, as for Dr. Kurt Ulrich, he is depicted as "uttering a gruff guttural curse words" in Adina's nightmare (Joseph 1984: 63); he "snorts as a wild beast (Joseph 1984: 65) and the narrator styles him as "the negro hating doctor" (Joseph 1984: 68). Thus the harassment and cruelty of these "irrational" people, the bad manners, the "hoggishness" of these foreigners that considered themselves to be the "one" is systematically reinforced, so that instead of blaming Adina for her carelessness, the reader is sympathetic and might even see the death of the innocent child as an act of divine justice. There is no pity for the "eminent" Dr. Ulrich when he sobs at the loss of his son, because the reader remembers that he is a "negro hating" doctor. Near the end of the story, the narrator is so enthusiastic about the general progress of Black people that he included himself in the group that went over to the Canal Zone in search of betterment:

"Lots and lots of us had passed over to the Canal Zone..." (Joseph 1984: 67). He also joined the group that would, from time to time, pay a visit to old Adina.

This omniscient narrator makes use of a very special narrative discourse; there is an attempt to narrate in American or British English, which is interrupted by Black people's use of a creole, whose lexicon is based on the same language. This might provoke recalcitrance in American English readers, while an authentic "Limonense" would just be overjoyed to find his vernacular language expressing certain subtleties that the classic language is unable to reproduce. Besides this particular mixture, the "rough" German accent along with some Spanish vocabulary enriches the linguistic aspect of this text and reinforces the multiplicity of a community where language is also an important element in the shaping of the subjects by the ruling ideology. The social and psychological fragmentation of Limón's environment is thus portrayed in the language that the narrator and the protagonists of Adina use:

The policeman, who often made 'ronda', keeping a distance, only to allow the nurse-maids the liberty that they really need, 'pobrecitas', and even so, he would indulge in a little chat with one of these girls, especially that 'mulatita' who spoke 'castellano' so fluently, and as he stood at the next corner, he spied this commotion at the corner where that iron grill was ajar, and so he hurried to see what the trouble was. Arriving to the spot, he heard an exclamation 'Lard Gad, Almighty', and then realized that something was really not good. He hurried his steps, and reached to where he saw the last maid peering down the open gap, he saw a body of a dead child, a child dressed in a sailor's uniform, a little white child. 'Dios mío, un cuerpo', he breathed, he tried to grab it, but realized that his arms could not reach down, and again, he would be soiling his uniform, so he retraced his steps to the Commissary, and used the telephone, notifying the 'cuartel' the finding of a dead child in the 'cloaca' around the Vargas Park (Joseph 1984: 64).

Even the intertwining of the narration of Adina's flight with Dr. Ulrich's awareness of his family disaster proves to be a very interesting narrative strategy since it effectively combines two stories into one. The wrath of the "one" and the fear of the "other" are presented in a sort of suspense story that help to maintain the reader's interest who is eager to know the denouement of this story.

The white patriarchal system has then been a very convincing one, since marginalization in this particular geographical text has been effectively carried out with no or very little opposition. Adina's flight resembled the slave's escaping in the United States from their bondage and heading North in search of freedom. It is well known that freedom is a process that is accomplished gradually, that is why we find Adina who is still enslaved to her poverty stricken position (she lived in a one back room and still had to do domestic chores for her subsistence), even though she has been able to escape being a woman breeder. Perhaps this event was even due to the fact that Willie, who had sworn eternal love to her on the park bench, thought that he had done enough or too much in helping her cross the border in safety and thus felt free to leave her to her destiny.

Whatever the cause of this attitude, Adina was once more left alone to face life, old age, and death away from her people in a strange land. Nearing the end of her existence, she was still the vulnerable, fearful being that had fled from her native homeland. The reader, however, does not perceive any regret from this heroine, who accepts solitude while continuing to struggle for herself, except for the memory of the dead child that seems to haunt her. Nevertheless, thus a tragic heroine, it seems as if she had to pay a price for having willingly defied the

established patriarchal conventions; and, therefore, loneliness in a strange land must be her fate. Her daily struggle for survival can be viewed as a heroic act, since she is forced to live a manless life that socially degrades her even more in an hostile world that, whether through race, or class, or gender, refused her the right to be part of the "one" and condemned her to marginalization. Ironically, near the end of her days, she is finally "Miss Adina", perhaps as a paternalistic tribute to an existence that was deprived of selfhood. Patriarchal codes do not ignore women, as some might erroneously think; they take them into account because it is fully grounded in a gender ideology, that is, profoundly concerned with the exploiting of women's time, labor and sexuality. Gerda Lerner affirms that sexism, racism and class are what define the ideology of male supremacy (Lerner 1985: 240).

Dolores Joseph's "Adina" is an attempt to demystify the white superior culture in terms of race and of class. Concerning gender, traditional stereotypes about women are developed and so Adina fulfills the roles that patriarchal society hands over to the "other": she is a nurse-maid, gossip-monger, unprogressive, church sister, the model of long-suffering passivity, and, aside from not taking on the "sacred" role of a "mother" as a feminine text, she does nothing or very little to break the system. In this sense, she demystifies motherhood as one of the keys to feminine wholeness. Adina's character is, therefore, an interplay between an attempt to grasp modern feminism and traditional womanhood. This apparent lack of interest in the gender question can be easily explained if we quote McLaughlin's Introduction to *Critical Terms for Literary Study*:

The production of literature always occurs within a complex cultural situation, and its reception is similarly situated. Authors and readers are constituted by their cultural placement. They are defined inside systems of gender, class, and race (McLaughlin 1990: 7).

Finally within this same context it is important to state that her situation as a woman, and especially as a Black one, confronted with all the hardships that she encounters, permits the exposure of patriarchal ideology and its resulting prejudices as a powerful weapon in the maintenance of the different scale of values. Thus, year after year, thousands of "Adinas", all over the world, that are aware of their triple subordination by race, class and gender, continue to fight hard for a better position within society, in an attempt to subvert the imposed hierarchy, and, thereby, achieve a dignified selfhood.

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