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Cecile Accilien, *Rethinking Marriage in Francophone African and Caribbean Literatures* Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2008. 202 pp. \$65.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-7391-1657-9.

Review by Carine M. Mardorossian, University at Buffalo.

In *Rethinking Marriage*, Cecile Accilien highlights the ways in which marriage, i.e., the “economic transaction” that occurs between a man and a woman, constitutes the basis for social acceptance in West African and Francophone Caribbean cultures. The comparative context of Accilien’s study is grounded in the shared history of French colonialism whose legacies, she argues, continue to shape the social institution of marriage and its disempowering effects on women in these countries. To expose the workings of patriarchal structures across this wide geographical, cultural, and historical spectrum, Accilien relies on the analysis of films, fiction, as well as criticism by African and Francophone Caribbean writers such as the Guadeloupean Maryse Condé and Simone Schwarz-Bart, the Haitian-American Edwidge Danticat, the French-Togolese filmmaker Anne-Laura Folly, the Ivorian filmmaker Désiré Ecaré, the Malian director Adam Drabo, and the influential Senegalese filmmaker Sembène Ousmane (to mention just a few). Accilien argues that the writings and texts she analyzes reveal the extent to which female agency and resistance in these cultures are consistently curtailed to buttress a hegemonic form of masculinity at the expense of women’s wellbeing and safety. What is more, drawing on a Fanonian insight, Accilien sees this patriarchal structure as a reflection of the workings of nationalism in the regions she scrutinizes.

The seven chapters in *Rethinking Marriage* are thematically organized rather than centered around close readings of particular narrative texts. In chapter one, “Marriage and Gender Politics,” Accilien takes on the issue of Western feminism. She highlights the reasons why many African and Caribbean authors and critics have distanced themselves from a movement whose premises are too often applied to nonwestern cultures in a decontextualized and paternalistic manner. Nevertheless, while emphasizing the importance of attending to cultural and ethnic differences when discussing gender in Africa and the Caribbean, her analysis of the workings of patriarchy in these contexts strongly evokes the kind of feminist approach whose assumptions she is questioning and which can be traced back to the second wave of the women’s movement. The discussion of the ways in which women’s agency and sexuality are controlled and subordinated to men across cultural and national borders consistently evokes the insights of 1960s and 1970s feminist analyses, even as it also shares some of their limitations.

In chapter two, “Marriage, Sex, and the Body,” for instance, Accilien examines the ways in which “marriage provides ways of controlling both a woman’s sexuality and her body” (p. 35). Films on circumcision such as *Finzan* by Cheikh Oumar Sissoko and *Malouda* by Ousmane help illustrate this claim and expose the conflict between tradition and modernity through which circumcision accrues meaning in African society. Accilien highlights the importance of the cult of virginity to both African and Caribbean cultures and uses her analysis of two novels and two films as a springboard from which to determine these societies’ relation to female sexuality: Africa is viewed through its relation to female circumcision via the lens offered by the films she discusses, while the Haitian-American Edwidge Danticat’s first novel *Breath, Eyes, Memory* offers the lens through which Accilien highlights the importance of the cult of virginity in Caribbean contexts.[1]

Chapter three scrutinizes the relation between marriage and motherhood as another site of women's oppression. The limited rights of women in marriage, the "cycle" of single motherhood, and the myth of male virility are all mentioned as examples of the ways in which motherhood disempowers women. The author illustrates her point through a plot analysis of *Fureurs et Cris de Femmes* (1989) by Angele Rawiri from Gabon.[2] She argues that while women's roles are indeed constrained by cultural traditions, women "begin to question the traditions and ultimately overthrow them" (p. 62). It is unclear, however, whether such claims pertain to what is happening in the novel or to the social and cultural worlds of Africa and the Caribbean in general.

Chapter four "Marriage, Religion, and Polygyny" analyzes how marriage and religion operate as one coherent entity in African societies. Accilien again uses a work of fiction, namely Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter* to discuss the role of polygyny in society and the use of religion as a way of supporting the practice.[3] The roles of the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law and their problematic relation to polygyny are also discussed. So is the practice of "plaçage" in Haiti, which refers to two people living together without getting married. Because marriage was forced upon slaves during the colonial period, Accilien explains, plaçage as a substitute for official marriage could be seen as a form of resistance. Last but not least, Accilien suggests a possible link between polygyny and Vodou, since Vodou stages the marriage of men and women to one *or more* lwa or spirits at the same time (p. 87), a practice that people may then unconsciously transfer to their human relationships. Chapter five engages the problem of AIDS in relation to the issue of polygyny, while chapter six on "Marriage, métissage, and Identity" (Accilien's strongest chapter) expands on the ways in which the plantation economy contributed to the disintegration of marriage and the family structure. This *development sharply contrasts with the role marriage has played in Western and industrialized settings* and hence highlights the importance of a historicized and contextualized discussion of the institution.

Chapter seven uses fiction and films from African and the Caribbean to "demonstrate how fiction novels represent the roles of women in marriage" (p. 143), but, like the rest of the book, it fails to work out the relation between the social world and the literary that is consistently implied but never theorized. Indeed, throughout *Rethinking Marriage*, Accilien assumes a straightforward and unfortunately unexamined relation between society and its representation, moving freely between sociological data and literary representations as if one could illuminate the other unproblematically. Literary examples serve as evidence of what is happening in African and Caribbean societies, while sociological information provides a straightforward framework for the analysis of the literary texts she discusses. Considering the rich and conflicted history of writings on the relation between the social and the literary, it is troubling that Accilien does not so much as gesture to the fraught nature of her approach. Nevertheless, for readers interested in becoming more familiar with texts and films from Africa and the Caribbean, *Rethinking Marriage* will not disappoint. Its discussion of marriage as a symptom of patriarchal power that transcends boundaries of nation, culture, and history may not "rethink" marriage per se, but it does give us a glimpse into the representation of the institution in nonwestern francophone texts.

## NOTES

[1] Edwidge Danticat, *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (New York: Soho Books, 1994)

[2] Angèle Rawiri, *Fureurs et Cris de Femmes* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1989)

[3] Mariama Bâ, *So Long a Letter* (Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 1981)

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