

## **Gender, Insurgency and Benevolence: An Exploration of Power in Maria Edgeworth's 'The Grateful Negro'**

'The Grateful Negro' by Maria Edgeworth features three vastly different female characters that embody the idea that class and one's positionality in society often intersect with gender to reveal the inadequacies of how we may unquestioningly and myopically view the idea of equality. This complicates the reading of the short story because it interrogates the idea that the only division in society is between the enslaver and the enslaved and it posits that more layered distinctions, based on age and gender, also exist. But more than this, the story's depiction of women aligns with the overarching exploration of the relationship between the slave and the owner and reflects the writer's assertion that a kind and accommodating relationship between the two is an important practical solution, which she situates above the perhaps distant dismantling of slavery. Through the stark binary of the good vs. bad slave narrative that Edgeworth creates in her story, conveyed most specifically through her female characters, she takes a less opposing stand towards slavery than might be apparent at first glance.

Clara, Caesar's wife, offers a kind of fascinating duality by simultaneously exhibiting an urgent desire to *do* something about the predicament she and Caesar find themselves in (as opposed to Caesar's complete blind obedience and passivity) but also by being relegated to a secondary position in the narrative, illuminated only by Caesar's role as the main character. She is at once known through her role as a wife and is also a nuanced character in her own right through her more acute awareness about the situation they find themselves in. Esther is an 'old Koromantyn negress' (Edgeworth 21) and it is noteworthy that she is characterized as older and witch-like which already distances her from Clara's youth and sense of loyalty to a husband and she is also specified as being from the 'Koromantyn' tribe which is considered to be intrinsically rebellious. Edgeworth casts Esther in a dangerous and insidious

light which serves to show one extreme of slaves--the exact opposite of the sanitized, cloaked narrative that the characterizations of Clara and Caesar seem to promote. She is threatening and alien--pronounced by her witchiness and craftiness--and her darkness is an encroachment, an entity that is contrary in every way to the notion of whiteness. If Caesar and Clara support Edgeworth's argument of what the good treatment of slaves can do to the temperament of a slave, then Esther is an example of a slave that cannot be retrieved from the state of rebellion. Lastly, Edgeworth's characterization of Mrs. Jefferies who is/previously was a 'languid beauty' (Edgeworth 25) portrays a slave-owner that is unlikeable in her exploitation of slaves and her sheer excessiveness and luxurious way of living that comes at the expense of the slaves she owns. Through portraying her as wildly ignorant and through the contrasting slave portrayals of Clara and Esther, Edgeworth seems to underline the need for a relationship between the master and slave that is understanding and kind as opposed to vile and callous. This demonstration of the female characters supports the overall premise of the story, where Edgeworth seems to lean towards a more humanistic treatment of slaves rather than strongly stand for the complete abolition of the institute of slavery. In this essay, I will explore Edgeworth's characterization of women and her humanistic approach regarding slavery and assess at which points these two intertwine.

Our first introduction to Clara is as a 'young and beautiful negro weeping bitterly' (Edgeworth 8) and it is important that both her youth and beauty are emphasized here. She is also deeply grief-stricken and she remains so for most of the remaining story. Though it might be easy to only see Clara for her unwavering loyalty to Caesar and through her grief at the thought of being disunited from him, she displays a powerful sense of strength and conviction, especially when the overseer says they will find her another husband and she says 'Never! Never!' even in the presence of Mr. Edwards (Edgeworth 29). Here, we see her express her own urgent desire and not bend at the whims of fate, not even in front of a slave-owner. When Caesar expresses that he will serve Mr. Edwards, Clara merely echoes this but springs 'forward' (Edgeworth 10) and this positioning places her as an equal to Caesar---in love and duty. Despite this, Edgeworth emphasizes that the two are 'different characters,' with Clara belonging to the Eboe tribe

which makes her 'soft, languishing and timid' and Caesar to the Koromantyn tribe which makes him 'frank, fearless, martial and heroic' (Edgeworth 13). Though this is a contrast between Clara and Caesar, it is also important to remember that this contrast may also apply to Clara and Esther (minus the heroism), who are the only two female slave characters and they too, belong to these different tribes.

Esther has 'obtained skill in poisonous herbs and knowledge of venomous reptiles' (Edgeworth 20) and this sense of mystery, magic, and exoticism places her at the opposite end of white society's industrialism and practicality. Her craft carries connotations of duplicity and make-believe. For instance, she has 'taught' her countrymen to 'believe her to be possessed of supernatural powers and then she (works) their imagination to whatever pitch and purpose she pleased' (Edgeworth 20). There is the sense that she controls their minds and that she is deceitful in some way. 'She was the chief instigator of this intended rebellion' (Edgeworth 20), Edgeworth writes and so links Esther's deceitful nature to the rebellion. Words like 'stimulated' and 'influence' and 'exerted' (Edgeworth 20) all denote the idea of the rebellion being something constructed and engineered by Esther, not organic in how it originated, not a result of the genuine complaints of the slaves. Towards the end of the story, in one particularly significant scene, 'five stout negroes' stand entranced by Esther, 'intent upon her incantations' (Edgeworth 31), as though she has them under a deep spell. Her hands are described as 'shriveled' (Edgeworth 31) and one does not have to stretch the imagination too far to conjure up the additional images of a cackling laugh and enchantress-like exterior.

Edgeworth puts Clara and Esther at opposing ends of the spectrum, with Clara's main purpose being to preserve her family and her husband's life and Esther's purpose being one that originates from her deceitful witchy craft. She is merely an instigator. A 'melancholy' (Edgeworth 20) hangs over Clara when she finds out what Esther has planned for Caesar and is incredulous that Caesar would doubt her 'constancy' for him (Edgeworth 21). It is not as though Clara is meek in her wants and desires but that her desires are forever rooted in the quest for a happy life with her companion. She is even seen as being 'timid' by her fellow slaves, which is why they conceal details about their rebellion from her (Edgeworth

22). Clara's predicament invokes sympathy from the reader, while Esther's motives are not seen to be fuelled by a cause as noble as love--even if the modern reader sees how Esther is fighting for the improved survival of her community.

At one point, Clara exclaims 'I ask you to save your life! I ask you, for my sake, to save your life while yet it is in your power!' (Edgeworth 22). Though Clara is straightforward and passionate here, ultimately, she is powerless in the face of what she believes Esther will do and what only Caesar can prevent. She also reveals a sense of naivety when she says that murdering Mr. Edwards cannot be the 'will of the sorceress' (Edgeworth 23) and this reinforces the timidity of her character. What is most interesting here is when Caesar says Esther 'shall not succeed, even though she speaks with the voice of Clara' (Edgeworth 22) and it is as though Clara's insistence on doing something to avert their incoming conflict can only be Esther's doing, she who is the instigator. It is not in Clara's nature to call for such action but in Esther's and Clara reinforces this idea when she says 'Cruel Esther! Why do you command us to destroy such a generous master?' (Edgeworth 23). Here, Edgeworth sharpens that dichotomy between the good and bad slaves by making their conflict a central one in the story. Where Mr. Edwards helped to keep Clara and Caesar united, Esther now threatens their unity, at once becoming a cause of great tension in their life together.

This conflict and tension reach their climax when Caesar's 'beloved Clara' has been 'thrown into a trance' by Esther who then--described as a 'hag'-- 'bursts into an infernal laugh' (Edgeworth 28). This paints her in a devilish light and deems her power-hungry rather than rightfully enraged. It appears to follow the trope of the madwoman, where Esther's concrete misgivings with society are shrouded under the guise of her just being an agitator for the sake of being one. Like the dichotomy between the opposing figures of Mr. Edwards and Mr. Jefferies, there is a stark contrast among the slaves, almost like a reflection of the differing slave-owners. Edgeworth implies that just as two masters with differing temperaments exist, so too can different slaves. And treating them right might just be what causes that difference in

behavior. Although Clara wants to prolong their life together, she too feels tenderness towards her master and cannot stomach the idea of killing him for a larger freedom.

Though Edgeworth presents a spectrum in the personalities of both masters and slaves alike, it is true that she also emphasizes how it is the master's responsibility to treat their slaves right. For instance, by including Mrs. Jefferies completely detached and cruel behavior towards her slaves, Edgeworth is pointing out just how soulless slave-owners can be and how this, in turn, can cause rebellion and upheaval in society. The image of her being 'fanned by four slaves' and as someone who ordered that her female slaves be 'severely chastised' over a non-significant mistake (Edgeworth 27) invites no sympathy for her character and in fact, evokes disgust in the heart of the reader. This characterization of her as vain, selfish, and entirely self-involved serves as a reminder of how *not* to treat slaves if one wishes to keep the peace because one of the female slaves she admonishes happens to be Hector's wife (one of the more enraged slaves). By linking this incident to Hector, Edgeworth shows why he is fixated on the desire for vengeance and it is one of the few times in the story that she shows their cause for rebellion as legitimate.

It is interesting that the ending rewards Clara and Caesar--presumably for their loyalty and gratitude--and they are given a happy ending. Edgeworth seems to be neatly ascribing endings to the characters that reinforce her ideas throughout the story. For instance, the vindictive overseer meets his death, Mr. Jefferies faces a huge loss in wealth and Mr. Edwards forgives the rebelling slaves, retaining his status as a character most benevolent and soft-hearted. The rebellion is quelled and Caesar who valiantly exclaimed he should be buried with Clara when he thought both of them were going to die (Edgeworth 31) retains his heroic stature. Through her representations of the female characters, her representation of Caesar's unwavering loyalty, and the way in which she ends the story, Edgeworth underlines the importance of treating slaves with kindness. However, she does not imagine a reconfiguration of the system that births inequality between the races in the first place.

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