Suzanne Lacascade

Claire-Solange, âme Africaine

Presented by: Charlotte Woodford

Claire-Solange, âme africaine (1924), by the Martiniquais writer Suzanne Lacascade, offers a compelling postcolonial critique of French society in the early twentieth century. The novel begins in 1914 in Paris shortly before the First World War, with the arrival from Martinique of the eponymous protagonist, the daughter of a French colonial civil servant, Etienne Hucquart, visiting Paris from Fort-de-Francein order to meet her father's family. Her Martiniquais mother died when she was young and she was raised by her mother's sister. Her Martiniquais aunt and cousins accompany her.

The novel foregrounds Claire-Solange's celebration of her Black heritage, herMartiniquais identity and African roots. Through Claire-Solange, the novel confronts the racial prejudices she encounters in Paris, embodied by the attitudes of her Parisian aunt. Claire-Solange's pride in her Black identity and opposition to discrimination also leads her to speak out against anti-Semitism.

Through her late mother's family, Claire-Solange feels a strong sense of connectionto her Black African heritage. The protagonist, draws attention to the epistemic injustice of mainstream representations of colonialism. Novels, she suggests, are transmitters of stereotypical knowledge shaping mythologies that inform a Eurocentric view of the world ; these, she suggests, also shaped her view of France before she arrived: 'Je m'imaginais le printemps, et la France, d'après votrelittérature, oui, comme vous vous imaginez les colonies d'après les récitsmensongers des explorateurs…' (*Claire-Solange*, p. 50).

The novel offers a vivid representation of 'Caribbean vernacular culture and music'(Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora*, pp. 54). Claire-Solange's cousins and auntintroduce into the house of her Parisian aunt, Madame Pol Hucquart the language, songs and recipes of the Caribbean; the critique Valérie Orlando points out that '[t]he French, white reader of the time is forced to contemplate otherness as s/he is exposed to Claire-Solange's world' (Orlando, 'The Politics of Race', p. 123). The novel also offers an alternative view of Paris, as Claire-Solange navigates the streets of Paris independently, seeking out places where she can find shops offeringfood and fashions from Martinique, where the exile community from Saint-Pierrelives, who had fled the earthquake of 1902. Lacascade's protagonist confronts racial prejudices which equate European identity with whiteness. For example on a visit to a concert hall, the protagonist overhears racist remarks directed at her cousins and speaks out proudly about her own identity: 'je suis une mulâtresse française' (*Claire-Solange*, p. 83).

When the First World War breaks out, the protagonist chooses to remain in France to assist with the war effort. Her distant cousin, Jacques Danzel, enlists, and they become romantically attached through their shared purpose. The form of the romance plays a role in the novel's political discourse: the protagonist, Claire-Solange, resembles the outspoken, lively and independent heroines of nineteenth-century women-authored romances, who are prepared to confront social prejudices to speak up for their own values and identity. The way that Claire-Solange becomes less

radical on falling in love with her cousin has been criticised by Orlando (‘The Politics of Race’, p. 121).

Published in 1924 in Paris, the novel won its author in 1925 a Montyon prize of the Académie française. The modern critical reception of the novel began with its reception bythe French novelist and academic Maryse Condé.

LANGUAGE: French / Français

CENSORSHIP STATUS: