

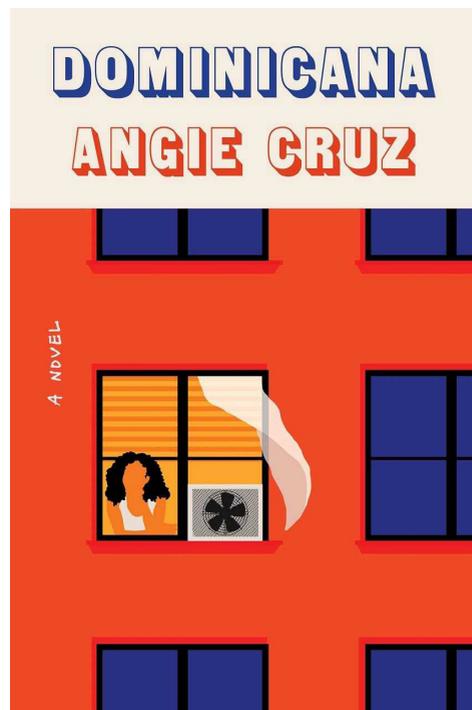
An Analysis of Feminism in “Dominicana” by Angie Cruz

Giorgia Maela Scribellito

University of Warsaw, English Institute, Cultural Studies Department
Hoza 69, 00-681 Warszawa, Poland
Email: gscibellito@yahoo.it
ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8518-5398>
Research interests: literary theory, philosophy, Caribbean Literature, Feminism

The novel *Dominicana* was published in 2019. Because it was recently published, few articles and book reviews were written on it. The novel was written by Dominican author Angie Cruz. Cruz has written several novels in English that caught the public’s attention: in 2001, she published *Soledad* and in 2005, *Let it Rain Coffee*. *Dominicana* was translated into Italian in 2020 and won the Alex Price and in the same year, was a finalist in the Women’s Price for fiction. *Let it Rain Coffee* won the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award in 2007. Cruz also wrote a new book released in September 2022 entitled *How Not to Drown in a Glass of Water: A Novel*.

Cruz was born in 1972 in Washington Heights, New York City, and today she is fifty years old. Her first book came out when she was only 29 years old. Therefore, despite



Submitted 22 May 2022 / Accepted 15 July 2022

Itelkta 2022 05 22 / Priimta 2022 07 15

Copyright © 2022 Giorgia Maela Scribellito. Published by Vilnius University Press. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License CC BY 4.0, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium provided the original author and source are credited.

being a contemporary fairly young writer, she has achieved considerable recognition with her work. She is part of the second generation of Dominicans born in the United States to Dominican parents but who maintain a strong cultural heritage making frequent trips to the Dominican Republic since they were very young. She has a son.

Dominicana describes the story of Ana Canción, a very young Dominican who is married off to Juan Ruiz when she is fifteen years old and brought to live in New York City. Ana's mother has other children to feed and take care of. Therefore, her mother is relieved to marry her off as she has one mouth less to feed. Ana imagines her married life and has big dreams and expectations for herself. Unfortunately, her husband does not keep the promise of sending Ana to school and allowing her to work. Instead, Ana becomes a housewife and has to deal with the trauma of child marriage. She is shocked when they first have sex together and struck at her husband's brutality. Ana considers her mother a traitor but all the time she tries to rationalize her situation as she is brought up to do and tries to fit the role of the good wife as much as possible. At the same time, Ana wishes her husband dead but never goes through with her purpose of killing him.

The only other relationship that Ana has is with her brother-in-law César and with the pigeons that occasionally visit her balcony. Nevertheless, she ends up killing one of the pigeons to feed it to her husband after she naming it, Betty. Ana also makes friends with another woman Marisela, but the friendship is short-lasting.

The only work Ana is allowed to do by her husband is tailoring suits, which she sells to the customers her husband brings home. In this way, she manages to save some money, which she hides in a doll called *Dominicana*. Ana dreams of using this money to buy herself a ticket back to the Dominican Republic and to send them off to her mother to help her support her siblings. However, Ana never achieves her purpose since she spends the money, she has saved to pay off Marisela's debt to her husband. Also, the Americans invaded the Dominican Republic reinstating a dictatorship and preventing left-wing rebels from taking over the island; therefore, chaos is reinstated in the Dominican Republic.

One of Ana's brothers, Johnny, is shot at a protest against the Americans and her family suffers from hunger. Nevertheless, her husband Juan returns to the Dominican Republic for some months to manage the property he acquired from Ana's father. As a result, Ana is left alone with her brother-in-law César, whom she loves. Living with César Ana has much more freedom than with Juan: she starts attending English classes at a local church, sells *pastellitos* and other food to César's co-workers, goes to the beach and even dances with César. Eventually, they have a relationship, but Ana does not dare to go to Boston and live with him, preferring to sacrifice herself for her family. She is also pregnant and afraid that her brother-in-law will be unable to take proper care of her and her baby. Therefore, Ana sacrifices her true love to the role of the dutiful wife despite Juan's brutality and the restrictions he imposes on her.

Dominicana is set in the 1960s amidst the war in Vietnam, the riots against Jim Crow throughout the United States and the murder of Malcolm X. Initially, Ana rebels against her husband and calls herself Ana X even though she does not know precisely who

Malcolm X is aside from what she hears on the streets. However, as the story progresses, and especially in the last three parts, parts four, five and six, the reader understands that Ana will never let go of her husband because she has been too much indoctrinated by her mother about her role as a dutiful wife and her obligations towards her family.

In many ways, this novel reflects the situation of the Western woman in the 1950s, before the women's liberation movement started. The novel contrasts with the work of other Dominican writers older or younger than Cruz, such as Juliá Alvarez and Raquel Cepeda. Although like Cruz was born in the United States and precisely in New York City, in the 1970s (1973), in her first book, which was published in 2013 called *Bird of Paradise*, Cepeda describes her experience as a liberated woman who goes against her family's will rebelling against patriarchal impositions and racism. Instead, Alvarez, born in New York City in 1950, in her much-acclaimed book *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*, describes the complicated situation of four sisters who have a hard time adapting to life in the United States and feel divided between their parents' wish to make them proper Dominican women and the liberty they witness around them. Eventually, they rebel against their parents' imposition, marry the man of their choice, smoke Marijuana and settle for a life in the United States rather than go back to living in the Dominican Republic.

Therefore, *Dominicana* stands as an exception in the contemporary panorama of writings by Dominican authors. In many ways, it is similar to *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* by another Dominican writer, Junot Diaz, who was born in Santo Domingo in 1968. Like Wao, Ana is subject to violence and the novel does not end, as in a romance story, with a happy ending. Also, as in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, in *Dominicana* the heroine learns from the school of life and grows emotionally and personally throughout the story even though she is incapable of rebelling and radically change her situation. Nevertheless, the novel ends with Ana's mother recognizing the worth of her daughter and Ana, her mother, and one of her brothers hope to move in an apartment of their own away from Juan. *Dominicana* is a *Bildungsroman* since the heroine develops throughout the story even through not in the direction one would expect.

Although *Dominicana* stands as an exception in the contemporary panorama of Dominican authors, one can find themes frequently discussed by Dominican American women namely the mother-daughter relationship. *Dominicana* exemplifies Rita Felsky's view on the female *Bildungsroman* (coming-of-age novel) in *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics Feminist Literature and Social Change* (1989). Felski characterizes the female coming-of-age genre in the following terms:

biographical, assuming the existence of a coherent individual identity which constitutes the focal point of the narrative; *dialectical*, defining identity as the result of a complex interplay between psychological and social forces; *historical*, depicting identity formation as a temporal process which is represented by means of a linear and chronological narrative; and *teleological*, organizing textual signification in relation to the projected goal of the protagonist's access to self-knowledge which will in practice be realized to a greater or lesser degree. (Felsky, 1989, p. 135)

Thus, Felsky evidences an important aspect of the female coming-of-age novel, namely its historical, biographical, dialectical, and teleological aspects, which are evident in *Dominicana*. As it is explained at the end of the *Dominicana*, the novel relates the story of the author's mother and reflects the biographical and historical aspects of the female *Bildungsroman* identified by Felsky.

Furthermore, it can be argued that *Dominicana* falls in line with the Caribbean American *Bildungsroman* as far as the mother-daughter relationship is concerned. In a similar vein to what is described in the novel that we are analysing, it can be noted that as a result of traditional and patriarchal concerns present within the family, in the Caribbean-American female and feminist *Bildungsroman*, the mother is often not viewed as a role-model by the daughter but rather as an obstacle to the achievement of psychological, personal, and sexual independence. This pattern is visible in the version of this genre by Anglophone Caribbean women, for example, in *Zami* (1984) by Audre Lorde, even though in a more problematic way. In Lorde's book, the mother-daughter relationship is baffling, as it represents an obstacle to Lorde's realization of her lesbian identity due to the mother's traditional views. However, it is also considerably "erotic", at least at the imaginative level, and thus, hinders but also, in a way, advances the protagonist's identity development throughout the narrative, from the point of view of sexuality. We can argue that a similar situation is described by Jamaica Kincaid in *Lucy* (1990), with the difference that the daughter's perception of the mother is very robust, in a similar way to *Zami*. Lucy perceives her relationship with her mother as "a love affair" (Kincaid, 1990, p. 132), and also in terms of "one lover rejecting another" (Kincaid, 1990, p. 91), although it ends before she migrates to the United States (Kincaid, 1990, p. 90). From then on, the mother is entirely perceived by her offspring as an obstacle to her personal and sexual freedom.¹ In a similar fashion in *Dominicana*, the mother hinders the aspirations of the daughter until the end when she realizes the true state of her daughter's situation and liberates her from her abusing and oppressive husband.

In general, one can argue that the mother-daughter relationship is problematic in the Caribbean American *Bildungsroman*, as it is a theme also discussed by the Jamaican writer Michell Cliff (1988) and Haitian Edwidge Danticat (1988). The mother-daughter relationship is problematic in *No Telephone to Heaven* (1987) by the Jamaican American writer Michelle Cliff due to different racial identifications on the part of the mother, Kitty Savage, and daughter, Claire, in the difficult racial climate of the United States. Unable to bear the racial atmosphere prevailing in the country, Kitty, who has dark skin, leaves Claire in the U.S. with her light skin father and goes back to Jamaica. Kevin Everod Quashie, a Professor of English, black literary and cultural studies at Brown University, claims that initially, "neither" "the density" of racial categories in the United States nor "the legacy of Jamaica colonial history overwhelm the specificity and heft of her chosen relationship with to mother" (Quashie, 2004, p. 68). Nevertheless, as a result of her mother's identification

¹ This view is confirmed by LeSeur, G. J., 1995. *Ten Is the Age of Darkness: The Black Bildungsroman*. (Columbia: University of Missouri Press), 180 ff., among others.

with "black women", Claire "chooses her father as primary coalition" (Quashie, 2004, p. 70) but soon becomes sensitive to the situation of "black people" in the United States. Eventually, under Kitty's lead in their correspondence, Clare chooses her own "agency," "her ability and responsibility to choose her coalitions, her mobility to traverse the borders between self and not-self, racially and otherwise" (Quashie, 2004, p. 72). She leaves the United States and engages in a journey of self-exploration in different countries, among women of different nationalities, crossing "borders of time, space, nation, corporeality, and gender" (Quashie, 2004, p. 73), and eventually, returns to Jamaica.

Similarly, in the *Bildungsroman* *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994) by the Francophone Caribbean-American writer Danticat the mother-daughter relationship is torn. Eileen Burchel, an Associate Professor of French and Chair of modern languages at Marymount College in Tarrytown, NY, argues that "in its psychological and political dimensions, the novel explores the centrality of the mother-daughter relationship to self-identity and self-expression" (Burchel, 2003, pp. 60–62). Furthermore, she observes that "it is a trope that also stands for the complex relationship of the country (mother-land, mother-tongue) and individual" (Burchel, 2003, pp. 60–62). Burchel then adds that "Sophie recounts her passage from girlhood to womanhood in a circular narrative of recurring separation-reunion with important mother-figures" (Burchel, 2003, pp. 60–62). Burchel emphasizes the relationship between the public and private sphere present in Danticat's novel at the symbolic level, which emerges from other Caribbean *Bildungsromane*, such as *Lucy*.

In a similar vein, we would like to emphasize that, as in other Caribbean-American *Bildungsroman* narratives, such as *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, the mother-daughter relationship is torn, and the mother represents an obstacle to the daughter's achievement of independence in her terms. Agreeing with this perspective, J. Brooks Bouson defines this relationship as "troubled" and claims that Martine, the mother, "rapes" her daughter Sophie (Bouson, 2009, p. 71). While the mother wants her daughter Sophie to study and gain prominence in American society, she tries to control her daughter's sexuality (Bouson, 2009, p. 71). As a result, the daughter breaks free from this control, stops contacting her mother, and goes to live with a musician from Louisiana, with whom she has a baby girl. Like what happens in *Lucy* and *Zami*, in *Breath, Eyes, Memory* the mother is cherished at the beginning of the book but it comes to represent a severe obstacle to the daughter's achievement of personal and sexual independence as the book progresses.

In conclusion, *Dominicana* is a novel that is hard to read because of its violence. However, it portrays in stark tones the life of Dominican women in the 1950s in the United States amidst worries for their family and loved ones back in the Dominican Republic and their attempt to make a life and a mark for themselves in the United States. It departs from the contemporary Dominican-American novel since it is set in the 1950s and not during or after the women's liberation movement, but it also falls in line with it as far as the mother-daughter relationship is concerned. The mother-daughter relationship is torn as it is generally the Caribbean *Bildungsroman* by women.

References

- Burchel, E., 2003. As my mother's daughter: *Breath, eyes, memory* by Edwidge Danticat. In: Eds. J. Fisher & E. S. Silber. *Women in Literature – Reading Through the lens of Gender*. Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group.
- Bouson, B. J., 2009. *Embodied Shame. Uncovering "female" Shame in Contemporary Women's Writing*. Albany: State University of New York.
- Cliff, M., 1988. *No Telephone to Heaven*. London: Methuen.
- Cruz, A., 2019. *Dominicana*. New York: Flatiron Books.
- Danticat, E., 1988. *Breath, Eyes, Memory*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Felsky, R., 1989. *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Kincaid, J., 1990. *Lucy*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- LeSeur, G. J., 1995. *Ten is the Age of Darkness: the Black Bildungsroman*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press.
- Lorde, A., [1984] 2007. *Sister Outsider*. New York: Crown Publishing Group.
- Quashie, K. E., 2004. *Black Women, Identity, and Cultural Theory: (Un)becoming the Subject*. New Brunswick, New Jersey, London: Rutgers University Press.