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Source: *Journal of West Indian Literature*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (November 1990), pp. 25-45

Published by: Journal of West Indian Literature

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23019674>

Accessed: 11-03-2017 03:15 UTC

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# THE WHITE WITCH OF ROSEHALL AND THE LEGITIMACY OF FEMALE POWER IN THE CARIBBEAN PLANTATION

— Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert

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White in the golden light of the sun it stood, the Great House of Rosehall. It dominated the landscape; it imposed itself upon the gaze of all who might pass along the road that ran in front of the property; it indicated opulence...it represented the pride and arrogance of the planter caste which still ruled in Jamaica, and whose word, on its own plantations carried all the authority and sanction of an arbitrary will scarcely curbed by laws passed in recent years for the protection of the bondsmen..<sup>1</sup>

Standing high atop an eminence overlooking Montego Bay, “like a tiara on a hilltop,” Rosehall is the epitome of an era when sugar was the most important commodity in the international market, a time when their sprawling sugar plantations made the West Indies the jewels of the British Empire. But Rosehall, magnificent as it is as a symbol of plantation-era power and wealth, owes its hold on the imagination to its having been the setting for the legend of terror that included treachery, voodoo

and murder, a tale that embodied the depravity of plantation rule and which had its root a woman's fiendish power.

Rosehall made its way into legend through its connection with Annie Palmer — the woman that would come to be known as the “White Witch of Rosehall.” Annie Palmer's legend is intricately bound with the issue of the legitimacy of female power within the plantation system, as she is one of the very few, and certainly the most famous (or infamous) of the women planters in the British West Indies. Annie's legend grew precisely out of her notoriety as a female planter. The story of her sexual excesses and brutality towards her slaves — a story not much different from that of many corrupt male planters — became, by virtue of her being female and thus not naturally entitled to a commanding position, emblematic of the debasing domination of the plantation system.

Through the years, the legendary Annie Palmer has evolved into a mosaic of all the evils that could attend whites in the “nasty dangerous tropics.” Born Annie May Patterson, the daughter of Irish parents, she grew up in Haiti, where orphaned at an early age, she was raised by a voodoo priestess. This connection to Haiti would later be used to underscore the ‘unnaturalness’ of her upbringing: Irish, brought up by a voodoo Baroness, “white, lovely, imperious, strong, fearless,” she is said to have been born with powers developed with the aid of friends well-versed in old African magic, which she would use later to terrorize the people in her estates. At eighteen, the remarkably beautiful girl is believed to have used these skills to cast a spell on John Rose Palmer, master of Rosehall, to lure him into marriage. By the age of twenty-one, she had poisoned Palmer, gaining control of the Rosehall plantation. She allegedly strangled her second husband, another English planter whose estate she inherited, and is said to have stabbed her third husband to death. She had also taken numerous slave lovers whom she is reputed to have killed

as she grew tired of them. By her mid-twenties, her wealth and power were unmatched by any of her neighbouring planters.

The terror with which she ruled her plantations was to become legendary, as it involved unprecedented violence — in an environment already notorious for its savagery — and witchcraft. According to legend, Annie Palmer built a balcony overlooking the courtyard of Rosehall, from which she would watch as she had slaves lashed to death, finding in the spectacle of source of titillation and sensual delight. Annie's capacity for cruelty was said to be such as to make Rosehall the most feared plantation in Jamaica. But despite this reputation for brutality, her wealth and position protected her from the sanctions of the law, the repudiation of her planter neighbours notwithstanding. Her protection, tied as it was to continued planter hegemony, lasted only until the slave uprising of the 1831 Christmas holidays, when dozens of planters were massacred. Among the first to die, at the age of twenty-nine, was Annie Palmer. Legend says she was killed by a voodoo priest whose magic had not been stronger than Annie's own, but who wanted to avenge the death of his granddaughter, murdered by the white witch. The slaves refused to bury her body and a spell was cast on her tomb to keep her spirit at rest.

Over the years, the legend of Annie Palmer has come to exemplify the morally corrupting influence of the plantation system, responsible for the creation of an environment where "only a vicious society could flourish." C.L.R. James, writing about French planter society in Haiti, described it as a society of "open licentiousness and habitual ferocity," where whites were accustomed to the indulgence of every wish. It was a society marked by the "degradation of human lives," where men sought "to overcome their abundant leisure and boredom with food, drink, dice, and black women," having, long before 1789, "lost the simplicity of life and rude energy of those nameless men who

laid the foundation” of the Caribbean colonies.<sup>2</sup> The Annie Palmer of legend, a woman of voracious lust and uncontrollable brutality, embodies these negative qualities of colonial and plantation rule.

The theme of plantation societies as places lost in their degradation and ferocity is developed by Herbert G. de Lisser in *The White Witch of Rosehall*, a novel based on Annie Palmer’s story.<sup>3</sup> The depiction of the plantation as an environment that can only nurture debasement and depravity is a popular theme in colonial Caribbean literature, one which de Lisser sees aptly represented in the legend surrounding Annie Palmer, a woman whose excesses he perceives as symbolic of the defiling character of plantation rule. *The White Witch of Rosehall* is a tale of colonial decline whose moral arguments center on the contrast between Jamaica as a place which by its very nature incites corruption and sin, and England as the repository of strong and lasting moral values. In de Lisser’s presentation, this contrast is exemplified by the struggle between Annie, representative of plantation debauchery and iniquity, and the old-England values of Rutherford, a newly-arrived young English gentleman, heir to his father’s English and Caribbean estates, who comes to Rosehall posing as a mere bookkeeper in order to learn the plantation business from the bottom up. In de Lisser’s popular version of the Palmer story, Rutherford is easily seduced by Annie, giving way with hardly a struggle to what he terms “the West Indian ethos”:

...he was secretly startled that he had so quickly succumbed what he had heard at home were the manners and customs of this country, with a disregard of all concealment, a careless acceptance of any conditions and circumstances that might appeal at the moment, however, flagrantly might be violated every principle of circumspect conduct. (65)

Rutherford's brief but intensely passionate affair with Mrs. Palmer soon runs aground: his scruples awaken as his knowledge of Annie's character grows (especially as her behaviour is far from adhering to the patriarchal ideal), and Annie quickly discovers that he is also interested in Millicent, a young and charming free mulatto girl who has become Rutherford's 'housekeeper' or would-be mistress.<sup>4</sup> Her claim to Rutherford's attention (and affection), and her outspoken defiance of Mrs. Palmer, whom she openly accuses of having murdered her husbands, makes Millicent the target for Annie's relentless rage.

At the root of Annie's drive for revenge is Millicent's race and class status: it is made clear in the text that although Annie would be loath to lose Rutherford to any woman, to lose him to a woman she deems her inferior because she is a mulatto and the granddaughter of a former slave would signify a radical break from the rules that dominate the social landscape of the plantation. It is Annie's conviction that, although free, Millicent is not much better than a slave: "I am a mistress of slaves, that is my position," is her answer to Rutherford's attempt to stop her from whipping Millicent, "and this woman is little better than a slave" (106). Given Rutherford's subsequent efforts to save the girl from Annie's attempts at her life, Millicent becomes the pawn in the battle of wills that ensues between Annie Palmer and Rutherford, her life forfeit to a struggle that centers on two rarely discussed aspects of plantation life: the legitimacy of female power in the intrinsically patriarchal plantation system, and the deeply-rooted race and class tensions dividing black, white, and mulatto women in plantation society.

Thus, the plot of *The White Witch of Rosehall* revolves around three critical aspects of power relations within the plantation: Rutherford's need to regain command of his will after been easily seduced by Annie, a struggle at whose core is the reaffirmation of white patriarchal rule over unsanctioned female

power; Annie's relentless and ultimately self-destructive struggle against Millicent, a struggle whose basis is Annie's determination to affirm her superior position as a white woman in the race and class hierarchies of plantation society; and the struggle of Takoo, Millicent's grandfather, a struggle whose basis is the power held by white women over black males in the plantation household, and the concomitant inability of black males of defend black females from the abuse of master or mistress.

Through the unfolding of these interwoven plots it becomes clear that de Lisser's critique of plantation life is heavily dependent on prevailing patriarchal sexual politics. The novel's central plot moves from the manifestations of unbridled female power, a 'corruption' by its very definition of the 'natural' power hierarchies of the plantation, to the 'taming' and destruction of that power, leaving open (by means of Rutherford's departure from Jamaica never to return) the whole arguable issue of whether all power, not solely female power, is pernicious in the plantation. The interest of de Lisser's tale in our context rests on two considerations: his depiction of white female power in the plantation in all its aberrant manifestations (particularly important as the story is taken from history and legend, and therefore not entirely de Lisser's creation but part of the Jamaican collective memory); in the nature of the primary victim of Annie's manifestations of power — a mulatto woman whose very ability to awaken a murderous rage in the protagonist is based on her race and class. Annie's power as a white woman and as mistress of a plantation, and the threat Millicent's claim to equality poses to that power, thus become one of the central issues of the novel.

An examination of the sources of Annie's power as presented by de Lisser reveals the precarious foundations on which that power is based. The novel underscores Annie's tenuous claim to her commanding position, thus preparing the

ground for the re-establishment of the patriarchal control she has wrested from her murdered husbands.

The primary source of Annie's power is her wealth, represented by Rosehall itself, the possession of which set her aside as foremost among her peers. The Great House, a "blatant assertion of opulence and power," seemed intended as a sort of challenge to a "headstrong and proud plantocracy" (240). Annie's character more than matched Rosehall's arrogance. Like Rosehall, Annie is "filled with a sense and feeling of her own power" (53), her voice marked by a "metallic imperiousness" which declared her habits of command.

The possession of Rosehall, however, points directly to the illicitness of Annie's ill-gotten power. Her position of command was obtained through the murder of its legitimate male owner, and the murders of not one, but three husbands underscore the particularly monstrous circumstances that made her power possible. The fact that the main 'weapons' to gain initial access to power were her 'intoxicating,' 'dazzling,' beauty and her skills as a witch, both treacherous 'female' weapons that negate the traditional 'male' concept of fair play, signals the danger posed to the patriarchal system (represented here by Annie's murdered husbands) by conniving, power-hungry, deceiving women such as Annie. Annie's contempt for the men she is purported to have murdered rests on her assessment of her own strength via ! vis their weakness. Asked by Rutherford whether she is afraid of their ghosts, she answers:

It is not of them I am afraid. I despise them in death as I despised them in life. They were weaker than I when alive, and I am still stronger than they are now that they are dead. (53)

In her own explanation for the basis of her contempt for her husbands, Annie emphasizes their degradation: they were



drunks, spineless men who had succumbed to the 'West Indian ethos,' lacking the male qualities of strength and determination that sustained the patriarchal system and thus opening the way for unbridled female control.

It should be noted in this context that Annie, shunned by her neighbouring planters for the alleged murders of her husbands, administers her plantations with an iron hand, that despite the threat of revolt in the air since Emancipation was decreed, she continues to run Rosehall with the "evil, reckless spirit of former days." This recklessness, which is in contradiction with the more cautious stance of other (male) planters, seems to invite revolt. Her brazen stance, which could be interpreted as signalling her lack of male restraint, appears as an invitation to self-destruction which could bring the reality of revolt and death upon the entire system, thus confirming male fears of the consequences of 'irrational' female power.

Once acquired through violence, Annie's ill-gotten power needs to be sustained by violence. Her legendary brutality is portrayed as an 'unwomanly' quality that makes behaviour typical of males in the plantocracy particularly heinous in her hands. The contrast between expected 'womanly' behaviour and Annie's cruel treatment of her slaves, for example, functions in the novel as an indictment of the corrupt plantation system; but that is so precisely because the wielding of such power by a woman reveals its atrocity in all its brutal aspects. Atrocities, when "committed for instigated by a woman...bring about a special shudder." As Antonia Fraser writes of the common reaction to the knives in Queen Boadicea's chariot: "it is not so much the mythical weapons themselves as the woman driving the chariot which gives us surely that special *frisson*."<sup>5</sup>

Annie's violent rage, once awakened, is inexorable, as evidenced by her relentless and ultimately self-destructive persecution and murder of Millicent. This quality of Annie's begins

to unfold from her first appearance in the text. The scene finds Rutherford waiting to meet Mrs. Palmer at the site of the flogging of a young woman Rutherford had tried to defend from the sexual advances of one of the foremen. As he awaits Mrs. Palmer, he fully expects that she will mitigate or eliminate altogether the girl's punishment, especially as it is clearly motivated by sexual harassment. What is expected of Annie in her position as representative of 'True Womanhood' is a far cry from the sensuous delight she takes in watching a flogging, as Rutherford will learn to his (and Millicent's) chagrin much later. To look on while lashes were inflicted "was a joy and a satisfaction" she found difficult to forego:

She had witnessed whippings for years and years,  
and her appetite had grown with what it fed on...that  
first tasting of blood, as it were, had awakened a certain  
lust in her which had grown and strengthened until it  
had become a powerful and abiding obsession. (80)

This opening scene prefigures Annie's relationship to Millicent, whom she will later attempt to whip during their confrontation over Rutherford. It is significant in our context that Annie's initial display of power in the novel is against another woman, one subject to her by her race and social status. The subsequent manifestations of her power throughout the novel will focus on Millicent, presented in de Lisser's text as a bold mulatto woman, conscious of the power bestowed on her by her freedom, her literacy, and her grandfather's position as a powerful obeah man, a girl not willing to readily accept the inessential place assigned to her as a mulatto woman in plantation society.

In the novel (as in the legend) the fact that Annie is a woman with enormous power serves to stress long-standing misogynist biases. As with any "female who dares usurp male power," (and Annie has clearly usurped male power through murder), Annie

is “richly endowed with vices, lust naturally paramount.”<sup>6</sup> Her dominating, commanding character, reverses the traditional pattern of dominance in male/female relationships, where the woman is regarded as essentially passive, “the receptacle of male sexual drive for the subsequent reproduction of the species.” (Figs,125). The importance of male dominance as the keynote to male/female relationships serves to underscore the unconventionality of Annie’s position, especially as she subverts female passivity through the volcanic explosions of her ‘unnatural’ lust. This ‘subverting’ quality of Annie’s character is evidenced during her first encounter with Rutherford, when she takes the sexually aggressive role, leading him directly into her bedroom. Her tempestuous command in their sexual relationship is one of the clearest manifestations of Annie’s reversal of gender roles, since the consummation of the sexual act, which in Western culture is inextricably linked to the idea of submission, results in Rutherford’s submitting with a voluptuous and willing abandon to Annie’s will. The plot of the novel will follow Rutherford’s efforts to recover the will power he had so easily relinquished to Annie so as to prove that he, as a white English male, possessed the necessary resolve to restore the patriarchal values Annie has so flagrantly violated.

In *The White Witch of Rosehall*, de Lisser emphasizes Annie’s tempestuous lust as vital to her drive to power. Her sensuality is described as “temperamental and dominant...wild as the sea fronting Rosehall when it was lashed to fury by the winds that rushed down from the north, fierce as the storms that sometimes ranged over this country” (67). The thwarting of her lust signified by what she perceives as Rutherford’s attraction to Millicent, especially after Annie had “given herself to him,” unleashes the increasingly melodramatic displays of Annie’s magical powers, displays that will culminate in Millicent’s death.

Annie's dependence on witchcraft as an avenue to sustain her power is further evidence of the unsanctioned quality of her authority. Her power is clearly linked to her reputation as a witch, as she explains to Rutherford:

I have told you before that we have to rule these people by fear, and I, *a woman*, must encourage their foolish ideas, if I am to hold my own amongst them. (168, my emphasis)

Consequently, she held control over her slaves and employees not only by bodily fear — “By dread of the whip and the iron chain” — but by the threat of potent spiritual terrors, by the conviction she had instilled in them that she could summon fiends from hell at will, that she could beat down the resistance of any enemy through the secrets she learned from her voodoo-priestess nurse.

Her being female is inextricably linked to her ability to instill in people a belief in her magic powers. When Burbridge, Rosehall's senior bookkeeper, tells Robert about Annie's voodoo background, he emphasizes the equality of the power of the Haitian voodoo priestess to that of the male. But Eva Figs, in her discussion of witchcraft in *Patriarchal Attitudes*, establishes clear differences between the powers of female and male witches. Figs argues that by nature of their superior powers, female witches were more feared and indeed more dangerous than their male counterparts. In a discussion that bears on the contrast between Annie's powers and those of Takoo, for example, Figs describes the powers ascribed to female witches as much more impressive than those of the male. Reputedly, female witches could fly through the night and change themselves into other creatures at will. (Annie could make beasts materialize in the sky.) A female witch's power is often associated with aberrant sexuality and morbid practices, both char-

acteristic of Annie's legendary behaviour. Female witches supposedly can feed on corpses and have sexual intercourse with evil spirits, who tutor them in the art of doing harm. Compared to these attributes of female witches, a male sorcerer's powers are considered to be much more concrete and restricted, "almost amount[ing] to a rational system"(58).

Annie's illegitimate position of command, attained through murder and sustained through violence and witchcraft, is dependent on the institution of slavery, without which the foundations of her power would not exist. Her power is only understandable within the plantation household, as it rests primarily on her being white in a society where her race makes it possible for her to hold power over people considered inferior by virtue of their race and their status as slaves.

De Lisser depicts Annie as aware of the benefits she can reap from her being a white woman in a plantation society. She is portrayed as knowing full well that in England, among other white women, she would "count for little," despite her beauty, that "there would be no supremacy for her there;" but that in Jamaica, where the mere fact that she was white conferred upon her a special status, "she could live; almost unfettered...a life of domination and sensuality" (137). It cannot be forgotten that Annie's access to a position of power usually reserved for white males in plantation society is directly linked to her being a white (and beautiful) woman in a society marked by the scarcity of white women. In the Caribbean,

(b)ecause of the existence of slaves, a social grouping whose inferior status was based on colour in addition to class, petty whites of both sexes elevated themselves to a social standing which would have been unobtainable in England...In a society where all white women were 'ladies' and black females merely 'women' or

‘girls’, social pretentiousness and arrogance on the part of the ‘ladies’ was positively encouraged (Bush, 248-9).

Annie, being white, became the legal wife of a rich planter whose estate she was then in a position to inherit. By contrast, it is assumed in the text that if Millicent were to triumph over Annie in their battle for Rutherford’s love, the best she could aspire to become would be his mistress, a position that would not necessarily give her access to the control of a late lover’s wealth. Annie’s power, therefore, is directly attributable to her being white, and rests on her society’s concepts of racial superiority. Her reported brutality is incomprehensible if not backed by the disdain for blacks fostered by the institution of slavery. De Lisser describes her voice as betraying a “supreme and unconscious contempt” when she speaks of her slaves, and Robert comments that “[t]he people around [her] might have been sticks and bones as far as they affected her” (58). This feeling of racial superiority is most clearly seen in Annie’s relationship with Millicent, where bigotry plays a central role. The problems in the relationship between Annie and Millicent have their roots in plantation-bred divisions between slave and slaveholding women. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, when posing the question of the existence of bonds between black and white women in the American South, answers with a simple inescapable ‘no’:

The privileged roles and identities of slaveholding women depended upon the oppression of slave women, and the slavewomen knew it. Slaveholding and slave women shared a world of mutual antagonism and frayed tempers that frequently erupted in violence, cruelty, and even murder..[The slaveholding woman’s] ideal of honour was related...to the ability to command the bodies

and labour of others, to a model of social hierarchy in which some were born and would die superior to others, whatever their personal failings and economic vicissitudes.<sup>7</sup>

Annie's murderous rage towards Millicent has its foundation in the possibilities of these hierarchies breaking down, of Annie's position of supremacy being put to the test. In Millicent, Annie meets a rival with a clear sense of what she is due as a free mulatto woman of some fortune and importance. Takoo, a man of considerable affluence, had determined that Millicent should be looked up to "as a young woman of wealth, regarded as a superior, treated with deference" (198). Her upbringing has made of Millicent a self-assured young woman who proudly asserts her worth. Faced with a threat of a flogging from Ashman, Annie's overseer, she defiantly responds: "Don't hell me! I am not one of you' slave that you can flog like a dog; and me gran'father know how to deal wid anybody who ill-treat me" (82). It is a self-assurance that prompts her to hurl an accusation of murder at Annie, in defense of her own superior moral claim to Rutherford's affection. The accusation so defiantly thrown at her is perceived by Annie as being the worse because it comes from a mulatto woman: "from a native woman (the accusation) constituted the quintessence of an unbearable insult" (108).

Annie's own assessment of her situation vis à vis Millicent emphasizes the racial differences that divide them:

She thought she might be able to endure the successful rivalry of a woman of her own class, or even of her own race; the humiliation would not then be so complete...she knew [that] nearly all of [the white women in the island] had rivals among the coloured girls....Other white women might compromise with the existing conditions and

make a sacrifice for some external peace. She sneered at them: such pitiful weakness moved her to contempt. (223)

The situation that divides Annie and Millicent is not unique to them but characteristic of the existing tensions dividing white and coloured women in plantation societies. Barbara Bush, in her study of race relations between women in the British West Indies emphasizes the strong “intra-sexual tensions that underlay relations between white and black women,” underscoring the “constant frustrations” and “burning jealousies” white women underwent in their unenviable position vis à vis black and mulatto women (257). Bush’s assessment of the growing social mobility of the free coloured class, “well-off mulattoes, some slave owners themselves, who were the forerunners of the coloured ‘aristocracy’ which dominates the social pyramid of modern Caribbean societies (258),” is especially relevant in our context since it places the specific struggle between Annie and Millicent in a clearer socio-historical perspective. Millicent herself is depicted as aware of the challenge that her claim to Rutherford’s affection posed to the established class and racial order:

...Millicent had a resolute mind. She was going to fight with Mrs. Palmer for possession of this man. Other *girls like her* had fought with as highly-placed ladies before in this same parish, *and had won*. (76, my emphasis)

Tied to the racial struggle between Annie and Millicent is the question of relative strength of Takoo’s power as compared to that of Annie’s, particularly since Millicent derives a great part of her self-assurance from her confidence in her grandfather’s might. It should be remembered that one of the most salient aspects of the institution of slavery was the com-



plexities in gender relationships created in societies where interaction between men and women was rigidly regulated along racial lines. As Fox-Genovese writes, these relationships were

inscribed in a social system in which slaveholding women had the right to command the obedience and deference of slave men, in which slaveholding men had the right to exploit the bodies of slave women, and in which slave men did not have to right to resist either form of assault, although they often did at the risk of their lives. (49)

In the text, Takoo, a free man still constrained by the structures of slavery and the plantation, must measure his powers against those of a white woman in the struggle for the life of his granddaughter. The struggle is intriguing in that it initially shows Takoo's deference and actual fear of Annie and her power, both the power that derives from her wealth and position as a plantation mistress and the power that stems from her ability to manipulate supernatural forces. The relationship between Takoo and Annie clearly depicts the pattern of female domination that prevails in relationships between black men and white women in plantation societies. Faced with Millicent's steady decline towards death, Takoo vows to seek revenge, only to realize the recklessness of his outspoken threats against a white woman:

But for his overwhelming, overpowering anger, Takoo would not have ventured to speak like this. He was uttering terrible threats against a white woman who, however much she might be shunned by her own class, could claim the protection of the law against a well-known obeahman.... (151)

Annie, on the other hand, feeling protected from the sanctions of the law by her position, flaunts her superior powers as a witch in her dramatic defeat of Takoo, choosing to do so at the very moment that would have concluded his exorcism of the spell Annie had placed on Millicent. It is significant that although Takoo finally gets his revenge on Annie for the murder of Millicent — he personally strangles her to death during the slave uprising — this revenge is only possible as a political act, as part of a revolt whose purpose is to bring the entire plantation order crashing down. The nature and context of his revenge underscores the necessity of changing the reigning structures to make the revenge possible. Within the plantation structure, Takoo's revenge would have been impossible without forfeiting his life and risking bringing the rage of the entire system upon him and his followers. The restoration of plantation power which ends the novel brings precisely this kind of retaliation upon Takoo and the slaves that joined him in the revolt. The insurrection defeated, Takoo is killed by Ashman, Annie's overseer and former lover, thereby ending the tale with Annie's death avenged.

Ultimately, de Lisser is more interested in the restitution of patriarchal and colonial rule as a fitting conclusion to his tale than he is in the political questions raised by the slave revolt. The revolt itself is simply dismissed as an almost irrelevant episode that was over in a few weeks, leaving no trace behind it other than Annie Palmer's death. It is as if the historical revolt had been nothing but a plot device to solve the problem posed by Annie's unsanctioned power.

The fact that de Lisser is not interested in exploring the possibilities of radical change — whether this means a slave revolt or the sanctioning of female power — is made explicit by Rutherford's adherence to the basic tenets of the social hierarchies of Jamaican society. Rutherford's ideology is that of a

benevolent abolitionist who finds the abuses of slavery distasteful but sees no need to radically alter the social structures created by the institution. His liberal, paternalistic stance, for example, does not question the racial hierarchies so fiercely defended by the planter class. His initial exchange with Ashman is marked by his demand to be treated as is due a white man, even if that white man is a bookkeeper: "I have just arrived and you keep me standing on your verandah as if I were a nigger slave," he says (12).

His views of gender relations are also marked by this acceptance of the natural superiority of white women. Musing over the next step in his relationship with Annie, after the beginning of their sexual liaison, he briefly considers the possibility of an 'establishment' like those set up for coloured women by white men in Montego Bay, but soon rejects this as an unlikely alternative since "a somewhat different standard for women of the upper orders obtained, and Annie belonged to those orders, was assuredly in the front ranks of them" (68). Similarly, his reaction to Annie's row with Millicent is one of shock at the debasement involved in a white woman's battling with a coloured girl:

But don't you understand, Annie, how revolting all this is? You are a white woman, a lady, the mistress of Rosehall, and you come here and engage in a row with a coloured girl, a row that might have been a fight if her grandfather had not happened to come in when he did. (110)

Rutherford's attitude towards Millicent betrays his conviction of the inferiority of her position as compared to Annie's consequence as the white mistress of Rosehall. He repeatedly chastises Millicent for her disrespect and insolence when speaking of Annie, and it is significant that his own interest in Millicent arises out of the contrast he sees between the servility that

should characterize Millicent's behaviour and the young woman's "independent manners." Under the influence of the rum he demands from a reluctant Millicent, Rutherford "suddenly realizes that he rather liked this *brown spitfire* who dared to go great lengths because she was 'free and educated' and her grandfather was a man of wealth and power" (174, my emphasis).

In Rutherford's eyes, this conviction of what is due Annie as a white woman takes precedence over Millicent's claim to have her death avenged. Rutherford is clearly aware of being the only person in a position to bring Annie to justice for the death of Millicent since the authorities, who had ignored previous rumours and suspicions about Annie, would be obliged to listen to a white man of his family and position. However, faced with seeing Annie in the "rude grasp of these slaves, handled brutally" by black men intent on revolt and revenge, Rutherford puts aside the fact that he had, just minutes before, intended to report Annie to the authorities as a murderess, and comes to her defense:

She was a white woman, she was Rosehall's mistress, she was beautiful, she was of his own race and a member of the ruling, dominant class. For these men to terrorize her, to dare threaten her with death, was soul-sickening, revolting, incredible..Outraged pride of race animated him: *he was a white man struggling for the life of a white woman....*The very idea [of this besetting of a white woman by her slaves] was monstrous, atrocious. It mattered nothing what she had done, it was not for these men rudely to handle her and slay her. It was the duty of every white man on the estate to stand by her in this deadly hour of peril. (244-45, my emphasis)

Rutherford's defense of Annie, whom he is unable to save from death at Takoo's hand, is a chivalric act that restores the balance of gender relations previously upset by Annie's seizing of power through the murder of three husbands. Annie, finally reduced to the feminine role of white damsel in distress, awakens as much sympathy from Rutherford as her former role of domineering femme fatale had awakened his abhorrence. This restoration of the balance of what should be the proper gender relations between a white man and a white woman in a patriarchal/plantation society comes at the price of the dismissal of the murder of the mulatto woman. It is the crime of murdering Millicent which "mattered nothing," since in the scale of values accepted by Rutherford (and de Lisser), the life of a white woman, however criminal her deeds, is worth more than the life of an innocent mulatto girl whose only crime was that of claiming the recognition of her worth as a woman. Ironically, it was this same conviction of racial superiority that drove Annie to seek her self-destructive revenge.

The end of the novel finds Rutherford leaving Jamaica, vowing never to return to an island that he has found to be, like Annie herself, "mighty fine on the surface, but...nastily dangerous underneath" (192):

He had now begun to see that below the surface there was much about this life that was drab, unutterably coarse, grimly sinister. (144)

Given Annie's embodiment of the most sinister aspects of the plantation system, the political implications of his tale could not have been lost on de Lisser. The fate of Millicent, the Caribbean mulatto woman, as a pawn in the struggle between Rutherford, the English gentleman, and Annie, the creole planter, is too close to the realities of the colonial power structures to be dismissed as unimportant. Given Rutherford's representation of

colonial-patriarchal interests, and Annie's standing as symbol of plantation abuses, the ultimate solidarity between the English man and the creole woman — a solidarity that rests on the dismissal of a mulatto woman's claim to life — epitomizes the unholy alliances that typify colonial rule (a world on which part of his wealth rests), and is manifest expression of the hypocritical moral stand that sustained colonial control. De Lisser's tale of a woman's fiendish power, his retelling of the grimly fascinating legend of Annie Palmer, is ultimately a metaphor for the complex web of relationships that sustained colonial power.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Herbert G. DeLisser, *The White Witch of Rosehall*. Kingston: Macmillan Caribbean, 1982:7. All further references will be to this edition and will appear in parentheses in the text.
- <sup>2</sup> C.L.R. James. *The Black Jacobins*. (New York: Vintage Books, 1963):27.
- <sup>3</sup> The novel, first published in 1929, continues to be immensely popular, especially among visitors to Jamaica, and has been repeatedly reprinted.
- <sup>4</sup> Coloured women who became 'companions' or 'housekeepers' to white men held important positions in plantation societies; "they considered their unions with white men in the same light as marriage and it was 'extremely difficult to obtain the favours of a woman of colour' except in such terms....The powerful position of coloured housekeepers is well testified to in contemporary records and it is this group who impinged upon the intimate lives of white women." (Barbara Bush, "White 'Ladies', Coloured 'Favourites' and Black 'Wenches': Some Considerations on Sex, Race and Class Factors in Social Relations in White Creole Society in the British Caribbean", *Slavery and Abolition* 2 (1981): 253-4.
- <sup>5</sup> Antonia Fraser, *The Warrior Queens* (New York: Knopf, 1919):6.
- <sup>6</sup> Eva Figes, *Patriarchal Attitudes: Women in Society* (New York: Persea Books, 1986): 54.
- <sup>7</sup> Elizabeth Scott-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1968):34-5, 49.