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"A WOMAN IS A CHESTNUT, A MAN IS A BREADFRUIT": PROVERBS AND FEMALE RESILIENCE IN SIMONE SCHWARZ-BART'S *THE BRIDGE OF BEYOND*

Abstract: *The Bridge of Beyond* (1982, French original 1972) by Guadeloupian female writer, Simone Schwarz-Bart, depicts Caribbean women at the intersection of gender, race and class. Drawing inspiration from Caribbean oral tradition, itself a legacy of the African patrimony, the author makes copious use of proverbs in the novel. This study analyses some of the proverbs used by female characters from the womanist perspective. It focuses on the internalisation of the messages they encode and how these messages translate into effective means of resistance to various forms of adversity in the hostile post-emancipation Caribbean society. The study reveals that women in the novel and in tandem with the sociology of the Caribbean islands are the stabilising force of the family within a social structure that emasculates black men. The paper concludes that the tenacity and resilience of the women emanate from a positive world view gleaned from proverbs as a result of which they emerge as solid anchors of their families and, by extension, agents of the survival of their entire race.

Keywords: Adversity, Caribbean women, feminism, literature, proverbs, resilience, resistance, Simone Schwarz-Bart, womanism

Introduction

"Fem-n cé chataign, n'hom -n cé fouyapin" which translated into English means "A woman is a chestnut tree, a man is a breadfruit tree" is a popular Guadeloupian proverb. According to Maryse Condé (1993), the chestnut tree and the breadfruit tree look identical in foliage and in fruits. However, when their fruits ripen and fall, the fruit of the chestnut tree releases a large number of seeds with hard covering whereas the breadfruit, which does not contain such seeds, breaks into a white paste which readily rots under the sun and produces a foul smell. In other words, when

a woman falls, she rises again but when a man falls he is crushed. This proverb pays homage to the resilience of Caribbean women.

Proverbs are common to all cultures. They constitute a genre that demonstrates the power of the spoken word. Mieder (1993:14) defines a proverb as "a concise statement of an apparent truth that has (had, or will have) some currency among the people". Trench (2003:9) sees proverbs as "condensed quintessential wisdom"; while for Finnegan (1981:11), proverbs are "a rich source of imagery and succinct expression encapsulating ideal and allusive wording, usually in metaphorical form". According to Lau, Tokofsky and Winick (2004:8), proverbs are "short traditional utterances that encapsulate cultural truths and sum up recurrent social situations". Holmann (1976:421), defines the proverb as "a sentence or phrase which briefly and strikingly expresses some recognized truth or shrewd observation about practical life and which has been preserved by oral tradition. Proverbs owe their appeal to metaphors, simile, rhyme and parallelisms etc." Focusing on the form of the proverb, Akporobaro and Emovon (1994:3) state that "the proverb is … a short popular saying that expresses a truth of experience or an observation in a strikingly figurative language. It is marked by epigrammatic terseness and by the ready acceptance of its truth".

In other words, proverbs encapsulate the wisdom of a people; reflect their world view, their philosophy of life and the way they relate to one another, to others, and to nature around them. They are timeless, born out of many years of observation and experience, passed from one generation to another and generally accepted as truths. They appear in condensed figurative language and are effective as a means of transmitting beliefs and culture (see Ihan Basgőz 1990). Apart from their application for such purposes in real life situations, proverbs are used in literary contexts for the witty representation of the human condition and for motivational purposes (Maja Gwóźdź 2016; Mahoney and Mieder 2016). Furthermore, Bhuvaneswar (2013:244) argues that:

> Proverbs as a genre of language are not only wide-ranging but also multidimensional, and inter-disciplinary and hence ubiquitous in their proverbial linguistic application. It ranges from the spoken medium (conversation, public speaking, media broadcasting and advertisement, and oral

> literature) to the written medium (poetry, drama and novel, and non- literary forms such as letters, social and cultural transmission, law, psychology, psychotherapy and anthropology ...

Proverbs can be apprehended at three semantic levels – literal, contextual and philosophical. They are used to teach morals, to commend or condemn people's behaviour and to warn against danger. In the specific case of the Caribbean islands, they reflect the collective violent experience of the people dating back to the plantation era characterised by a brutal suppression of the voice of slaves. In that atmosphere of "voicelessness", slaves used proverbs as coded language to transmit messages among themselves (see Gyssels 2016) while in the post-slavery context, black Caribbeans have been using proverbs to reflect generally on life, particularly on their harsh daily existence

This probably explains the abundance of fatalistic proverbs in their repertoire. However, in spite of the preponderance of proverbs of resignation, the female protagonists of Simone Schwarz-Bart's *Pluie et vent sur Télumée Miracle* (1972) translated as *The Bridge of Beyond* (1982) tend to focus more on those that commend resilience and resistance to adversity.

This is significant because proverbs generally tend to play a sexist role in many societies (see Yusuf 1998; Schipper 2003; Bestman 2013). For example, a Yoruba (Nigeria) proverb says "*Whoever rides the horse of a woman is bound to fall* " (Bestman 2013:232) while an English proverb states that "*Women are necessary evils"* (Whiting 1977:494). Feminists have attempted to counter such sexist proverbs. For instance the English proverb "*A woman's place is in the home*" (Simpson 1982:249) has been countered as "*A woman's place is in the House... and Senate*" (Mieder 1985:277). This counter proverb challenges the female-limiting original proverb and points to the unlimited possibilities open to women in politics and social life. In consonance with this, Yusuf (1997) has studied the countering of misogyny in English proverbs. However, it is proverbs and proverbial statements about female resistance to adversity in *The Bridge of the Beyond* that are the object of my focus in this work. For the purposes of this study, proverbial statements would include sentences which contain

phrases or related items which derive from known proverbs or which mirror proverbs in their content, style or unit.

Theoretical Framework

Womanism which would provide the theoretical framework for the study is a variant of global feminism postulated and expanded by Black women - Alice Walker (1984), Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi (1985, 1996), Clenora Hudson-Weems (1993) and Mary Kolawole (1997), among others. It underscores the incorporation of racial and national considerations into sexual issues. It insists on historical references such as slavery, colonialism, neo-colonialism and racism in analysing Black women's condition and their fictional production. By definition, a womanist is a Black woman who is subjected to trials, exploitation and adversity but who refuses to be crushed by such experiences.

Social Context and the Language Question

Generally, the West Indian family is matrifocal, a legacy of the slave plantation culture which did not encourage family ties among slaves. Children fathered by slaves belonged to their masters and could be sold at the whims of their owners which imply that male slaves procreated but hardly nurtured their children. Moreover, after the abolition, many emancipated slaves wandered far from the plantations in a bid to put the horrible experience of slavery behind them. This phenomenon of wandering seems to have persisted long after the immediate post-slavery period especially in the lives of the men. A logical explanation of this is that men, unlike women, are not tied down by maternity or the care of children. They therefore tend to be constantly on the move, unable to develop roots such that the women are obliged to be pillars of their families as well as the mainstay of the economy. It is usually the women who have to contend with adverse economic conditions as they combine their burdens as mothers with the duties of the absent fathers.

The Bridge of Beyond has been hailed as a masterpiece not only from the thematic point of view but also and especially from the language perspective. Indeed the novelist, in spite of her privileged status as an educated half caste, identifies with the suffering illiterate black masses of the rural communities. Her choice of a protagonist in the person of a poor old village woman is therefore deliberate. It is an eloquent demonstration of her commitment

to the cause of the common people. Télumée the protagonist is actually a fictional representation of a real life woman named Fanotte from Schwarz-Bart's native village. This is quite revealing because in the complex, racist and class-conscious Caribbean society, such a woman would under normal circumstances not only go unsung but would not even be seen by reason of the triple jeopardy of being black, woman and poor. Schwarz-Bart's commitment notwithstanding, the novel would not have enjoyed the huge success accorded it if it had been written in classical French, that is, *"français français",* French of Paris – to talk like Léon Gontran Damas (1972:37) – which at that period in the history of the literature of the islands was the hallmark of many a Caribbean author. On the contrary, the Lougandor women and other characters in the book come across as flesh and blood, as people with whom the reader can empathise and identify mainly because of the author's peculiar use of language.

Indeed, the question of language has, over the years, been a challenge to Afro-Caribbean writers. On the one hand is French, the official language considered as the language of culture but spoken only by a minority of the populace. On the other hand, is Creole, the language of the uneducated masses, denigrated by the literate "civilised" minority. Like Jacques Roumain before her, who in *Gouverneurs de la ros*ée (1944) translated as *Masters of the Dew* (1947) succeeded by a special use of language in restituting the inner landscape of his Creole-speaking characters into French, Simone Schwarz-Bart was faced with the need to transcend linguistic barriers in order to transpose the thoughts and spirit of her native Creole speakers into French. The result of her effort is the unique literary language of *The Bridge of Beyond* which is a beautiful blend of French and Creole, a mixture of the French written tradition and the Creole oral tradition (see Gyssels 2016).

Roumain and Schwarz-Bart have blazed the trail in what has since become the development of a literary language that transposes authentic Creole thoughts and world view into French especially since Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau and Raphaël Confiant (1989) came out radically in praise of Creoleness. According to them, "our aesthetics cannot exist (cannot be authentic) without Creoleness" (89). They further reiterate that:

> Creole… is the initial means of communication of our deep self, or our collective unconscious, of our common genius, and it remains the river of our alluvial Creoleness. We dream in it. In it we resist and accept ourselves. It is our cries, our screams, our excitements. It irrigates each of our gestures… the tragedy lived by many of our writers comes from the castration which, linguistically, they were victims of during their childhood. (104-105).

The particular genius of Schwarz-Bart lies in her ability to evolve a poetics which is an amalgamation of Creole and French without resorting to bilingualism. In doing this, she draws inspiration from the Caribbean oral tradition, itself a legacy of the African patrimony. She makes copious use of tales, songs, riddles, proverbs and proverbial statements couched in metaphors borrowed from the Guadeloupian landscape; climate, fauna and flora (see Ojoade 2004). She focuses in particular on the experiences of women in the rural setting for, indeed, the inhabitants of the Caribbean rural communities and especially women, are the custodians of the Creole oral tradition**.**

Nathalie Buchet Rogers (1992) in "Oralité et écriture dans *Pluie et vent sur Télumée Miracle"* notes that the period depicted in Schwarz-Bart's novel witnessed some form of tension due to the introduction of Western education into the life of the Blacks. This new phenomenon, symbolised by writing, posed some threat to the oral tradition of the black people who responded by a more tenacious adherence to their oral culture. According to Rogers, Schwarz-Bart captures this tension in her novel. Even though she employs the French language – a symbol of the written tradition – to communicate the oral tradition of her people, she nevertheless successfully restitutes the authenticity of her characters, their life and oral culture through the use of proverbs. I agree with Rogers that it is in the use of proverbs that the novel is connected to the oral tradition of the black Caribbean people and that the originality of the novel derives from the vital force of the oral tradition and its repercussions on the thoughts of the characters.

Proverbs and Female Resilience

Petermann (2015) in his article "Attitudes as Equipment for Living" notes that Kenneth Burke "proposed that literature can be used as what he calls 'equipment for living,' as tools for dealing

with encountered situation… he used proverbs as models for equipment for living and described them as 'strategies for dealing with situations'". In line with Burke's proposition, this study analyses the proverbs in *The Bridge of Beyond* as "models for equipment for living and as strategies for dealing with" the challenges encountered by the female protagonists of the novel. My discourse, as earlier indicated, is located within the womanist theoretical framework. In postulating this theory, Walker in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* delves into the socio-historic reality of African-American women where the traditional expression of mothers to their precocious daughters is "you acting womanish". "Womanish" girls exhibit exceptional qualities of strength, courage and intelligence. They are resolute and have the capacity to take charge under difficult conditions. This mental and physical strength is acquired by dint of having to survive in a hostile racist environment. The society portrayed in Schwarz-Bart's *The Bridge of Beyond* has a lot in common with Alice Walker's background. The novel depicts the vicissitudes of four generations of strong Guadeloupian women and their resistance to adversity in the post-emancipation society and I argue that their ability to withstand travails and triumph over various challenges stems from the fortitude and the wisdom transmitted through proverbs and proverbial statements.

In the Guadeloupian society depicted in *The Bridge of Beyond*, slavery has been abolished in theory but the people are still contending with the aftermath of that odious experience. The life of the descendants of slaves is still defined by slavery, albeit a new form of slavery - slavery minus the physical iron branding, the chains and the whips, but slavery all the same. They are still subjected to extreme poverty and various forms of dehumanisation while burning out their lives on the white man's plantation in order to eke out a meagre living. It is against this background of near hopelessness that Schwarz-Bart situates her *sheroes*. She insists in particular on two of these female characters – Télumée the protagonist and Toussine her grandmother. I will therefore underscore the experiences of Toussine and Télumée in line with the emphasis placed on them by the author.

Télumée is brought up by her grandmother and it is pertinent to note that the scenario where children are raised by their grandmothers is not uncommon in the Caribbean as can be attested to in

Joseph Zobel's *La Rue Cases-Nègres* (1950). Toussine takes custody of her granddaughter in order to allow Victory, the girl's young mother, to be free to search for love and stability in a society which, alas, is fundamentally and systemically designed to promote emotional and familial instability among black people. Toussine is a very strong woman, an exemplar of womanist resilience, a role model to the young Télumée. An astute teacher, she makes proverbs and proverbial statements the bedrock of her granddaughter's education and given their metaphorical form and esoteric nature, these proverbs serve as graphic vehicles of conveying the ethos of their community to the young girl. Télumée grows up a "womanish" girl and it is not surprising that, later in life, she is able to overcome her challenges through the lessons learnt from her grandmother's proverbs.

Even though the novel is generally rich in proverbs, the focus of this study is on those used by or in connection with the four major female characters - the Lougandors. In analysing the proverbs, I follow the chronological age of the women starting with Minerva who belongs to the first generation down to Télumée, the narrator and the last of the dynasty. Minerva, the first of the Lougandor women is described as a woman who "had an unshakable faith in life. When things went wrong she would say that nothing, no one, would ever wear out the soul God had chosen out for her and put in her body" (Schwarz-Bart 1982:3). This is remarkable for a woman who has been through the crucible of slavery under a legendary cruel master and who has been made an object of public ridicule by an unfaithful lover. Only a few pages are devoted to the story of Minerva; yet she emerges as a strong woman, conversant with the use of the metaphorical language. During the preparation for her daughter's wedding, she faces the pettiness of frustrated jealous neighbours:

> L'Abandonnée remained full of the same surliness... The breeze blowing over Minerva's cottage embittered the women, made them more unaccountable than ever ...'What I say is, Toussine's more for ornament than use...The main thing is not getting married, but sticking together year in year out', said one. 'They're laughing now, but after laughter come tears, and three months from

> now Minerva's happy band will find itself with six eyes to cry with', said another (7).

Minerva fights these women back with the Bible proverb: "*All they that take the sword shall perish with the sword*" (8)**.** It should be noted here that the proverbs in *The Bridge of Beyond* reflect the diversity of the Caribbean population. While some share close affinity with the proverbs of African societies, others are influenced by the white colonialists' culture and religion (see Rogers 1992). The proverb cited above originates from the Bible. It is a word-for-word citation of Jesus' rebuke of Peter when the latter cut off the ear of the servant of the high priest the night of his master's arrest as narrated in Matt. 6:52**.** Elisabeth Piirainen (2013) looking "at the widespread biblical idioms from the viewpoint of intertextuality", that is, "the relationship between conventional figurative units and existing texts that can be identified as their cultural and historical sources" (129) notes that

> A close relation between the text and the conventional units derived from it is found in direct quotations: These are more or less word-for-word references to a particular text. They gradually develop into figurative units as the speakers' awareness of their initial use as a citation is lost. Only a small group of Biblicisms belong to this category (129-130).

This is the case with the proverb used by Minerva. Her people had had contact with the Christian religion of the white populace through slavery and colonisation, yet it is unlikely that they would remember the initial biblical use of the proverb: "*All they that take the sword shall perish by the sword"*. Whereas it was a question of tangible swords in Matt. 6:52, the conventional figurative unit derived from the proverb has come to signify retributive justice and this meaning is not lost to Minerva's envious neighbours. She simply wishes their daughters what they wish her Toussine and that puts a stop to their invectives. Minerva is a fighter but in addition she demonstrates an ability to savour every joyful moment chance bestows on her in an otherwise hostile environment, and this quality is also identified in her descendants.

Next to Minerva's story is that of Toussine, her daughter who is introduced as "a woman who helped you hold your head up"

(2). Unlike her mother, Toussine starts life on a positive note. She personifies all that is positive in the adolescents of her community. She radiates an unusual loveliness and displays a zest for life and later marries a man who cherishes her. This period of her life is elaborately described but suddenly the narrator introduces a proverbial statement as a prelude to the next episode in the life of this character: "*Woe to him who laughs once and gets into the habit, for the wickedness of life is limitless: if it gives you your heart's desire with one hand, it is only to trample on you with both feet*" (11). This proverbial statement, which warns people not to rule out misfortune in their affairs, immediately generates a sense of foreboding. However, it also conveys a realistic conception of life. It is a warning that there are two sides to the coin of human existence and Toussine is about to experience the unpleasant side. Indeed, calamity strikes one night as Toussine's home is gutted by fire in which one of her ten year old twin daughters sustains fatal injuries. She experiences the agony of a mother watching her child die a slow painful death. After this ordeal, Toussine goes into deep depression and temporarily loses her mind. Her mental decline is captured by another proverb which says "*The leaf that falls into the pond does not rot the same day*" (1). This proverb, like several others, borrows its metaphor from the plant life and underscores the close affinity of the rural population with the nature around them.

Toussine conducts herself like a zombie for the space of three years. This shows that she is not super human. On the contrary, as indicated below, she experiences the natural emotions of a mother who has suffered such bereavement:

> Meranée's suffering was terrible. Her body was one great wound attracting more and more flies as it decayed. Toussine, her eyes empty of all expression, fanned them away, put on soothing oil, and grew hoarse calling on death, which, being no doubt occupied elsewhere, refused to come. If anyone offered to replace Toussine at the bedside for a while, she would say, smiling gently: 'Don't worry about me. *However heavy a woman's breasts, her chest is always strong enough to carry them'* (12).

Toussine regains her sanity and it is apparent that the message encoded in the proverb cited above plays a major role in her re-

covery. This message, which may have been registered and stored in her subconscious over the years, only required a catalyst like the tragic loss of her daughter to activate it. It is also revealing that Toussine repeats this proverb over and over again during her daughter's agony. The imagery used in this proverb is pertinent and arresting. Breasts are an essential part of a woman's anatomy which she is obliged to carry. In this context, they symbolise challenges as if to imply that women are particularly prone to facing hardships. In a way, this is true in Télumée's society because as we later discover, the women do bear heavy responsibilities not only as keepers of the home, but also as bread winners in sites outside the home. They stand as the solid anchors of their families and by extension, their race.

A woman's breasts also signify life for it is through them that children are nourished. In other words, no matter what happens, a woman carries the sacred duty to keep life going. Figuratively, Toussine "dies" with her little daughter but like Phoenix rising out of his own ashes, she springs back to life bringing her family alive with her. "Toussine had taken her family into prison with her, and now she brought them back to life again" (14). This renaissance is mediated by the birth of a baby girl symbolically named Victory. With her renewed energy and vigour, Toussine demonstrates that indeed "however heavy a woman's breasts, her chest is always strong enough to carry them." This proverb is complemented by another: "*However tall trouble is, man must make himself taller still, even if it means making stilts*" (50).

These proverbs convey the underlying principle guiding Toussine's life and inform her unbreakable spirit. They do not advocate an escapist philosophy; neither do they deny the reality of pain and sorrow but prescribe a realistic and courageous response to life's problems. Trouble, an abstract concept in the last proverb is personified thereby moving it to the realm of the concrete in order to convey its message more graphically. Rogers (1992) posits that proverbs with African affinity are generally located within the realm of dynamic ideas as opposed to those with Western background which tend towards fixed ideas. Toussine's distress is succinctly expressed through the proverbs above. She grieves and the grief has a cathartic effect on her. Her strength of character and ability to resist adversity earn her the respect of her people who in

appreciation of her resilience honour her by giving her a new name:

> In the days of your silks and jewels we called you Queen Toussine. We were not far wrong for you are truly a queen. But now, with your Victory, you may boast that you have put us in a quandary. We have tried and tried to think of a name for you, but in vain, for there isn't one that will do. And so from now on we shall call you "Queen Without a Name!" (14-15).

They may be at a loss as to what to call her but one thing is certain, in her strength they find new hope. To those outside their community, she may be an unknown woman in the countryside but in terms of capacity for life and willpower, she towers above many and her compatriots see her as a role model. She exhibits unusual strength, that womanist trait identified by Alice Walker which has characterised several women of African descent in the Diaspora for many centuries.

Victory, the child of Queen Without a Name's symbol of resilience and mother of Télumée the protagonist, like Minerva and Toussine before her, faces her own life challenges. But she also inherits her forebears' undaunted spirit because her character has been built on the moral values and codes of behaviour transmitted through proverbs that reflect the collective experience of her people. She is a hardworking single parent, a laundress "wearing out her wrists on the flat stones in the rivers, and her linen emerged like new from under the heavy waxed irons" (16). She has a habit of "singing like a happy magpie" (16) while working and when chided for working too hard, "heaving those heavy irons" (6), Victory would reply with a proverb that encapsulates her attitude to life: "*A small axe cuts down a big tree*" (16). This proverb speaks of courage, determination, diligence and industry which are Victory's response to deprivation. Imbued with the energy and strength conveyed by this proverb and others like it, she courageously faces the responsibility of fending for herself and her children without depending on anyone.

Apart from poverty, Victory experiences some heartaches as she journeys through life. Like Minerva, she is deserted by the author of her first pregnancy, Regina's father. Another lover, a certain Hubert from Desirade abandons her and she takes to drink-

ing almost losing her mind. She is rehabilitated by Angebert, Télumée's father, the only man who really cares for her. She experiences miscarriage but perhaps one of the most tragic events of her life is to watch Angebert murdered in cold blood. In spite of all this, Victory "was a woman who carried her head high on a slender neck" (17) because she is fortified by several doses of Queen Without a Name's proverbs and proverbial statements and understands that "*behind one pain there is another. Sorrow is a wave without end. But the horse mustn't ride you, you must ride it*" (51). Fully prepared for eventualities, Victory is determined to ride the horse of life's adversity and that is the secret of her survival.

Télumée her daughter's story forms the main plot of the novel. It begins with Télumée as an old woman standing in the middle of her garden looking back on her life and those of her foremothers. Their life histories are recounted in a flash-back beginning with that of Minerva, her great grandmother. The didactic effect of proverbs is particularly pungent in Télumée's life. It is striking that in the opening sentences of her narration, she unequivocally identifies with her problematic island and expresses an unusual optimism about life in spite of the many upheavals she has been through:

> *A man's country may be cramped or vast according to the size of his heart. I've never found my country too small*...And if I could choose it's here in Guadeloupe that I'd be born again, suffer and die. Yet not long back my ancestors were slaves on this volcanic, hurricane-swept, mosquito-ridden, nasty-minded island. *But I didn't come to this world to weigh the world's woe*. I prefer to dream, on and on, standing in my garden, just like any other old woman of my age, till death comes and takes me as I dream, me and all my joy (2).

This set of proverbial statements hints at the various dimensions of the challenges Télumée has had to contend with. Her catalogue of woes include racial abuse and sexual harassment as a young domestic worker in a white family; betrayal by Letitia her childhood friend who seduces Elie her husband; battering and humiliation by her beloved Elie turned sour due to economic deprivation; the violent death of Amboise her second husband at the hands of white

plantation owners during a sugarcane cutters' strike; the horror of cutting sugarcane for a living; the loss of her grandmother Queen Without a Name closely followed by that of Man Cia her spiritual mother; and finally the disappearance of Sonore her adopted daughter at the instigation of Angel Medard, a man she had rescued from the depths of despair. In spite of all this, Télumée accepts and identifies with her island because she has learned from her grandmother that "*the way a man's heart is set in his chest is the way he looks at life. If your heart is put in well, you see life as one ought to see it, in the same spirit as a man balancing on a ball – he's certain to fall, but he'll stick it out as long as possible*" (49). Télumée's attitude to her island derives from the philosophy embedded in this proverbial statement.

Indeed, her education reposes mainly on two pivots - courage and warning about the dual nature of life that life consists of both good and evil. The first engenders resilience the second insulates her against disappointments. She is trained early in life both by her grandmother and Man Cia to "be a fine little Negress, *a real drum with two sides. Let life bang and thump, but keep the underside always intact*" (39). The warning encoded in this saying is of primary importance in a society where the average black woman is confronted with economic exploitation, a hostile geographical environment, racial oppression, sexual abuse and domestic violence. Télumée experiences such challenges later in life without being broken. She has learnt to keep one side of the drum of her life intact. In the same vein, another proverb prepares her for the vicissitudes of life: "*No matter how heavy your breasts you'll always be strong enough to support them*" (42) which first comes to her as an admonition at the advent of her breasts. The implication of this proverb has been discussed with respect to her grandmother. Suffice it to say here that it is part of the mechanism that helps Télumée survive the disappointment of her life with Elie.

In fact, ever before marrying Elie, she has been taught by her grandmother that "*all rivers, even the most dazzling, those that catch the sun in their streams, all rivers go down and are drowned in the sea*" (52). This proverb is not only a warning about the inevitability of the natural course of life but it also indicates that every experience of life, even the most beautiful, such as falling in love, must certainly come to an end. Télumée in her moments of distress resulting from her failed marriage, can't help asking herself:

"how often has Queen Without a Name told me that all rivers go down and are drowned in the sea, how often had she told me?" (52). This constant reminder testifies to the powerful effect of this proverb on her psyche. It not only helps her to withstand the shock of Elie's cruelty but also prepares her to face the death of her second husband.

It is important to note here that Elie too was, to some extent, tutored by Queen Without a Name. She spent time teaching him and Télumée about life through stories, riddles, proverbs and proverbial statements during their courtship. One of them says: "*There are three paths that are bad for a man to take: to see the beauty of the world and call it ugly, to get up early to do what is impossible, and to let oneself get carried away by dreams – for whoever dreams becomes the victim of his own dream*". However, Elie unlike Télumée, does not seem to have learnt his lessons. In spite of Queen Without a Name's warning, he allows himself to "get carried away by dreams...and becomes the victim of his own dream". He dreams of a prosperous future with Télumée leaving no room for eventualities:

> 'You'll see'...'you'll see, later on, what a fine convertible we'll have, and we'll be dressed to match, I in a suit with a ruffle, you in a brocade dress with a cross over collar. No one will recognise us. They'll say as we go by, "What beautiful young couple is this?" And we'll say, "One of us belongs to Queen Without a Name and the other to Old Abel... And I'll give a toot on the horn and we'll whizz away laughing.' (47)

But reality is different from dreams. When faced later with the prospect of cutting sugarcane for survival, he succumbs to despair. While Télumée survives the wind of adversity, Elie is completely crushed giving credence to another Creole proverb: "*Fem-ne tombé pas janmi désespéré*" (Condé 1993:4) meaning "*a fallen woman will always rise again"*.

Another obstacle confronted by Télumée is racial abuse. Racism is a common concern of all womanist theorists because it is a hydra-headed monster to the emancipation of black women the world over and it goes hand in hand with economic deprivation. Racial abuse and economic exploitation are recurrent themes in the Caribbean literary imagination and rightly so because they

constitute existential issues in the islands. While the white population lives in affluence, the Blacks grapple with abject poverty and are often forced to work for the former in order to earn their living. Télumée is hired as a domestic worker in her teens by Madame Desaragne, but the descendant of the "White of the Whites" (38) is still imbued with a mindset reminiscent of the time of slavery. She exploits the young girl and treats her to verbal abuse and sometimes outright provocation but again Télumée's response is anchored on one of her grandmother's wise sayings:

> On those days, I would sing as I went about my work, and my heart would grow lighter, for *behind one pain there is another* - that was what Grandmother said. And through the darkness I would see Queen Without a Name's smile – '*The horse mustn't ride you, my girl, you must ride it*' - and that smile would put heart into me, I would sing as I worked, and when I sang I diluted my pain, chopped it in pieces, and it flowed into the song, and I rode my horse (60).

Riding one's horse is symbolic of being in total control of one's feelings and actions and one important womanist quality is the ability to take charge in a difficult situation. Even though Télumée cannot help being financially inferior to Madame Desaragne, she is able to avoid being crushed by this prejudiced white adversary. Again we cannot but compare Télumée's attitude here to that of Elie. It is interesting that Elie at the peak of his frustration buys a horse and rides aimlessly about. This is reminiscent of Wvabor, a character in one of the tales Queen without a Name used to narrate to Elie and Télumée. Wvabor was so sensitive to the wickedness of mankind that he found pleasure only in his mare which he named My Two Eyes and treated as such. He mounted it one day and rode away to the clouds moving from hill to hill, from mountain to mountain. But by the time he desired to touch ground again, he was no longer in control. His mare continued galloping away in a frenzy until they both disappeared. Elie, like Wvabor loses control of his destiny and is carried about like a vagabond on his horse. In sharp contrast, Télumée as an initiate into the power of Queen Without a Name's spoken word does not allow the horse of her life to ride her but succeeds in holding its reins firmly in her

hands all the time (see Rogers1992) and especially while working for the Desarangne.

But Télumée's challenges at the home of the Desaragne are far from over. She also faces sexual harassment from Monsieur Desaragne. It is important to state at this point that the question of interracial sexual relations in the West Indies is complex. During the period of slavery, female slaves were subjected to sexual abuse by their white masters. After the abolition, interracial marriages were forbidden but it was common for white men to use black women as sexual objects. Paradoxically, Frantz Fanon avers in *Peau noire, masques blancs* (1952) translated as *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967) that due to inferiority complex, black women seek amorous relationships with white men in order to "whiten" the race through the children resulting from such affairs.

In *The Bridge of Beyond*, there is a social barrier between the white and black populace. The only reference made to interracial relationship is that of a "Creole... who in the old days just after the abolition of slavery had fallen in love with a strange and fascinating young Negress. Cast out by his own people, he had sought refuge in a desolate and inaccessible wasteland far from the eyes that looked askance at his love" (12). Obviously it is an uphill task to violate interracial sexual taboos. Yet Monsieur Desaragne conducts himself like erstwhile slave masters with Télumée: "Monsieur Desaragne walked calmly in, shut the door behind him, and leaned against the wall. Then he came over to me and put his hands up my skirt..." (72). He holds out a silk dress to Télumée and takes it for granted that a poor black servant cannot resist such a "reward".

Télumée reacts to this attempt to commoditise her body and objectify her person by threatening to castrate him: "I've got a little knife here and even if I hadn't, my nails would be enough... I swear to God you won't be able to go into any other maid's room because you won't have the wherewithal" (72) and she punctuates this with a proverb: "*Ducks and chickens are alike, but the two species don't go on water together*" (73). This is a warning to the white man not to overstep the boundaries his people have imposed and Monsieur Desarange gets the message and beats a fast retreat (see Gyssels 2016). What is particularly striking is that Télumée dismisses this encounter as "just one of the little currents that would ripple my waters before I was drowned in the sea" (73).

Proverbs have prepared her to dispense quickly with unpleasant experiences. Like a true womanist, she takes charge of her life. In her old age Télumée, like her grandmother, is honoured with a new name by her people, Miracle Télumée, as a form of tribute to her spirit of resilience.

Conclusion

This study, located within the womanist framework reveals that racial, economic and gender issues mediate the day to day reality of the Caribbean woman represented in Simone Schwarz-Bart's novel, *The Bridge of Beyond*. It notes that whereas the men tend to be constantly on the move, the women bear the responsibility of providing for their children and sustaining the family. Through the family saga of the Lougandor women, the novelist underscores the role of women as custodians of the oral tradition and highlights the use of proverbs in educating their daughters thereby inculcating into them a philosophy of life that enables women to withstand adversity. Consequently, women emerge as the stabilising elements of their communities in spite of being beaten and blown by the rains and winds of adversity.

As a result of the wisdom gleaned through the age-long proverbs, they acquire the qualities of strength and nurturing identified as essential characteristics of Africana womanists by Hudson-Weems (1993); they mother their communities in line with Ogunyemi's postulation of African womanism as a "mother-centered ideology with its focus on caring - familiar, communal, national..." (Ogunyemi 1996:114) and their lives reflect Alice Walker's concept that a womanist is "committed to survival and wholeness of entire (black) people, male and female."(1984: xi). I therefore posit in conclusion, that the process of struggling for the survival and wholeness of the entire black Caribbean people involves the use of proverbs in building a spirit of resilience into the lives of the women making them bulwarks against racism, economic deprivation and gender oppression as delineated in Simone Schwarz-Bart's *The Bridge of Beyond*.

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