

Solitude la flamboyante: a work of decolonial feminism by

Paula Anacaona

Solitude, la Flamboyante is an illustrated historical fiction written by Paula Anacaona - writer, publisher and translator - in 2020. The novel tells the story of Solitude, a woman born around 1772 in Guadeloupe, which is then a French colony. Solitude is born from an enslaved mother in Bellesource, the home of the French bourgeois family L'Arbresle. Because she is the product of her African mother and a French sailor, Solitude does not have dark skin. Thus, she is treated differently than other enslaved people. As she grows older, Solitude takes in fact the role of the young mistress Marie-Julie's confidant and play partner. Little by little, Solitude realizes the injustice that surrounds her and her kind and organizes a rebellion against the colonists. The novel focuses on Solitude's quest for her own identity as well as on her bravery when she leads a group of enslaved people to escape the plantations and to live in nature as a community.

In this paper, I argue that *Solitude la flamboyante* is a work of decolonial feminism as theorized by the French political scientist Françoise Vergès. According to her, decolonial feminism consists of « dépatricariser les luttes révolutionnaires » (Vergès 19). Anacaona does exactly that when she tells the story of Solitude. First, the writer emphasizes the questions of memory and History by reshaping the History of Guadeloupe and the rebellion of enslaved people. Secondly, it is through the narrative, but also through the form that the writer gets her message across, since the modifications of the language aim to free the protagonists from racist and rigid gender ideologies. Finally, Anacaona highlights the role of racialized women in their

own destiny, aiming to break free from the “civilizational feminism” which, according to Vergès, currently dominates feminist discourses.

Solitude la flamboyante reshapes the historical narrative of the colonies. Although the novel is fictional since Anacaona imagined most of Solitude’s personality, it is also historical, and her existence is not to be questioned. Anacaona ensures to provide her readers with many historical facts, such as dates and official records of enslaved people. In one passage, she notes that

"L'abolition (de 1848) concernera en Guadeloupe 87.087 esclavagisés – le chiffre est précis, car il vient des indemnités payées par l'Etat français aux propriétaires. (...) L'Etat versa donc aux colons guadeloupéens une indemnité de 470 francs par esclavagisé. Au total, les propriétaires français d'esclavagisés (de Guadeloupe, Martinique, Guyane, Saint-Louis du Sénégal, La Réunion et Madagascar) reçurent 123 millions de francs – l'équivalent de 5 milliards de tes euros aujourd'hui" (p.222)¹.

Solitude’s personal story thus aligns with the story of Guadeloupe, her cherished land. After the French Revolution, the enslaved population of the Antilles starts rebelling and some of them become “Marrons” and escape the plantations to live in nature. The novel explains that

“le marronnage affirmait la possibilité d'un futur quand ce dernier était forclos par la loi, l'Église, l'État, la culture qui proclamaient qu'il n'y avait pas d'alternative à l'esclavage, que celui-ci était aussi naturel que le jour et la nuit, que l'exclusion des Noir.e.s de l'humanité était chose naturelle ».

¹ The author reminds the readers of specific facts that are relevant in order to understand today’s inequalities. For example. The enslaved people did not receive any financial compensation. According to the author, "*cette abolition ratée sera la base d'inégalités futures qui, plus de 150 ans plus tard, n'ont toujours pas disparu*" (p.223).

On February 4th 1794, slavery is officially abolished in the colonies. However, under the reign of Napoléon Bonaparte, France reestablishes slavery in 1802. Yet, the History of slavery, and especially of the reestablishment of slavery by Napoléon is absent from most History books. In fact, the History of France is mainly told by France itself and, according to Vergès, not written in its entirety. For her, « il y a là quelque chose qui relève d'une volonté d'effacer ces peuples et leurs pays de l'analyse des conflits, des contradictions et des résistances » (Vergès 18). Thus, Europe chooses to erase and to ignore certain aspects of colonization and enslavement, in particular anti-racist and decolonial fights.

By referencing undeniable historical facts, Anacaona reshapes the narrative since the story is told by an enslaved woman, who, so far, have always been spoken for. Moreover, the novel reclaims the organized and peaceful rebellion led by the enslaved people of Guadeloupe. On page 128, the repetition of names humanizes the rebels and highlights their individuality². Alongside the visual repetition of a pair of broken handcuffs³, Anacaona insists that « les Esclavagisés n'ont pas été libérés – à la voix passive. *Nous nous sommes libérés*. L'abolition a été *collective* » (222). Anacaona thus alters the narrative by making enslaved people active in their liberation rather than passive. Additionally, she corrects the misuse of the term “Indiens” to refer to the indigenous people of Guadeloupe when Solitude confesses: “Je devrais même pas les appeler Indiens, eux ils s'appellent Kalinagos” (75). According to Vergès,

*« les féminismes de politique décoloniale s'inscrivent dans le long mouvement
de réappropriation scientifique et philosophique qui révisé le récit européen du*

² « Nous étions une multitude redécouvrant avec fierté notre négritude. [...] Henriette, Jeanne, Virginie, Marguerite, Thérèse, Anne, Joséphine, Sophie, Marie, Benoîte, Jacqueline, Maire-Josèphe, Geneviève, Lucie... Emmanuel, Paul, Eucharistie, François, Joseph, Baptiste, Jésus, Pierre, Jean, Christophe, Matthieu, Jacques, Luc, Jean-Baptiste, Jules, Germain, Ferdinand, Edme, Georges, Marcel, Denis, Fernand, Auguste, Gabriel, Lucien, Clovis... Et les enfants Rosalie, Amaury, Camille, Augustin, Marie... » (p.128)

³ The illustration appears twenty times between pages 128 and 221.

monde. Ils contestent l'économie-idéologie du manque, cette idéologie occidentale-patriarcale qui a fait des femmes, des Noir.e.s, des peuples autochtones, des peuples d'Asie et d'Afrique des êtres inférieurs marqués par l'absence de raison, de beauté, ou d'un esprit naturellement apte à la découverte scientifique et technique. » (Vergès, 24).

On the contrary, the novel insists on the multiple skills and cleverness that the enslaved people demonstrate in their quest for freedom. Additionally, the writer uses the term “la Révolution” (151) to refer to the enslaved people’s rebellion. The narrator Solitude declares:

“Il était temps que les bourgeois qui emplissent les coffres de la nation se rebellent contre les aristocrates, qui ne lèvent pas le petit doigt. La situation est la même ici : les planteurs ne font rien et ce sont nous qui tenons l'économie à bout de bras ! » (113)

Thus, Anacaona elevates the status of the enslaved people of Guadeloupe and ennobles their rebellion by comparing it with the French Revolution. Until then, the latter was glorified while the first one was ignored.

In addition to legitimizing the enslaved people’s rebellion through the narrative, Anacaona also liberates her protagonists through the language that she uses. French grammar and lexicon can sometimes still illustrate colonial and patriarchal ideologies. When writing or translating novels or essays on the topics of decolonization or feminism, some authors struggle to express gender fluidity or to break free from power relations. In *Solitude la flamboyante*, the language is decolonial. First, Anacaona uses the word “esclavagisé” rather than the word “esclave”. If the latter is used, it starts with a capital letter. Anacaona even sheds light on the process of reforming the language when the group of enslaved people votes to adopt a new noun that would best describe them on page 185. Replacing the word “esclave”, that suggests

the natural identity of a person, by the word “esclavagisé” deconstructs a vocabulary which is associated with ideologies of power, and from which the decolonial literature aims to break away. The passive voice denounces the process of objectification that the colonists perpetuated on African peoples. Similarly, the term “mûlatresse” is used throughout the novel to refer to the main character. Because the mule comes from a horse and a female donkey, this term was used by the colonists to refer to enslaved people that were born from an enslaved parent and a White parent. The term is obviously pejorative since it compares a human being to an animal. Moreover, it refers to sterility, thus taking away Solitude’s feminine identity, since the colonists thought that the mixing of bloods made individuals sterile. At the beginning of the novel, the narrator states: “ la mulâtresse Solitude... C’est ainsi qu’elle est passée à la postérité. Mais tu ne m’entendras jamais l’appeler ainsi » (13). Solitude is in fact represented pregnant on the cover of the book, thus contradicting her pejorative notoriety. Finally, the writer embraces the “accord de majorité” in a particular occurrence: “nous étions arrivées” (180). As she justifies in a foot note, she uses the feminine agreement because the group is composed mostly of women. Therefore, Anacaona reforms the French language as a tool of empowerment in order to break free from patriarchal and racist ideologies.

Anacaona also highlights the role of racialized women in their own destiny, aiming to break free from a civilizational feminism which, according to Vergès, currently dominates feminist discourses. As the political scientist argues,

“si le féminisme reste fondé sur la division entre femmes et hommes (une division qui précède l’esclavage), mais qu’il n’analyse pas comment esclavage, colonialisme et impérialisme agissent sur cette division [...], ce féminisme est alors raciste” (Vergès 31).

First, women in the novel are at the center stage. Anacaona makes Solitude the narrator of her own story, giving her a voice while she has previously always been spoken for. Moreover,

the author adds another narrator to her story: Anacaona, the princess of Haiti who reigned when the first colonizers arrived on the island in 1492. She was the first woman to lead the resistance movement among the enslaved people while resisting colonization. The author published the story of that princess in 2019⁴ and even took that pseudonym for herself and her publishing house as a gesture to prone self-definition and a space of freedom. As the omniscient narrator in the story, princess Anacaona is ubiquitous (« je voyais » (94), « en le voyant » (195), « en l’entendant » (195) and watches over all of the enslaved people who came after her, including Solitude, but also including Ana-Maria and her daughter Marie-Julie, Solitude’s mistresses. Indeed, it is through the princess Anacaona’s observations that the reader has access to the women’s secret feelings towards enslavement. Ana-Maria and Marie-Julie are in fact the only White characters to feel guilt and empathy towards the African populations. This contrasts with Edmond, the master and husband who beats his wife and only thinks about his own interests and profits. However, although Ana-Maria’s condition is considered inferior and submissive to her husband, she is clearly not enslaved. This sharp contrast between Solitude and her mistress refutes the discourse of many women in the European literature of the eighteenth century, who compare their feminine condition to enslavement, thus negating the experience of people in the colonies. Moreover, anti-slavery narratives from the age of enlightenment aim to show that « sans la femme blanche, pas de liberté⁵» (Vergès 47). White women proclaim themselves as the saviors of the « others », suggesting that the latter are uncivilized. Although Ana-Maria and Marie-Julie are aware and sensitive to Solitude’s cause since they understand the inhumanity of enslavement, they do not participate in her freedom. On the contrary, they admire Solitude

⁴ Anacaona, Paula and Amaral, Claudia. *1492, Anacaona l’insurgée des Caraïbes*. Paris, Anacaona Éditions, 2019

⁵ Vergès gives as an example the character Sophie who frees an enslaved couple in *Zamore and Mirza* written by Olympe de Gouges in 1784.

for gaining it herself. Thus, Anacaona moves away from a civilizational feminism, whose mission is defined by Vergès as “d’imposer au nom d’une idéologie des droits des femmes une pensée unique qui contribue à la perpétuation d’une domination de classe, de genre et de race » (12). Anacaona tells the story of Solitude directly, without going through an intermediary. Although the princess Anacaona is the first narrator, she states:

« *Il est temps de laisser parler Solitude. Je comprends son souhait que personne ne raconte son histoire à sa place* » (23).

To conclude, *Solitude la flamboyante* is a completely decolonial novel in which Anacaona reforms the History of Guadeloupe and its people by stating historical facts and by highlighting the active role of the enslaved population in its liberation. Anacaona also plays with the French language in order to free colonized people from racist or gender rigid ideologies still perpetuated today. At last, the novel emphasizes the role of enslaved women in their own liberation, breaking free from the idea that they need European women to gain their freedom. According to Vergès,

« *réécrire l’histoire des femmes, c’est suivre le chemin ouvert aux États-Unis, en Amérique centrale et du Sud, en Afrique, en Asie, et dans le monde arabe, pour mettre au jour les contributions des femmes indigènes, des femmes noires, des femmes colonisées, des féminismes antiracistes et anticoloniaux* » (Vergès 98).

The consequences of History are serious, which is why it is important for racialized people today to transmit knowledge of ancestors throughout stories, just like princess Anacaona does in the novel. This process allows the new generation of readers in 2020 to fill in the gaps that the Western-patriarchal ideology has intentionally constructed.

Works Cited

Anacaona, Paula & Amaral, Claudia. *Solitude la flamboyante*. Éditions Anacaona. 2020.

Vergès, Françoise. *Un féminisme décolonial*. La Fabrique éditions. 2019.