

The Intersection of Matrilineal Bonds and Spirituality in Jesmyn Ward's *Let Us Descend*

Sènakpon Adelphe Fortuné AZON *

Department of English, FLASH-Adjarra/ GRAD Laboratory, University of Abomey-Calavi, Republic of Benin.

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Abstract

This paper focuses on Jesmyn Ward's novel *Let Us Descend* and examines the interweaving of matrilineal bonds and spiritual inheritance in the literary representation of American chattel slavery. Enslaved Blacks survived enslavement by cultivating both a fierce psychological resilience and forging spiritual rootedness. Ward's novel illustrates the enslaved workers' spiritual grounding by weaving its narrative on a Black adolescent girl who must confront the brutal realities of her existence. Through a close reading of the stylistic devices and thematic choices that the novel makes to chronicle its protagonist's tribulations, this study argues that the young enslaved draws her strength from the interconnected power of her maternal lineage and ancestral elemental spirits, which provides her with an effective framework for resilience. Drawing on an approach that brings traditional West African cosmologies into dialog with the psychoanalytic theory, this paper explores the complexities of the enslaved workers' experience. It also highlights how the preservation of matrilineal heritage and engagement with Black spirituality function as coping mechanisms and as vital strategies for restoring and asserting liberty.

Keywords: Matrilineal Bond; West African Spirituality; Slavery; Let Us Descend; Resilience

1. Introduction

Reading Jesmyn Ward's *Let Us Descend* makes us realize that the connection of African Americans matrilineal bonds and spirituality goes back far to Black ancestral traditions. The novel discusses the intersection of Black spirituality, ancestral reverence, communal resilience and women's central involvement in sustaining cultural identity amid enslavement and marginalization. The convergence of spirituality and matrilineality in *Let Us Descend* is articulated through a particularly strong faith that fuses African cosmologies with Black spirituality, and sustains communal resilience and cultural survival. Within this framework, mothers orally transmit ancestral rituals and histories to their daughters, empowering females as spiritual anchors and fostering intergenerational, communal strength and resistance. The mother-daughter transmission dynamics in *Let Us Descend* establish Annis's contacts with the spirit of her dead mother, Sasha. Mother Sasha manifests spiritually to commune with her daughter to whom she whispers, connecting her with her ancestors through rituals. Drawing upon these traditions equips Annis with the knowledge she needs to survive her descent into the hell of the Deep South. The end result of Annis's connection to the ancestral heritage she taps into is her exceptional inner strength, her acute sense of perception and the visions she has. Her experience shows women's roles as nurturers, guides and priestesses.

It is in this perspective that modern revivals, including Yoruba-derived traditions like Candomblé and Haitian Vodou, emphasize women's roles as priestesses and nurturers, pushing out Black femininity over the exclusionary worldview Christianity puts forward for the Black. Also, in many African indigenous cultures, matrilineal bonds are deeply rooted in spirituality, acknowledging the sacred roles of women as caregivers, nurturers, and guardians of tradition. The

* Corresponding author: Sènakpon Adelphe Fortuné AZON

African-derived mysticism portrayed in *Let Us Descend* emphasizes women's responsibilities as protecting, nurturing, teaching and guiding children. It becomes then important to focus on the essence of the matrilineal bond from a Black perspective, which is often characterized by elements like ancestral connection and reverence, elements that shape social connections in African American communities. With Annis, these elements that shape human society elevate her from objectified victim to empowered resistor.

This paper theorizes matrilineal bonds and spirituality as two distinctive but culturally intertwined systems that shape social bonds. The experiences and responsibilities that matrilineal bonds enclose can be framed as spiritually significant. This paper explores how this nexus functions as a potent mechanism for fostering resilience and pursuing liberation.

While these two concepts of matrilineal bonds and spirituality are not directly linked, their intersection in the novel evidences how parents influence children's development through socialization, shared experiences of wonder, and value transmission. In *Let Us Descend*, Annis's profound yearning for her mother and for freedom at a moment she is steeped in desperation and loss is the deep catalyst that opens her access to a spiritual world where she connects to her ancestors who become her anchor. Her move out of the material world is not escapism but a critical epistemological shift, allowing her to access a world that Ward vividly renders as "sopping with spirit" [1].

This paper provides an analysis from psychoanalytic theoretical framework and pre-colonial African cosmologies, interpreting *Let Us Descend* as a multifaceted strategy of resistance. So it intends to analyze Annis's resort to spirituality to maintain her dignity and sense of self in the face of inconceivable cruelty. It submits that *Let us Descend* is an appropriate scope to examine how spiritual facts interconnected to matrilineal bonds create a distinctive literary cosmology to challenge both the historical cruelty of slavery and the assemblies of the historical narratives. In reading Jesmyn Ward's *Let Us Descend*, three axes of reflection emerge at the heart of Ward's articulation of Annis's journey into spirituality (1): matrilineal heritage and the transmission of identity, (2): spirituality and the presence of the supernatural, and (3): the convergence of matrilineal bonds and spirituality.

2. Matrilineal Memory and the Transmission of Identity

Annis's opening declaration: "The first weapon I ever held was my mother's hand" [1], seems so powerful that it immediately brings out the primacy of maternal connection. Annis holding her "mother's bladed hand" on that night, who leads her far from her sire into the Carolina woods after a long calvary of sexual aggression, dehumanization and oppression, stands as a symbol of freedom and re-creation. Besides, the *weapon* in this case is not a material tool, but the mother's hand which stands as a source of comfort, protection, strength, and the transmission of identity and survival skills. However, the mother's hand expresses physical and historical knowledge transmitted through the mother-daughter relationship. This mother-daughter relationship is symbolically expressed by Annis and her mother Sasha in *Let Us Descend* through what the psychiatrist and psychoanalyst John Bowlby (1907–1990) calls *attachement*, a theory that crystallizes around the mother's hand. In Bowlby's theory, the mother's hand comes in the infant's life on top of all hierarchies. Bowlby emphasizes that at the center of a mother-daughter bond, lies the foundation of attachment, a foundational need for security, safety, freedom and nurturing [2].

Although the title of the novel draws its evocative resonance from Dante's *Infierno* [3], in scope and regarding the protagonist's trajectories, *Let Us Descend* has much in common with other neo-enslaved narratives like Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* [4], Dolen Perkins-Valdes's *Wench* [5], Sadeqa Johnson's *Yellow Wife* [6], James McCune's *Song Yet Sung* [7], and Edward P. Jones's *The Known World* [8]. Most protagonists in these works encounter a tragic end, or their trajectories are so steeped in suffering that whether they eventually die or survive hardly matters to the reader. Also, the further they delve into spirituality and communion with their ancestors, the further they drift away from their fellow enslaved, and the less they are understood and appreciated. Their spiritual connections work like a move on the vertical axis which takes them away from the horizontal axis on which their companions evolve. Besides, the protagonist's spiritual rise [or move on the vertical axis] counterbalances her corporeal plunge into the abyss of enslavement expressed in the novel's title.

In her descent into the infernal realms of suffering, Annis, the haunted female protagonist, is ensnared in solitude and must confront her hardships without any help from other enslaved workers. Her communion with the world of spirits and the dead comes as a compensation, offering her, instead of the slippery companionship of betraying co-workers, a firm ground on which to rest her trust. Her powerful attachment with Mama Aza and mother Sasha, established through the maternal line, helps Annis develop the defense mechanism which serves as a source of guidance, guard and strength. In this dynamic, she demonstrates how the connection between mother Sasha and her constitutes the most important

thing that ever exists. Because physically and biologically, from the instant of birth, a dance of bonding and attachment is immediately created between mothers and daughters, determined by moments of intimacy, proximity, and reunion.

Also, this connection that mother Sasha consciously cultivates by teaching her daughter combat skills inherited from her own mother, Mama Aza, an *agojie* [Fon elite female warrior], helps Annis confront to some extent the attempts of abuse she encounters throughout her cruel journey as an enslaved female. Annis's itinerary encapsulates the theme of *the weapon of memory*. The concept of *weapon of memory* can be understood in two distinct registers, one physical and, the other, metaphorical. For a physical interpretation, this weapon Annis holds stands as a form of combat training and set of skills that help her resist abuse. In the same way, figuratively, this weapon represents the power and strength transmitted from mother to daughter to stand up against historical and cultural obliterations: stories, the memory of ancestors, and love. The combination of physical weapon and the endowment with one's history uplifts her self-construction, strengthens her beliefs and identity in a new hostile world. Furthermore, Annis's case of having a multiple caregivers, her grandmother, Mama Aza, and her mother, Sasha, both of whom are sources of motivation and enlightenment, makes her grow up feeling secure and also developing "more enhanced capacities to view the world from multiple perspectives" [9].

For Black females who are deeply rooted in long-standing cultural, religious, and communal traditions, physical empowerment and positive historical representations help them develop a clear outlook of self-preservation, and equips them on how to confront people and institutions that turn out to be significantly adversarial to the wellbeing of African Americans [10]. Furthermore, Mama Sasha taking Annis's hand and leading her into the Carolina woods to prepare her for the harrowing journey encapsulates the mother-daughter relationship as a continuous flow through which resilience, identity transmission and protection are transmitted: "last person protected me was my mama" [1]. So, during her harrowing journey into the underworld, scenes of communion with her mother and Aza's spectral apparitions highlight layered maternal stories, where fragmented recollections of pre-enslavement life merge with present trials and ordeals, forging Annis's defiant identity.

Mama tosses the weapon to me and picks up her childhood staff, jagged as lightning. I sweat, fear spiking my armpits. My heart thumps in my ears... I don't like it, but then I don't have time to like it, because I must parry, block, jab. The world turns to one whipping, one humming, and us spinning with it. [1]

In many other instances, the rupture in matrilineal connection has left many African Americans females, from the era of slavery to the present, with certain lapses in their psychological capacity to confront oppression, in a multifaceted world spinning with violence and in which Black people, in Annis's words, are never in the "whipping" and "humming" side, but are the ones getting the blows. Annis's odyssey shows the physical and spiritual meaning of matrilineality, the "matrilineal magic... connecting back into the power-held lineage of our female ancestors [which] is not simply a flight of fancy or genealogical curiosity" but rather "an act of deep reclamation" [11]

Mama Aza's repetitive apparitions to Annis give her solace and shatter her numbness. She finally resolves to take the lead, facing the challenges she encounters. As it happens when she finds herself in a brown-silver, brackish water at the edge of a vast, hungry lake that has swallowed her raft, she takes an important decision that makes her summon all her energy for success. Faced by unsurmountable challenges, she still thinks she has the choice and that her destiny lies in her own hands and cannot be decided by the frogs, the bees, and the knots of woods:

I want to lead. I want to find my own way through this knot of woods, drying towards their winter sleep. I want to choose where to put one aching foot, where to sink into the mud, ankle-deep in mosquitoes, before pulling it out to step again. I want to raise to the bee. I want to choose. [1]

In *Let Us Descend*, Annis's survival does not only depend on her physical power but on her capacity to continuously sustain her will on the narratives of power, on the glorious memories of her mother and grandmother. "She's told me this story many times, the first when I was a girl, in one of our earliest lessons" [1]. Furthermore, her mother's narratives about her grandmother as a brave African warrior woman who fights bravely when she was enslaved, help Annis in her separation from her mother when she herself gets sold into the South. These narratives help Annis turn inward, trying to find cosiness from her mother's stories and the memories of her African warrior grandmother. The narratives her mother tells her become the psychological assets that maintain her through loss and trauma. Mother Sasha, through narratives and actions, transmits to Annis her identity as a descendant of a brave woman who can overcome any obstacles lying in her way.

Realistically, many African Americans back to the time of slavery were not aware of their narratives which lead them to give up to loss and trauma. So the importance of ancestral narratives is to provide strength in moment of profound

doubt and hopelessness, functioning as strategy of resilience. On this point, the mother–daughter bond between Annis and her mothers in *Let Us Descend* is the primary matrix through which she understands who she is, what her Black body means for her: a temple and a deadly weapon when she appropriates it; and what it could be turned into by others: a usable property and work tool; and also what kind of future she can imagine for herself when she chooses to embrace either conception.

3. Spirituality and the Presence of the Supernatural

For a historical interpretation, *Let Us Descend*'s spiritual cosmology elicits its inspiration from various African diasporic traditions, like the simbi, nature spirits, from the Kongo regions. Ward then constructs her spiritual landscape in the novel by consolidating the diasporic traditions with influences like Haitian Vodou and Santería, as shown with the spirit Aza. Aza is partly based on the orisha Oyá. In *Let Us Descend*, Jesmyn Ward laces Annis's narrative with spiritual cosmologies, a world where the material and the spiritual are seamlessly intertwined. We can understand that Annis's resistance and survival are contingent not only on physical forces, but on her connection to the elemental spirits and, more critically, to the inherited wisdom of her matrilineal lineage.

As in response to Jacqueline Mattis's question: "How do religion and spirituality inform African American women's efforts to cope with and construct meanings about the adverse circumstances they encounter?" [12], *Let Us Descend* crafts for Annis a picture of *religious naturalism*, a perspective that finds religious meaning in the natural world. The Unitarian minister William R. Murry refers to this worldview as *religious naturalism* [13]. Ward anchors the spiritual answer to oppression and exploitation in the matrilineal lineage. This *religious naturalism* certainly finds one of its most accomplished illustrations in the novel with the spirits it crafts on its own: Aza, which is the storm spirit, *They Who Take and Give*, the earth spirit, *She Who Remembers*, the spirit which always keeps and witnesses the abhorrence of slavery, and the *Water Spirit*, which depicts both origin and oblivion. The convergence of the various supernatural elemental entities or spirits that Annis perceives as omnipresent and whose presence she embraces as sources of empowerment, constitutes a crucial dimension of the world that she describes as "sopping with spirit" [1]. Annis's visionary gift unveils a world where natural forces and ancestral memories are imbued with consciousness: storms coalesce into human form, rivers offer whispered counsel, and the spirits of her foremothers become tangible guides.

Generally, many enslaved people, forcibly displaced from their ancestral lands, had to reconstruct a spiritual community in dialog with the local landscape, rivers, storms, places. Albert Raboteau observes that it is the quick adaptability of these African religions to new environments that accounts for their survival: "Precisely because of their adaptability, African religions could embrace new gods and new rituals without losing their fundamental character. It was their ability to change that allowed them to maintain continuity with Africa in the slave societies of America" [14]. However, these substitutes provided a deeper connection to other rivers, storms, places back in Africa. As Annis is brought to the market of enslaved laborers in New Orleans, she starts creating that spiritual landscape anew, that helps her find resources in her new hostile land. Early, in the New Orleans's market, the voice of the spirit calling out to her, using her true name, Arese, and her response to the call, mark the beginning of the creation of her new spiritual landscape with the spirits. She finds happiness at the end of the visit of the spirit that sets her aside from all others.

Close my eyes when I hear a woman's voice, a misty calling under the shush of the trees. At first I think the person calling me is Safi, come back to work the rope, to free me. And then, when Safi doesn't slink from the whispering dark, I think it's my mother, that she done came for me like she said, because I called to her spirit, because I call, every breath, every lurch, every cutting eye, every blink, is me saying her name since she was took from me: Mama. But the voice murmuring from nowhere, from the dark everywhere, it is not my mother's voice. It is not soft Safi's. It is a bad wind, pushing through the seams of windows, rising through gaps in the floor. It would flatten green saplings in fields. It would knock a man from a horse. It is a high howl that simmers to a low groan. My heart judders: with fear, with want. Part of me don't care who this voice belong to, because I realize only I can hear her: no one else wakes and peers into the woods, asks "who goes there?" The Georgia men snore and snuffle, and the chained men and the roped women are prone in the night, flattened by the day. I hear her calling me by my true name, the name my mother gave me before my sire flattened it to Annis. Arese. Arese: She came in at a good time [1].

On this foreign and hostile land, the presence of the supernatural revealing itself to Annis provides her with mental, emotional, and spiritual strengths for action and resilience. Furthermore, she gains sustenance and strength in this spiritual landscape she creates, and is able to perceive the presence of the spirit based on the stories that she heard. In Aza's apparition to her, she whispers to Annis: "You could be my priestess. You could teach them my true name" [1]. Annis sees in the spirit's offer a sense of worth, love, trust, strength, as her choice expresses a privilege she has never had in her whole life. These words have a powerful meaning. In ancient cultures, a priestess was a woman who held an unparalleled spiritual power and was granted a high social position. So Aza calling Annis priestess can be seen as a call

to Annis to become a spiritual leader, a guardian of her people's spiritual heritage. Annis is chosen to receive the spirit's *true name*. Aza shares a potent divine secret with the young girl, the one that is the key to her identity and spiritual power. So the presence of the supernatural has helped Annis find a way out, in a world to which only she has access, a world which has no straight lines, but is the only path to freedom, as Aza makes Annis understand. It is a world that widens Annis's possibilities capabilities, formerly restrained by the chains of slavery.

You must understand something more of this spirit," Aza says. "And you must understand something more of time, of the universe, to begin to know the Water. The spirit speaks in riddles because that is how her and her kind see. The universe is no straight line, no narrow road. The universe is a riddle, a slant gathering of places, of voices, of happenings. But she who foretells sees a path, the most likely path, for you to be free [1].

The interpretation of this statement brings to a general analysis emphasizing the word *water*. Because as Aza says, she must understand more of the universe and spirits but this understanding should start from knowing the water. Physically, the water is the source of life, and spiritually, the water stands for the primal source of spiritual knowledge and power. Also, she descends into her condition of slavery through the Atlantic water crossing, which is key in her understanding her current condition. Furthermore, in a common concept in many continental and diasporic African traditions, the water refers to a spiritual realm associated with the orisha Oyá. So as Aza says, beginning to "know the water" means beginning to know the source of the universe. Beginning to "know the water" also calls to an introspection by going down into the depths of one's own birth water, one's own psyche, to be able to confront one's fears and limitations, and to emerge transformed, renewed.

4. The Convergence of Matrilineal Bonds and Spirituality

Resistance in enslavement goes beyond the mere flash of the cunning intellect, subterfuge and defiant uprising. It also welled from spiritual depth, as the case of Annis shows, blending matrilineal connections and spiritual inheritance. The interweaving of matrilineal bonds with spirituality in *Let Us Descend* constructs a framework for survival and resistance against the systemic dehumanization of slavery.

Annis shows that her resilience does not come from mild individualistic concepts of survival, but instead from cultural strategies established in African traditions, which connect matrilineal lineage to the spiritual practices of African cultural traditions. The supernatural sights the Black enslaved laborers educated in Black spirituality saw, the relative fear that their spiritual power created in some White enslavers, recreated here in literature, are not personal survival strategies. They are embedded in collective cultural networks that link each and all to the community of ancestors and extant practitioners who preserve these traditions despite violent social repression. The current narratives of cultural re-creation like that of Ward bear testimony to the Black tradition in America. Annis's portrayal in her novel furthermore bears witness to one specific strand of that tradition: storytelling, that is necessary to preserve the whole edifice and lend it to the transformations and adaptations of time and circumstances. The preservation of these traditions through storytelling, herbalism, and ritual practices transmitted through matrilineal lineages, can stand as a source of resistance. By their awareness and preservation of cultural traditions, the enslaved laborer established a connection with that community of ancestors. This connection is one of the strongest resources that sustained their resilience against the erasure of their history. Mothers and substitute caregivers transmitted this spiritual knowledge, knitting responsible parenthood in spirituality. The spiritual figures of ancestors, like Mama Aza and mother Sasha, that at the same time stand as spiritual figures, teach and guide their descendant on the good way of survival, resilience, keeping personal safety in the context of adversity.

Annis's capacity to *descend* into the abhorrence of slavery while succeeding in maintaining her selfhood banks on her connection to maternal ancestors who offer her both spiritual guidance and practical skills. Furthermore, the connection she establishes with her mothers transforms her from a powerless victim, subjected to oppression, into an agent fully involved in shaping her own destiny, fighting for her freedom. It shows what might be called spiritual agency, the freedom and ability to express autonomy and exert choice through connection with spiritual assets. To sum up, we can understand that the preservation of spiritual tradition through matrilineal bonds triggers a transformative process. This transformative process, Annis experiences and it helps her resist oppression.

Annis transformative journey unfolds through stages delineated by Greer, et al.:

interrogate and accept reality, gain the insight and courage needed to engage in spiritual surrender, confront and transcend limitations, identify and grapple with existential questions and life lessons, recognize purpose and destiny, define character and act within subjectively meaningful moral principles, achieve growth, and trust in the viability of transcendent sources of knowledge and communication" [15].

By going through this transformative process achieved through the connection to maternal ancestors, individuals find resources for transcending collective trauma, extending their strength on how to get involved in sorrowful experiences without succumbing to their grasp. This approach helped enslaved individuals not only in recovering from trauma but in promoting new views and strengths as a product of their struggles.

Matrilineal spirituality is presented in *Let Us Descend* as a potent liberatory practice that implies survival, liberation and resistance. In this regard, Annis teaches through her experiences that a hard-won liberation relies on both physical and spiritual dimensions. Ward recalls us through Annis's experience that in this dynamic, "teaching Mama Aza's way of fighting, her stories, it's a way to recall another world. Another way of living" [1]. It is then important to view and reassess spirituality and matrilineal bonds as sources of resistance. Resisting adversity and oppression relies on the understanding of spirituality and matrilineal bonds. Ultimately, the historical and cultural context of matrilineal bonds and spiritual traditions help "know [...] when to stand and when to go, when not to fight... Knowing when to wait and hide and watch and duck" [1].

5. Conclusion

This study highlights how the correlation between matrilineal bonds and spiritual traditions serve as a source of guidance, motivation and resistance against systemic dehumanization of chattel slavery. From the time of slavery to date, women and girls have gone through rigid experiences of enslavement which have impacted their lives and left deep scars in the psyche of all female African Americans from enslaved descent in multiple ways. The storytelling enterprise in which Ward gets us involved, relying on the black tradition, is a remedy against those visible and invisible scars of slavery, a system that has, in fact never completely disappeared. The experiences of a teenage girl called Annis comes to remind us of the importance of these mother-daughter relations once and now vital but which are more and more eroded today in the age of multimedia by YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok. Strong matrilineal bonds, interwoven with adaptive spiritual traditions, can procure strength and challenge the cruel realities African Americans in general, and females in particular, grapple with in America. Despite the pressures and situations Annis faces during her journey as a chattel enslaved, she demonstrates a remarkable resistance just by tapping into her matrilineal power and the teachings of her grandmother Aza's spirit. Through matrilineal bonds, cultural preservation and the transmission of spiritual traditions, through storytelling and self-centered education, African Americans can find ways to cope and redefine their identity and rise up to their own social expectations in their own terms.

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