



## THUMBPRINTS OF MISERY: EDWIDGE DANTICAT'S *THE FARMING OF BONES* AS A COUNTER-HEGEMONIC NARRATIVE OF HISTORICAL TRAUMA

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### Abstract

Edwidge Danticat's novel, *The Farming of Bones*, is a poignant narrative that explores the themes of memory, identity, and trauma. Set against the backdrop of the 1937 Haitian massacre, the novel narrates the life of Amabelle Desir, a young Haitian woman who works as a maid for a wealthy Dominican family. Traumatically wounded by the harrowing experiences of ethnic cleansing orchestrated by Dominican dictator Rafael Trujillo, Amabelle suffers a fragmented identity. Through Amabelle's story of escape and survival, Danticat questions the production of historical truth and the enduring impacts of trauma on collective memory. Offering a subjective view of historical events, the novel establishes the need for a counter-hegemonic narrative. With its rich lyrical prose *The Farming of Bones* challenges the absolute nature of truth and calls for rewriting of history.

**Keywords:** Trauma, history, truth, counter-hegemonic narrative

The Haitian-American author Edwidge Danticat's 1998 novel *The Farming of Bones* is a narrative that gives a "psychohistorical remembrance" (Arthur 101) of the gruesome Haitian massacre of 1937. The Caribbean islands of Dominican Republic and Haiti is divided by what is notoriously called as 'the Massacre River' which many Haitians in search of jobs and better living situations crossed over the years. Even though "prejudice against Haitians among many lighter-skinned Dominicans has become commonplace" (Torres-Saillant 13), the

dearth of labourers to work on sugar cane, tobacco, and coffee and the need for construction labourers led to many Haitians cross the infamous border. When Rafael Trujillo the Dominican military commander and dictator came to power, hatred towards Haitians were inflamed as his government accused Haitians as the reason for Dominican Republic's depleting economic status. With the idea of building a state of light skinned pure blooded Dominican Republicans, Trujillo initiated the extermination of all Haitians. Called "The

Cutting" ("El Corte"), this mission led to the mass massacre of Haitian cane labourers in October 1937. The bodies of many individuals slain near the border were disposed of in the waters of the Massacre River, which subsequently became etched in the collective memory of Haitians as a poignant metaphor for both death and eternity, embodying the pain and longing to provide a proper burial for their loved ones. When the state funded historical narratives justified the need for this cruel action, the history of many slave labourers were left unsaid. Edwidge Danticat's novel "The Farming of Bones" seeks to amplify the suppressed narratives within Hispaniola's historiography, offering a counter-hegemonic account of the traumatic events. She gives a more intimate and private history of the 1937 Haitian massacre. Danticat's novel represents a postmodern effort to diversify the "official history" by incorporating the narratives of Haitian immigrant workers residing in the Dominican Republic under Rafael Trujillo's administration. By doing so, the novel establishes a narrative space that functions as a site of collective memory for a group of oppressed and marginalised community.

Danticat develops her counter-hegemonic fiction by narrating the story through the voice of Amabelle Desir, a Haitian woman working for a wealthy Spanish family. Danticat deeply subjective narration through the testimonial voice of Amabelle provides the reader a means to understand the traumatic truth of history. Amabelle narration of her traumatic past unfolds a traumatic historical narrative that gives voice to the muted victims of the massacre. According to *Encyclopedia of Quality of Life and Well-Being Research*, collective memory refers to the "complex social process in which a society or social group constructs and reproduces its relation to the past. Collective memory mainly refers to those cultural practices and social knowledge about the past that influence emergence, transformation, and extinction of social identities." ("Collective

memory"). *The Farming of Bones* is thus a novel that reveals the collective memory of the voiceless victims of "the cutting". Danticat uses the female body as the canvas upon which the traumatic wounds endured by the victims are revealed. The years of hard work and the endured traumatic pain is expressed in terms of a deteriorated female body. Amabelle remarks: "I knew that my body could no longer be a tempting spectacle, nor would I ever be truly young or beautiful, if ever I had been. Now my flesh was simply a map of scars and bruises, a marred testament" (Danticat 227). The phrase "map of scars" refers to her body as a metaphor—a living map of pain that carries the physical documentation of personal and public violence. The image of the disfigured body of Amabelle is testimonial image of trauma.

This historical novel is set in a border town in the Dominican Republic in 1937, during President Rafael Trujillo's campaign of ethnic cleansing against Haitian immigrants. It narrates the story of Amabelle Desir, a young Haitian woman employed as a maid in the household of a wealthy Dominican family. Orphaned as a child, Amabelle was rescued at the river's edge by Don Ignacio, a prominent Dominican landowner, who subsequently raised her alongside his daughter, Valencia. Central to Amabelle's life is her lover, Sebastian Onius, who, like many other Haitian immigrants, works under cruel torturing masters, cutting sugar cane on an American-owned plantation. The death of Joel, a friend of Sebastian, in a car accident exposes the pervasive racism within Dominican society and the escalating tensions as President Trujillo prepares his lethal campaign. Amabelle and Sebastian's planned escape is thwarted when they get lost and separated. Amabelle then undertakes a perilous journey to the border in search of Sebastian. Her arduous journey takes her to a group of other slaves fleeing the massacre whom she joins as she travel through the mountains. Upon reaching the border city of Dajabón, she encounters violent Dominican

mobs who have been manipulated into believing the government's racist propaganda against Haitians. Amabelle endures physical assault and torture when her pronunciation of the word "perejil" (parsley) exposes her Haitian identity, serving as a shibboleth used by Dominican mobs. Following the death of her friend while crossing the river that delineates the Haitian-Dominican border, Amabelle crosses into Haiti. There, she recuperates under the care of her friend Yves and subsequently travels to the family home of Yves. Yves and Amabelle maintain a complex relationship marked by ambivalence, further complicated by Amabelle's persistent quest to locate Sebastian. Despite learning of his tragic death during the massacre, Amabelle refuses to believe and clings to the hope for his eventual discovery.

The novel examines the enduring and devastating aftermath of the massacre through an exploration of the psychological developments of Yves and Amabelle as they navigate into middle age. Twenty-five years following the assassination of Trujillo, Amabelle returns to Alegria, the small town in the Dominican Republic where she came of age. Her journey is driven by a quest for closure and a desire to uncover information about Sebastian. There, she reunites with Senora Valencia, her childhood friend, only to realise that their friendship could never have withstood the strains imposed by racial and class disparities. The encounter completely shatters Amabelle, prompting her to pause at the border and contemplate on her past and the purpose of her life. In this acclaimed novel, Danticat attempts to construct a social and national identity by weaving together the personal history and traumatic past of a country's women population. The narrative delves into Amabelle's realisation of the traumatic impact of the massacre that has completely shattered her sense of self and rewritten her identity. Amabelle standing at the border between Haiti and the Dominican Republic is a significant moment in the novel as it represents the human

lives that are destroyed by the political struggle between two Caribbean islands. By narrating the history through the eyes of a single character Danticat attempts to ignite a more sympathetic approach from her readers.

The Farming of Bones portrays the post-colonial condition through an exploration of intersecting themes while its characters' traverse the national, geographical, and linguistic boundaries, and the intersection of these in them causing the formation of complex personal, social, and national identities. Amabelle who left Haiti at a very young age and returned later after years is unable to feel at home making her an Other at her own ancestral land. During periods of turmoil and unrest, individuals often seek a secure place where they can reconnect with their roots. Amabelle who has lost her documents when travelling to Dominican Republic do not have any official record to prove her Haitian nationality. She states: "I wondered who had our house now and if I could still claim the land, is my inheritance. I had no papers to show, but it was probably recorded some place that the land was once my father's and mother's and—even I hadn't been there for a long time—was still my birth right" (Danticat 184). Here the author shows how the paper documents created by governments become creator of identity and nationality. The personal history and truth of individuals are brushed away by the authoritarian policies. Danticat thus plays with the concept of history to prove that it is manufactured by those in power.

Establishing the constructed nature of history Danticat moves on to a rebellious questioning of such hegemonic truths. Danticat shows how the truth narrated by a few surviving Haitians are dismissed and questioned as they are asked to produce proof for their truths. The victims are asked to give material evidence for a history entrenched in profound personal trauma. Their wounded bodies speak loudly of their suffering but the immense trauma of their mind remains

undocumented. Their pain is discarded and shunned unless, a "civilian face [come] to concede that what they witnessed and lived through did truly happen" (Danticat 236). Danticat underscores the significance of reminiscence in shaping national identity. For instance, Amabelle finds solace in memories of her past as she feels disconnected and lose sense of belonging amidst the turmoil of war. Her reveries in which she recalls a time when she belonged to a Dominican family and lived a mundane life, are her mode of asserting her social identity. Travelling into her past, Amabelle reminisces: "I thought of past Saturdays spent sitting with Senora Valencia, but it was all in the past. Now we must endeavor to seek out the future" (Danticat 184). Edwidge Danticat through the story of Amabelle Desir illustrates the disillusionment felt by Haitians who struggle to define what their identity is in relation to a country and a community. Thus she speaks of the need to root into a collective identity as mode of discovery of self.

The political tensions between Haiti and Dominican Republic goes centuries back into history when they were still colonies of imperial powers. Their enmity originates from fundamental cultural differences. Dominican Republic is predominantly Spanish-speaking and Catholic, while Haiti is largely Creole-speaking and of African descent. The opposing nature of these cultures furthers the hatred. Historical records states that Dominican Republic in the nineteenth century was invaded by Haiti and this episode of Haitian occupation remains deeply ingrained in Dominican national memory. Using this as a pretext to ignite the deep ridden hatred, Trujillo seized the opportunity of killing Haitian labourers, as a retaliatory action. The Dominican ruler who perceives Haitians as a potential economic and national security threat framed their presence as endangering the Dominican Republic. An anti-Haitian propaganda was published portraying them as uncivilised barbarians who were potential adversaries to labor and prosperity.

Dominicans were made to believe that the presence of Haitian population contaminated their national identity and individuality, while Haitians were suppressed and marginalized. This is evident in the statement: "They say some people don't belong anywhere and that's us" (Danticat 56). Trujillo aiming at creating an exclusive Dominican population introduced measures to wipe away the Haitians.

Edwidge Danticat once said about the origin of the themes of her writing:

I think a lot of creative work springs out of some place deeper in us, a place that maybe even the writer does not have access to until he or she begins writing. I grew up under a dictatorship. Maybe that's a bigger scar than even I realized when I was a child, or even now. Maybe I'll understand it finally when I am an old woman. I saw a lot of people go away, a lot of people arrested, a lot of people "disappeared." I thought when I was younger that I was "used to it." It seemed like a sad, but kind of normal part of life. I thought it was like that everywhere, but maybe I was shell shocked by all this. Maybe I was traumatized and that trauma is now surfacing in this way. (Lyons 190)

In Danticat's novel *The Farming of Bones*, the protagonist Amabelle's haunting sense of guilt represents her traumatized psyche. Even before the massacre, Amabelle is traumatised, as she suffers from the haunting memories of her parents' tragic death. They drowning in the Massacre River and she surviving leaves her with an indelible feeling of survivor guilt. Awake or asleep she is haunted by nightmares and exists in a dissociated state. "It's either be in a nightmare or be nowhere at all. Or otherwise simply float inside these remembrances, grieving for who I was, and even more for what I've become" (Danticat 2). Amabelle's recurring nightmares reveals her fragmented sense of self and the sense of detachment that haunts her. In a nightmare Amabelle recounts encountering a



symbolic figure known as the "sugar woman," a folkloric entity described as adorned in a long, three-tiered ruffled gown resembling an inflated balloon. She has a shiny silver muzzle, and she wears a collar with beautiful dark locks around her neck. The imagery consists of childlike elements, as she imagines of romantically embracing void and kissing into the air imagining it to be a person. The sugar woman of Amabelle's dream represents historical trauma of slavery, as evident when she explains that the muzzle was "given to me a long time ago... so I'd not eat the sugarcane." Later the woman becomes the symbolical mirror of Amabelle, as implied by a dialogue exchange in the dream: "Told you before... I am the sugar woman. You, my eternity." The identification is further defined when Amabelle questions, "Is your face underneath this?" and reflects on the surprising realization that the voice emerging from her own mouth resembles "the voice of the orphaned child at the stream, the child who from then on would only talk to strange faces" (Danticat 132-133).

Amabelle, a victim of multiple trauma, carries a fragmented sense of self, and this finds resonance in the symbolic figure of the sugar woman. They both had undergone profound alterations and conceal their true identity beneath a brutally scarred body. They exist in a liminal space as they are unable to belong to a true self or a collective memory. The sugar woman's declaration that Amabelle is her "eternity" refers to a legacy of historical suffering that is visible in traumatically wounded characters like Amabelle. While the narrative is primarily a testimony of Amabelle's suffering the novel also includes several other characters to portray their struggles too. Sebastien, her lover, carries in him the haunting memory of his father's violent death during a hurricane (Danticat 34). Señora Valencia, Amabelle's employer, is later shown as giving birth to twins- a girl and a boy. It is narrated that the male twin, Rafael, named after Trujillo, attempts to harm his darker-skinned twin sister,

Rosalinda, who manages to survive while her brother succumbs to weakness and dies. This story of the twins symbolically represents the history of Haiti brutally attacked by Trujillo. The novel thus through its heart wrenching narration of Amabelle Desir establishes through a deeply personal tale, a counter-hegemonic narrative of historical trauma.

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