



## EMBLEMS, MAGIC AND MYTHOLOGY: TROPES OF SUBTLE RESISTANCE IN MAYRA MONTERO'S *THE RED OF HIS SHADOW*

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### ABSTRACT



The nature of female struggles varies the world over. Living in a proverbial man's world requires much ingenuity and brawn on the part of women to succeed. Female authors seeking to unseat hegemonic masculinity, the 'Big Bad Bull', likewise treads carefully, since this hegemonic patriarchal monster, fed by a male-privileging discourse aims at stifling the female authorial voice via literary misogyny. Heteronormativity, the ideology that ordinary people belong to rigid and complementary natural gender taxonomies, situates males as predators while objectifying women into subservience. Arnold postulates that homophobia in the French West Indies "is linked dialectically to the representation of the island male as a superstud" (39). He opines that this extreme form of gendering the masculine in literature suppresses the homosexual male and other sexual deviancies. But this finding by Arnold goes further to the wider Caribbean and even other parts of the world. It is within the context of the superstud that the female author writes and must tread with caution as a chameleon does, almost undetected, in a context hostile to any who outwardly oppose patriarchal masculinity.

**Keywords:** *Magic, Emblems, Mythology, Vodou, Resistance, Women, Patriarchy, Masculinity*

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**INTRODUCTION**

Writing amidst the chokehold of masculinity, Montero manipulates mythology and home-grown emblems dismantle dominant heteropatriarchal manifestations and open a space for same-sex discourse. Her reliance on local metaphors recalls Mapanje's subtle sidestepping of state supremacy. Her narrative celebrates density in a spirit of Creoleness: "For complexity is the very principle of our identity. Exploring our Creoleness must be done in a thought as complex as Creoleness itself" (892). Her novel is abuzz with Vodou, a leitmotif in the novel. Combined, her Vodou vernacular carry myths with meanings that elude ordinary readers.

A family flees Haiti to the Dominican Republic, bringing their religion, which they mix with Dominican Rara, another religious belief system, to create the Gagá. Among the Gagá allegiants, the youngest female member, Zulé Revé, undergoes initiation to emerge sorceress and potentate, her licences into licentious living. Ironically, despite her promiscuity, people near and far consult the herb cognoscente in the cane fields for physical and spiritual aid. The peripatetic lives of Zulé and her people in the cane field maze sadly lack the benefit of proper social amenities. These shoddy conditions, nonetheless, do not prevent her from leading an itinerant people through the cane fields on an organised, four-day pilgrimage that intersects with the Gagá of her nemesis and one-time lover, Similá Bolosse. Zulé's unresolved sexual life with Similá, in her salad days, and with a younger man return to haunt her at this cross-section.

**VODOU FACTS AND THE NOVEL**

Before articulating Montero's Vodou trope in a young girl's life as a means of subtly undermining patriarchy, consider some Vodou facts! Haitian Vodou is a syncretic religion practised chiefly in Haiti and the Haitian diaspora. Practitioners or 'vodouists' acknowledge a supreme, distant, unknowable creator, Bondye (derived from the French term, Bon Dieu, 'Good God'). Bondye's non-intercession in earthly affairs prompts the ritualists to direct obeisance toward spirits (loas) subservient to Bondye. Each loa controls a specific aspect of life, and

possesses dynamic and mutable personalities that reflect the negotiating situation. As a rule of thumb, practitioners foster close relationships with loas through offerings, sacrifices, personal altars, and objects of devotion. The vodouists engage the loas by engaging in grandiose music, dance, and spirit possession rites. Of note, Vodou "has survived in spite of its horrendously bad reputation and the persecution of its followers" (Rengifo 127). In the Caribbean, Vodou mushroomed under French rule in the 18th century during the active suppression of African religious practices. Contemporary religious Vodou practices descended from the West African Vodun of the Fon and Ewe people. The religion syncretises other African Yoruba and Kongo cultural elements with Taino religious beliefs, Roman Catholicism, and European spirituality influences, catapulting the religion into the international spotlight.

Having spent her formative years in Haiti, Montero capitalised on her knowledge of Vodou to personify the religion in *The Red of His Shadow*. With rituals as tropes, she illuminates the bedarkened Haitian world of avarice, envy, amphieroticism, trances, witchcraft, blood sacrifices, and superstition. Though spanning the chronological time of four days, the novel addresses Vodou's impact on the people's lives through a series of flashbacks: early life in the bately (living quarters), ceremonies, and death of family members. Sequential flashbacks bring the mythology-recalling power of the past to bear upon present characters. By overlapping opposing time zones, Montero renders them porous to each other in her magical world of Vodou.

**VODOU MYTHS, RITUAL AND EMBLEMS AS RESISTANCE**

Montero settles on Vodou and Vodou mythology, two signification-occluding orders, to unsettle patriarchy. The organising principle of her novel, the Gagá, which borrows heavily from Vodou, accords Zulé power unattainable to females under male-centred rule. Via the titles of mambo [priestess] and houngan [priest], the author establishes parity between the sexes. Author and critic, Fernández Olmos, concurs that "the choice of a female spiritual



leader, a mambo, is a significant one," and ranks "the mambo equal to her male counterpart, thereby conferring on women a status in the religious hierarchy denied to them in the larger society" (277). This power conferral resists patriarchy since a mambo, a female, mediates between loas and men. As undeniable leader of spiritual services, the mambo asogwe [high priestess] enjoys what Haiti and the Dominican Republic's dominant religion, Roman Catholicism, denies women. Linked to these and other Vodou vernacular are myths, another type of decontextualisation and a fertile chameleon breeding ground. Myths "not only disguises the context but adds the authority of traditional wisdom to a text" (Ross 171).

Montero's Vodou myths and emblems destabilise three of hegemonic masculinity's pride and joy: the rational-thinking male, the well-endowed virile superstud, and the normativity of heterosexuality. Her key characters—Jérémié Candé, Zulé, and Similá—constitute respective avatars for the loas: Carfú, Erzulie, and Bull Belecou or Taureau-trois-graines. Deities, in effect, become humans, and humans, in their fleeting dreams of immortality, become deities.

Montero uses Jérémié Candé's fickle emotional response, undermines the notion of the rational-decision-making male. Lewis also notes how Caribbean males, powerful lions of patriarchy, pride themselves in being family protectors. Candé, triply Zulé's Chinese stepson, batey member, and personal bodyguard sets his mind on her ever since having sex with her. Candé sets out to control the life of the mistress. But Zulé eschews his amorous advances. Adding fuel to the torch he carries for her, Zulé permits Jérémié's occasional acts of voyeurism. Set on watching, Candé asks for more. However, Zulé refuses, threatening his life and setting up herself for trouble. The lust-filled, voyeuristic fantasy world sets a high bar for the "Peeping Tom" in turmoil, and barred from materialising his dream. In Candé's case, his jealousy, added to deep-seated lusts, sets him off when he sees Zulé's lover, Similá. Zulé and her bodyguard-stalker, Jérémié, as well as the Gagá cohort set out on their annual cane field pilgrimage. This narrative set-up, with Similá and Candé and Zulé,

evokes a deathly love triangle. Zulé and Candé seem set to challenge Similá, when an unexpected turn of events shocks the reader: Jérémié, possessed of a spirit, resurrects old jealousies and sets about attacking Zulé.

The novel identifies Jérémié with Carfú, a loa, through the symbolic act of spirit possession, which creates a doubling between character and loa. Ready to attack Similá, "Jérémié Candé, who is now Jérémié Carrafur, who is the same as Carfú Coridón, who is the devil Guédé on his mother's side and the devil Guédé on the father's side...shows his middle finger to Similá and shouts the war cry" (135). While all loas represent African spirits, the Guédé figures as the death-and-fertility-embodiment organic to Antillean soil (Pinn 23). The Devil Guédé on both parental sides pins down Carfú's totalising mind influence on Jérémié. Montero employs spirit possession as metaphor to render the rational male uncontrollably irrational. The Vodou act of spirit possession defines a real life performance in which a person speaks and acts extraordinarily, and demonstrates uncontrollable fits of convulsions attributed to a body-inhabiting spirit. Vodou terminology employs mounting [possessing], horse [possessed], and riding. These equine terms, when applied to humans, constitute violent metaphors that represent the relationship between loa and ritualist. Spirit possession parallels 'getting in spirit' or being filled with the Holy Ghost, such as in many churches. Métraux's findings present spirit possession as difficult to fake. For the uninitiated to process the opaque phenomenon, Métraux pairs spirit possession with drunkenness. Upon regaining sobriety, the inebriated, like the possessed, remembers nothing. The drunkard may uncontrollably spill his guts, playing out his innermost thoughts. Observers sometimes seize the horse, in the case of a woman, to prevent indecent exposure during her wine-bibbing-like frenzy. Possession figures as a highly contested site for onlookers in the Caribbean. Some locals naysay this horse-powered, logic-defying ritual, while others ride on the belief. Combined, both postures portray a contradictory Antillean culture of mingling European and African logics. Overall, Métraux's analogous treatment of spirit possession



and inebriation underscores irrepressible violence and gut-spilling acts in humans. Montero engages this actual magic performance to magically unveil two sides to one person.

In the Caribbean, greater distinction exists between magic and magical realism. Both can function as narrative tropes. Magical realism catapulted the Spanish American novel to eminence. Leading pioneer, Carpentier, represents magical realism in his famous essay—written as a prologue to his 1949 world wonder—as “a privileged revelation of reality, an unusual lighting.... of unseen riches of reality, an extension of the scales and categories of reality” (Zamora and Faris 86). Donald D. Shaw employs a synonym, “fantastic realism”: a literary technique that exploits the pure imaginative and the irrational (46). Magical realism, similar to the surrealism of fantasy realism, subverts representations of power by creating a mixed partition between the divisions of magic and real, animals and humans. In undermining a cultural system, “lo real maravilloso” employs “wonder” perceived as “a cultural weapon against excessive rationalism; rationalism representing the colonialist mentality in power or rationalism as a system of power” (Carpentier 89). In this regard, Jose Eustacio Rivera’s *The Vortex* examines myths, legends, and the supernatural as part of magical realism.

Montero’s deployment of magic, however, transcends Rivera and Carpentier’s “set of pictures.” Her representation is not only imaginary, but real anthropological and social customs confirmed by Métraux. Here, reality is magical in itself, because magic is a cultural practice of Haitian and Dominican Vodou. Regarding Montero’s novel, esteemed critic, Susanna Regazzoni, declares: “Magic is not just exoticism; rather it belongs to a religion that accompanies everyday life of the people of Haiti in its time” (469). In essence, Montero plays with the magically real and the really magical and, with her poetic licence as *carta blanca*, may reverse the dynamics to render the really magical magically real. Causing snow to fall on a Caribbean island, for example, exemplifies magical realism in her novel. Rengifo says this of Montero: “The magical and supernatural appear in her work where they retain a

revelatory significance” (130).

Not surprising, Montero’s imaginary magic with real and personified Vodou practices authorise a “fact authentic chronicle, detailing life in the Spanish part of the island of Haiti, in the region of the Roman” (Regazzoni 470). Her cauldron of magic-cum-magical-realism concocts a hybridity that recalls her journalistic narrative seen in many of her works that, according to Weiez, “cannot be redeemed unless by means of fiction and imagination put to the reader” (73). Montero gains agency from the two faces of magic in the Caribbean and her primary technique, magic, becomes “a cultural weapon against excessive rationalism,” powerfully subverting while hiding meaning.

Montero enlists spirit possession rituals as motifs to uncover motives in her characters. She associates Carfú’s mounting of Jérémie Candé with giving free rein to years of bridled feelings of fatalistic jealousy. As the embodiment of Carfú, Candé’s actions mirror characteristics of the loa. Carfú is one of the aspects of the spirit, Papá Legbá. The Legbá—language master, quintessential trickster of Vodou mythology, and enabler of border crossings—fools onlookers. Montero now undermines the controlling patriarch, Candé, by stretching him to negative extremes, associating him with these loas like Carfú, a spirit syncretised with Satan, the epitome of evil in Christian mythology. As his name, Carfú, indicates, he monitors the crossroads and controls bad luck, deliberate destruction, misfortune, and injustices.

Zulé’s association with Candé presages non-progression and gloom, much like one stuck at a crossroad awaiting the ominous. After both Gagás intersect in a deadlock, a possessed Jérémie, in a bolt out of the blue, presents himself to confront the lovers. The faithful servant, driven to extremes of jealousy, plunges the machete into Zulé’s neck, then cuts off her nipples and fingers. Candé leaves everything but a sweet taste in Zulé’s mouth. Similá then runs over, and severs Candé’s knees. The beleaguered and complex heterosexual relationship consequently climaxes in Zulé and Candé’s demise. Here Montero validates the theory that links masculinity to violence. She goes further, through



hyperbole, to take the violence to maniacal levels to undermine the patriarch.

Montero destabilises masculinity through Jérémie Candé as renegade bodyguard. How ironic that, as personal guard, Candé slaughters the person he vows to protect! The stepson oversteps boundaries by mistaking guardianship with control over Zulé. He cannot accept that he and Zulé are no longer an item. He processes Zulé's affair as a betrayal of years of his faithfulness as guard and stepson. Candé's patriarchal move replicates that of the traditional male hegemon, who reads female disloyalty as a rejection of his socially ordained role as family provider and protector.

Insane with rage, Candé, attacks Zulé first. The aggrieved assaults last the person perceived first as culpable. Jérémie's most serious challenge is Similá. The bodyguard murders Zulé not only for bruising his male ego, but as revenge on Similá, a beef Candé intends to pound last. The pressure-cooking Candé, who is not mute but never opens his mouth (72), loses all sense of reason when his job matters most. Candé fails to filter personal feelings from professional responsibilities in the face of internal male insecurity issues, and consequently explodes, precipitating a masculinity crisis. His actions spell carnage for his camp by weakening the Gagá's defence against Similá. Christianá, the warrior queen, later pieces Zulé's scattered and twitching body parts together, graphic reminders not only of the female cry, but masculinity's blaring hee haw for help.

Montero employs auxesis, a feature of mythical accounts, to debase Similá Bolosse, Zulé's enemy-lover identified, like Candé, with extreme mythological and historical figures. Similá is a bokor [an evil houngan], since he works with two hands: one for good and one for evil. Following the lead of the Haitian proverb—when the character of a man is not clear to you, look at his friends—bokors work with the evil loa-quartet of Baron Samedi (mean ruler over the dead and cemeteries), Carfú, the Legbá, and Simbi (a diverse family of serpent loas) Associating Similá with the Legbá accentuates the houngan's duplicity. These loa personifications heighten Similá's

base qualities. Besides, onomatology traces his family name to 'bolos' [drug dealer] and the French verb, *bolosser* [to persecute]. In a sardonic way, 'bolos' means big zero or worthless. Bolosse traffics drugs from Santo Domingo into Haiti under the Duvalier regime, and barely escapes death in the Haitian uprising. He now heads a Gagá of bloodthirsty, rifle-slitting tonton macoutes.

Papa Doc's 1959 brainchild and members of Haiti's paramilitary force, the tonton macoutes were so-called from the Haitian mythological Uncle Gunnysack, a bogeyman-type creature who kidnaps and punishes disobedient children by luring them into a gunnysack [macoute], then carries them off to devour at breakfast. To perpetuate a reign of terror, the dictator disbanded the official army, and instituted these cannibal-like, nightmarish sycophants, the chiefest being Luckner Cabronne. This ill-famed tonton macoute chief, nicknamed 'Vampire of the Caribbean,' trafficked drugs and sold cadavers acquired for three dollars per dead at the General Hospital in Port-au-Prince. Many families reported empty coffins upon arrival at funerals. In extremis, relatives of the deceased engineered the undoing of this abhorred scavenger and blood-sucking vampire. Only Baby Doc surpassed him in power.

Papa Doc and Cabronne's singular aim—to consolidate power and silence dissenters—mirrors Similá's plot to monopolise trade in contraband across the Haitian border and annihilate opposers. Bolosse's scheme exemplifies how patriarchy, in the scheme of things, hogs economic resources, as Lewis postulates. The tonton macoutes' economic fame accompanied a strong Vodou religious air seen as unearthly to public eyes. Their choice of clothing—straw hats, blue denim shirts, dark glasses, with machetes and guns—accentuated Vodou influence in their lives (Murphy 66). The alloy of the supernatural and the physical, the celestial and the telluric, oiled a fear-instilling machinery. The avuncular hatred precipitated mass human slaughter like animals in an abattoir. The sobriquet, 'Vampire of the Caribbean,' fittingly captures Cabronne, and parallels Bolosse's cannibalistic tendencies in the novel. Montero employs hyperbolic language that depicts Similá's



sadomasochism as ruthless murder, thereby undermining him.

### CONCLUSION

By deauthorising with the same language of authorisation, Montero hides meaning as she forwards an agenda foregrounded in subtle resistance to patriarchy. She recognizes that a covert rather an overt attack serves her agenda well as she captures the reality and demands of a Caribbean context, but certainly one with relevance to a world steeped in patriarchy. She thus draws upon local culture: its emblems and mythology and use them as a means of camouflaging resistance in her novel.

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