

Introduction

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Paule Constant is a contemporary French novelist who writes in a classical manner. Her fictional world is often reminiscent of Balzac's because of the serial aspect of her books, the way time sequences overlap, and the reappearance of certain characters who at times fade out or return to prominence. In all of Constant's novels the main characters seek a space of intimacy and safety, a space of desire associated with the mostly absent Mother. The protagonist's inner displacement speaks of loss and sometimes creates unspeakable terror, throwing her into a space of exile and desperate solitude. Constant's first three novels, *Ouregano*, *Propriété privée*, and *Balta*, form the "Tiffany Trilogy," after the name of the character, Tiffany, who appears in the first two as a main character and in the third as a minor one.

Constant published *Propriété privée* (*Private Property*), her second novel, in 1981, and it may be regarded as a "coming of age" novel. Set in France at the beginning of colonial independence, it is the sequel to *Ouregano* (1980), which took place in West-Central Africa before independence. At the end of *Ouregano*, Tiffany's parents send nine-year-old Tiffany away from Africa to live in P. (quickly identified as Pau, a town in the southwest of France) near her grandparents in order to attend a Catholic boarding school. To leave children with relatives in the homeland or in European boarding schools in the 1950s was, in fact, a good alternative for working expatriates. They weighed the choices of a better education for the children against the usually less healthy physical or psychological climates of the colonies and their impending wars.

Propriété privée (*Private Property*) serves as a fictional backdrop for Constant's own educational experience when she herself was sent to France while her parents were assigned to various posts in Africa, South America, and Indochina. The boarding school, modeled on the one Constant attended, is transformed fictionally into "La Pension des Sanguinaires," taking its name from the street on which it is found, named for the slaughterhouse at the end of the road, and is translated as "The Slaughterhouse School," underscoring the violent nature of the child's experience there.

The irony in Tiffany's repatriation is that the homeland does not feel like home. The colonial Africa of the 1950s (*Ouregano*) is her adopted "real" homeland. Though a white child, Tiffany was in harmony with her African roots. Her attachment to the natural environment, its people, and African animals provided her with a sense of self. She now lives a doubly heartbreaking experience when arriving in the southwest of France: separation from the land she loved and from her parents, especially her mother, who is distant and unapproachable but nevertheless her mother. France becomes, in part, a land of exile and the boarding school a jail, another exile of the soul, compared to her free-spirited and roaming lifestyle in the African countryside.

Constant has given both gifts and emotional handicaps to her young character. Tiffany belongs to the whole world and to none of it. The aspect that remains buried at the level of the "unsaid" throughout the entire novel is that the little girl deeply misses her mother and father. It is never mentioned, thus making her adjustment all the more poignant. This "lack" and "missing generational link" are first recognized in Tiffany's heart by a lie, when she answers a little girl's question with four words: My mother is dead. Later, she settles into an overwhelming silence and a persistent desire to scream, punctuated by her difficulty in following the nuns' rules.

The first line of the first paragraph of *Private Property*, "The senior girl was helping Tiffany adjust her celluloid collar," sets immediately the stage of strict regulation. The white celluloid collar, already a yoke, and the dark-blue pleated skirt of the uniform erase her tenuous identity. Moreover, in the eyes of her classmates, to come from the town of Ouregano is to be from nowhere; it makes no sense and becomes nonsense, as the text points out. Tiffany's identity is further stripped away since she will no longer be called by her familiar if unexplained nickname, Tiffany, but by her official first name, Marie-Françoise. Tiffany has become "other," and within, she feels she is no one at all. Her African Technicolor life has changed into a dreary, black-and-white existence, matching the nun's robes and the school floor, a world full of fear and anguish.

Tiffany's loneliness within civilized and orderly framework enforced by the nuns at the boarding school, stands in stark contrast with the positive environment and warmth of her grandmother, a mother substitute, more tender and understanding than the biological one. The center part of the novel focuses on the cherished grandmother, the elusive grandfather, and their love for the child. The translators have shown in one of the notes

that the name Désarmoise is also a bit of Constant's irony at work with respect to the grandfather, but as it applies to the grandmother, it enhances her intrinsic qualities. She disarms trouble (French: *désarmer*); she has the virtue and therapeutic properties of the Artemis plant (French: *armoïse*), and is associated with the Goddess Artemis, Ambrosia, the moon, and women's cycles. The grandmother, like the concoction, calms the little girl. Tiffany, like a yapping little dog, snuggles into the hollow of her grandmother's neck among her furs to find the reassuring smell of happiness and total love.

The grandparents' home is a country estate with a park-like garden and a farm beyond, where the lonely child finds shelter on the weekends. As is clear from the book title, the private property not only guarantees privacy and security but the old oak in front of the house symbolically stands as Tiffany's guardian. The tree is dramatically shattered at the end of the story when all hope is crushed and when the child experiences yet another abandonment at the death of her beloved grandmother. The expectorated blood of the grandmother's illness has now turned into the menstrual blood of the child, who interprets it as a sign from God, of transmutation and togetherness. Tiffany has been chosen to carry on her grandmother's lineage and destiny, in a twin-like association and reincarnation.

The recurrence of the blood motif is striking in this novel, from the beginning with the name of the boarding school to the ending where a workman bleeds from the cut glass of a window pane. The farm cows will be bled, including Cora, Tiffany's favorite cow, after slaughter. This process is seen by the little girl as a black hole. At the same time, the house is emptied of its contents. The gutted home itself seems to be bleeding like the heart of the little girl. The final blow occurs when Matilde (Tiffany's mother) discovers Madame Désarmoise's green lizard pumps from her younger days in Cannes and also when Matilde finds her beige teddy bear, Titi (short for "*petit*" in French, meaning "little"). At this point, it is interesting to note that the mother refuses the name of "maman," another of Constant's ironic twists, as the character's initials, MM, for Matilde Murano, represent a play on words in French. The initials MM, sounding like "aime, aime," to love twice, stand also for "mama" as a child would say it. Furthermore, the subtext of the foreign last name emphasizes coldness and darkness. Murano in Italian is a town and a type of glassware; in Spanish, Moreno means dark. Finally, the mother, originally a blonde, comes back from the hairdresser with auburn hair on the very day she puts the property up for sale.

At the closure of the text, Matilde claps her hands together and says, "All done." It is, indeed, the end of the Tiffany's childhood. Now, Tiffany is an adult in a child's body, watching her mother, judging her, and recognizing her failings. With pity and sadness, she sees and, perhaps, is ready to accept her mother as a little girl in an adult body. Two lessons have been learned. First, the encounter with death leaves a hole forever. And second, grown-ups are far from perfect and can even behave like children, carving yet another deep hole into Tiffany's heart. For this reason, Tiffany writes in pencil the date of their departure on the wallpaper of her beloved grandmother's bedroom. She will remember.

In the last book of the trilogy, *Balta* (1983), Tiffany is an adult, rediscovering the Africa of her childhood, which is very changed and yet somehow remains the same. This novel stands as the darkest of the three books in this trilogy. It tackles difficult post-independence realities and includes obvious ethical concerns. If *Private Property* is a child's coming of age, *Balta* represents the struggle and the coming of age of African nations dealing with their newly acquired freedom.

Private Property, Constant's most popular novel, remains her most moving one as well because its themes touch a truth in all of us — our suffering self or our joyful one — but mostly, because our enduring being seems depicted with accuracy and vision in spite of the harsh realities of modern times. Paule Constant does not bow to political correctness and emphasizes that our greatest asset may be, after all, related to individuation, sublimation, and creativity. Her ethical and aesthetic concerns force the reader to feel and to think long after the book has been put back on the shelf.

NOTE ON THE TRANSLATION

In this translation, as with *Ouregano*, the novel that precedes *Private Property* in Constant's *oeuvre*, the quotation marks American readers might wish for have been omitted, just as in the original. This allows the translation to remain as close to Constant's style as possible. We have provided a number of footnotes to explain terms and references for readers unfamiliar with certain aspects of the French convent school experience.