

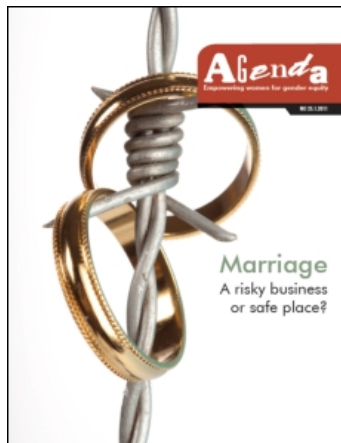
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Agenda

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t929906840>

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Online publication date: 21 April 2011

To cite this Article Murray, Jesscia(2008) 'When 'good' mothers kill: A representation of infanticide', Agenda, 22: 76, 32 – 41

To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/10130950.2008.9674929

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10130950.2008.9674929>

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When 'good' mothers kill: A representation of infanticide

Jesscia Murray

abstract

This *briefing* explores Yvette Christiansë's (2006) representation of an act of infanticide by the character of Sila van den Kaap in the novel *Unconfessed*. I will illustrate how the novel deconstructs idealised assumptions about 'good' mothers and families in order to reveal alternative constructions. Through the creative medium of fiction, Christiansë exposes the dangers that mothers and women face while also suggesting ways of subverting deeply embedded assumptions about what it means to be a 'good' mother and about what constitutes a family.

keywords

infanticide, motherhood, families, slavery, rape

'[W]hy does a woman do such a thing? Is she mad?' (Christiansë, 2006:155). When confronted with an act of infanticide, a male slave owner in Yvette Christiansë's (2006) novel *Unconfessed* asks this question.

This paper explores Christiansë's fictionalised account of the story of Sila van den Kaap. Sila's character is based on a 19th century Cape slave woman in South Africa, and *Unconfessed* was inspired by archival court records. Sila was sentenced to death in April 1823 after being convicted of killing her nine-year-old son, Baro.

Presenting her readers with a profoundly challenging portrait of a 'good' mother and through representations of different kinds of families, Christiansë interrogates the conventional notion of

the nuclear family as a space of safety. Although most contemporary research recognises that 'the family' is a historically- and culturally-specific construct, I would argue that families continue to be seen as the building blocks of society.

The presence of a father and a mother is popularly believed to be in the best interest of children. Sila's children are fathered by rapists and she learns early on that, as a slave woman, her 'body has no say in what happens to it' (Christiansë, 2006:134). She finds succour in an alternative family of her own creation that consists of fellow slaves and her female lover, Lys.

By means of a feminist analysis of *Unconfessed*, this paper will unpack the ways in which Christiansë, through Sila, challenges



Society in general sees the killing of a child as the ultimate perversion of a woman's mothering instinct.

these commonly held assumptions about families and mothers. What is so challenging about Christiansé's novel is the way in which it constructs a dialogue between academic discourses about the past, fictitious representations of the past and understandings of families. In this way the novel serves both as testimony to Sila's experiences and to the particular racial and gender violence that is represented as an institutionalised part of 19th century Cape life.

I will first examine how the history explains the patterns present in Sila's life. Christiansé's fictional representation takes place against two historical literatures: that of slavery at the Cape and that around colonised women's sexuality. The former has been widely written about and provides much of the context of the novel (Worden

and Crais, 1994; Shell, 1994; Van der Spuy, 2002). The gendered nature of South African slavery and its intersection with issues of sexuality have been the subject of work by Patricia van der Spuy (1991; 1993; 1996; 2002) and Pamela Scully (1997). In what follows, where I switch between the story's narrative and the historical material, I am relying on these authors.

Although there were significant differences in historical constructions of white and black women's sexuality, women like Sila were located in a space where the cultural understandings and meanings of Dutch settlers, the British, indigenous Africans and slaves intersected. Idealised European middleclass constructions of femininity and motherhood in the 19th century revolved around the essentialist notion that

saw women's ability to give birth 'as not only marking out women's difference from men but also as producing within women a uniquely female identity' (Altink, 2007:356).

These assumptions also had important implications for the way in which women's sexuality was viewed. Prior to the 19th century, European writing constructed women, especially indigenous colonised women, as sexually voracious, needing to be controlled and tamed. By the 19th century, however, an increasingly prevalent assumption was that women lacked innate sexual desires and would naturally choose to exercise their sexuality only within marriage.

Sila has to mother in a context where her choices and powers are severely limited

In the shift from active to passive sexuality, women became constructed as inherently maternal, patient, self-sacrificing and nurturing. This supposedly made them natural caregivers. The consequences of such an ideological manoeuvre are clear: it ensured 'that women would fully devote themselves to their prime duty – childbearing and childrearing' (Altink, 2007:356). This, in turn, would allow men to perpetuate their dominant place in society by focusing their energies on the acquisition of social, economic and political power.

In the novel, this history is incorporated as part of the narrative, which provides an emotional component lacking from most academic work, thus rendering the historical material more accessible. Christiansè traces Sila's life from the time she was taken from her childhood home in Mozambique and sold to a succession of owners in the Cape.

She was first owned by Minister Neethling, who sold her to Hendrina 'Oumiesies' Jansen. Oumiesies promised Sila that she would be freed but, after her death, her son Theron destroyed her will and took Sila as his own. He sold Sila to the

merchant Hancke who tricked her into working off her 'freedom price' (Christiansè, 2006:108) and, after years of toiling to pay for her and her children's freedom, Hancke sold them to Jacobus Stephanus van der Wat of Plettenberg Bay.

Although she had a number of children, the novel provides little detail about them, as Sila herself does not know where they are sent after they are sold. She gave birth to Carolina in 1810, Camies in 1813, Baro in 1814, Pieter, Meisie, Catherina and Debora as well as a son who died soon after birth and was not named. While at Van der Wat's farm, Sila committed infanticide. After three years, her death sentence was commuted to a lengthy term of imprisonment on Robben Island.

The novel *Unconfessed* is a contemporary representation of Sila's life as a slave woman in the Cape, and Christiansè taps into the collective traumatic memory of slavery by using fiction to articulate the trauma of racial and gender oppression through the character of Sila.

Throughout Sila's narrative, the focus is on her desperate attempts to care for her children in a society that sees them as less than human. Separation from her children is an ever-present threat as the slave owners had the power to sell a woman's children to different owners. Even when Sila's children are with her, she has to mother in a context where her choices and powers are severely limited. She is no more able to protect her children than she is to safeguard her own body against violence ranging from brutal beatings to being raped by her owners and jailers.

Ultimately, it is Sila's inability to protect Baro from the same beatings she endured that leads to her act of infanticide. She reflects that she, 'a grown woman, knew what it was to have bruises and how they hurt. He, being a boy, had bruises the same size as mine' (Christiansè, 2006:278). Her own life has taught her that Baro faces a lifetime of pain as she wonders 'what will the next day bring? What will the years bring?' (Christiansè, 2006:278).



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In addition to having the power to sell a child away from her mother, slave owners commonly tried to extract the maximum possible amount of labour from their slaves, including women who had recently given birth.

She can protect Baro from the violent Van der Wat only by 'sending [him] away' (Christiansë, 2006:240). Sila repeatedly uses this euphemism for the infanticide that 'underscores the tragic boundaries of her maternal power' (Dawkins, 2004:223).

Attempts to grapple with fictitious Sila's killing of Baro should be read against the theorisation of infanticide, since '[i]nfanticide is deeply imbedded [sic] in and responsive to the societies in which it occurs' (Spinelli, 2005:17). The characters who judge Sila's act are quick to slot her into the category of either mad or bad. While some assume that only madness could drive a woman to kill her child (Christiansë, 2006:155), others try to label her as bad by portraying her as a drunk at her trial (Christiansë, 2006:316).

Unconfessed, however, reveals that such categorisation is reductive and insufficient, thus suggesting Christiansë's desire to deconstruct such simplistic portrayals of Sila's motivations. Sila emerges as a good, loving mother whose act of 'infanticide may be seen as a response to the societal construction of and constraints on mothering' (Oberman, 2003:708).

In Sila's anguish over her living but imprisoned children, she repeats the sentences 'What can I do?' and 'What else can I do?' (Christiansë, 2006:197; 198; 200; 204). This leaves the reader in little doubt that Sila is a woman looking for some way to fulfil her maternal responsibilities, and she does so by using the only power she has left. She kills her child not because of a lack of maternal instinct but because of the strength of that instinct.

The intertwining of Sila's identities as a mother and as a woman emerges when she tells herself: 'I am useless, useless as a mother. I am not the woman I want to be' (Christiansë, 2006:46). By killing Baro, she is able to keep him safe as she tells his ghost 'I have never been able to protect anyone but you' (Christiansë, 2006:128).

While assumptions about women and their sexuality were in a constant state of flux, '[s]lippery conceptual and social identities could result in unambiguous social and political consequences' (Scully, 1996:341). Since women were expected to be naturally maternal, deviations from these expectations met with severe judgment, and society in general saw the killing of a child as the ultimate perversion of a woman's mothering instinct.

What she cannot accept is that she should sacrifice her children to a racist society

In the novel, the general opinion of society is represented by the ways in which characters react to Sila. While Christiansë sometimes names Sila's accusers, she often simply notes that 'they' called her mad or evil (Christiansë, 2006:155). Her act turns her into the embodiment of maternity gone awry and 'she was used to the way people stared at her' (Christiansë, 2006:26).

Sila herself is ambiguous about what it means to be a good mother, and throughout the novel she shifts between buying into society's expectations and rejecting them. Although she is aware of the likely consequences of her act, she sees no other way to protect her son. Sila's interior monologues reveal that she subscribes to very basic ideas of what a mother should be. When she reflects on the pain that her children have endured she notes:

'It was my business as a mother to know what snakes lay ahead on the road. Is that not what a mother does? A mother watches out.

A mother teaches her children – do not sit on cold stone, do not step over a log without looking, do not roll a big stone over without care, keep your head covered in winter...' (Christiansë, 2006:75)

Sila berates herself for failing to perform these basic maternal responsibilities and her self-criticism is all the more poignant since the real threats facing her children are rape, forced impregnation and beatings which ensured that the 'light in [them] went dull' (Christiansë, 2006:312).

She insists that a 'child's place is with her mother' (Christiansë, 2006:199), and she fights to keep her children with her while incurring the ire of her owners by stealing small treats like oranges from their kitchens because she believes that a 'mother must do what she has to do for her child' (Christiansë, 2006:61). Being a mother is an integral part of her identity and, in her conversations with Baro's ghost, she repeatedly refers to herself as 'your mother who loves you' (Christiansë, 2006:50).

Sila constantly has to negotiate the conflicting expectations of 'good' mothers. The minister's wife who meets Sila on Robben Island advocates the Victorian Christian stereotype of mothers by 'valorising submission and renunciation' (Dawkins, 2004:223) when she calls Sila 'insolent and selfish because a good mother would sacrifice her own pleasure for the sake of sending her child to a better place' (Christiansë, 2006:198). She expects Sila to be the sorrowful black Madonna who will 'deliver her children into society' (Dawkins, 2004:226).

The minister's wife reveals her ignorance of the ways Sila's world is shaped by race and class when she says that the word of God speaks to people 'no matter what colour, no matter what station in life or where we were born' (Christiansë, 2006:204). Sila recognises the hollowness of these words and she realises the minister's wife 'knows nothing about the power



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Slave mothers are treated as nothing more than the producers of future slaves.

of these words and who bears them' (Christiansë, 2006:204). Sila's life and choices are fundamentally determined by these very factors God supposedly disregards. There is no 'better place' for Sila's children in this society.

After the scene in which Baro is beaten by Van der Wat, the neighbouring farmer De la Rey tells Sila that she 'must teach that boy to know his place' (Christiansë, 2006:275). In her analysis of African American women's literature of slavery, Dawkins (2004:231) asserts that the 'duty [of] a black son's mother must be to curb his speech, stifle his spirit, and – ultimately – to deliver him into a social order that will destroy him'.

Sila is not afraid to sacrifice for her children as she rhetorically asks the dead Baro 'you *know* your mother would grab the edge of a blade for

you? You *know* your mother would cut off her right hand to save you? And you *know* you are dearer to me than my own right hand?' (Christiansë, 2006:265). What she cannot accept, however, is that she should sacrifice her children to a racist society where they will face a lifetime of physical and psychological pain and degradation.

Even as Sila does all she can to be a good mother, the novel reveals the extent to which her actions are judged and her choices are limited. When she becomes pregnant in prison and the superintendent demands an explanation from the guards who raped her, they respond by saying '[s]he is a very bad woman' (Christiansë, 2006:8), and Sila finds that she 'had no energy to deny this' (Christiansë, 2006:9). She was also raped many times by her previous owners Theron and Van der

Wat who 'came each night' (Christiansë, 2006:35) and 'sweated on her' (Christiansë, 2006:28).

She is powerless to stop these men, and these experiences teach her that '[a]fter all these years, [her] body still has no say in what happens to it' (Christiansë, 2006:133). Although she is blameless, she rebukes herself for not knowing which one of her rapists fathered her children when she tells her unborn child '[b]aby, I am your mother. I am the one who should know all things about you because I was there, but I am already less than your mother because I do not know which one is your father' (Christiansë, 2006:90). This tendency for women to blame themselves for sexual assault and its consequences also has resonance beyond fiction.

Sila seems unable to separate the pain of being a woman from the pain of mothering

Sila's desperation is matched only by her defiance as she challenges prevailing social constructions of family by asserting that the 'fathers do not matter' to her and that she is 'all the parent [her] children needed' (Christiansë, 2006:191). Traditional nuclear families were seldom a viable option for slave women. In addition to having the power to sell a child away from her mother, slave owners commonly tried to extract the maximum possible amount of labour from their slaves, including women who had recently given birth. These factors meant that child caring frequently fell to elderly or infirm slave women when mothers were sent back to work immediately after giving birth while children separated from their mothers were cared for by other slaves. For slave women, the creation of alternative families was thus borne of necessity.

Sila recognises these alternative family dynamics when she notes '[m]others and children, and mothers of children not theirs. That is how we are in this country' (Christiansë, 2006:127).

After she was taken from her own family by slave traders, an older slave Alima 'was all the mother [Sila] really had on this side of the world' (Christiansë, 2006:127). The slaves Alima, Philip, Philipina, Roosje and Spaasie are among the people Sila misses because they 'were family to [her] on Oumiesies' farm' (Christiansë, 2006:164).

In contrast to the exclusive and limited nature of the nuclear family, Sila describes her family as follows: 'If I counted everyone I call family, we would fill a village of our own' (Christiansë, 2006:164). Her certainty that these family members 'would have looked after [her children]' (Christiansë, 2006:164) evokes a notion of communal childrearing, which holds that it takes a village to raise a child.

The comfortable intimacy she finds with Lys is revealed by the description of this makeshift family the two of them constitute with the only one of Sila's children who is left: 'we were sleeping, me and Lys, like two shells that fit each other, Catherina lying at my back' (Christiansë, 2006:298). The closeness between Lys and Sila allows them to simply 'reach out' (Christiansë, 2006:322) and they know that the other will be there.

Christiansë's explication of alternative family forms may well reflect a broader concern with lived realities, since women and children, particularly girl children, are at considerable risk in a contemporary 'normal' family situation where the 'dynamics of power and differential access to and utilisation of resources' (Neff and Vander Mey, 1986:38) ensure their continued dependence and subjugation.

Sila's defiance of expected gendered and mothering roles can be traced back as much to her refusal to accept the patriarchal as the racist dictates of her society. She notices 'the way the world sets itself around men' and asks '[a]re men like the moon and women like the stars?' These reflections are prompted by her jealousy of a woman she suspects may be carrying the child of a man she recently met, Chirikuloma. She



The presence of a father and a mother is popularly believed to be in the best interest of children.

realises that '[a]fter only one day in the company of this man, I was jealous and afraid' (Christiansë, 2006:226). Rather than acquiescing to her resentment of this woman, however, she decides that being a star around a male moon 'is not good enough for [her]' (Christiansë, 2006:226).

Her anger at the gendered dimension of the oppression she experiences is clear in the following statement:

'Bring me a woman who has children! Bring me a girl who is afraid of what is between her legs and I will show you a girl who has been taught to be afraid of being a girl, a woman who is afraid of being a woman, a woman who is afraid of bringing girls into this world and who sees how boys grow up.' (Christiansë, 2006:244)

Once again, Sila seems unable to separate the pain of being a woman from the pain of mothering. Dawkins (2004:228) argues that a slave woman had two kinds of power, to either 'destroy her offspring or to refuse conception'. The vulnerability of Sila's body to rape means that the latter is really no option and she has only the former type of power at her disposal.

Sila had always known that, 'one day, [she] could be a mother. That was what came to all women, especially those of us who were called slave' (Christiansë, 2006:110). Despite the lack of choice in conception, Sila's actions are prescribed by love: 'My children came into my body whether I liked it or not, but I love them' (Christiansë, 2006:319).

Sila retains her capacity for love even after a lifetime of seeing her children and other loved

ones sold away from her 'like pieces of furniture or animals' (Christiansë, 2006:110) and this need for human connection leads her to create a new family with Lys on Robben Island. She continues to define herself in terms of her relationships with the people she loves and she describes herself as 'Sila, friend and lover to Lys, mother to children who carry the weight of the world on their faces' (Christiansë, 2006:339).

Sila creates alternative families that sustain her through a life of extreme hardship

For Sila, Lys is her 'good, quiet day' (Christiansë, 2006:207). In contrast to the violent images of men grabbing at her body and kicking her door in at night, Lys 'is the one who brings [her] warmth' (Christiansë, 2006:322) and 'quiet' (Christiansë, 2006:207).

Sila feels nurtured and protected by Lys and the slaves who became her family on Oumiesies' farm. While at the farm, this family safeguarded Sila's body as long as they could by keeping Theron away from her, regardless of the beatings it inevitably brought (Christiansë, 2006:170). In this way, 'Spaasie and Roosje saved [Sila] from what had happened to them' (Christiansë, 2006:178). When Sila is in prison, her contact with Spaasie gives her hope and news about her children.

Sila and her family retain the ability for joy and they 'all learned to find happiness, however it came' (Christiansë, 2006:166). What little they have is shared in Sila's world. When she manages to take two pieces of orange from the warden's kitchen, she gives one piece to her daughter but she 'did not think of keeping the other piece for [herself]' (Christiansë, 2006:62). Instead, she gives it to Flora, who is the child of a woman she despises. Even when Lys is dying of leprosy in the brutal environment of Robben Island, she is not alone. Sila tells her '[p]ut your head on my lap. It is a dear weight that sometimes is as heavy as

the whole world but I am happy to hold this, too' (Christiansë, 2006:335).

This family, that bears little resemblance to the traditional model of the ideal family, provides a space of love, trust and security that seems to be completely absent from the 'proper' families depicted in the novel. The differences between Sila's family and that of Theron are particularly striking. Resentment characterises the relationship between Theron and his mother Oumiesies as he tells her that 'he was the man of the family and he did not have the wealth that a man should have because his mother held it all in her hands' (Christiansë, 2006:176).

Status and ownership are continuously contested in the interactions between Oumiesies and her son and she insists that she is 'the head of this family' while she asserts her claim with the words '[t]his is *my* house' and '[t]hese people [the slaves] are *mine* to do with as I will' (Christiansë, 2006:180). Their relationship is described as 'ugly' (Christiansë, 2006:176) and Oumiesies dies 'forgotten' and with '[n]o smile, no friends' (Christiansë, 2006:182).

Although in appearance a nuclear family, Sila hints at the perversion of the ideal of intimacy and safety in Theron's family. While the novel does not provide an explanation, Sila realises that the daughter 'hated her father. You see, their seed turns on them. I know why she hated him. Family secrets are not so secret' (Christiansë, 2006:113).

Sila thus creates alternative families that sustain her through a life of extreme hardship. Her primary concern is for the children she did not choose to have and she recalls a warning Roosje gave her when she was still a young girl: 'Sila, there will be a time when you will bear children and then you will be afraid of the world in ways that are new and terrible' (Christiansë, 2006:110).

In her attempt to protect these children, Sila embodies a mother who is both powerful and powerless and she simultaneously displays

defeat and defiance. By exposing the reader to the ways in which colonial and patriarchal forces play themselves out on Sila's body, Christiansé (2006) illustrates that Sila is far from mad. On the contrary, in some ways she seems to adhere to the traditional European middleclass model of the ideal mother and its expectations of maternal self-abnegation and sacrifice by doing all she can to be a nurturing and comforting presence in the lives of her children.

The reader gets an immediate sense that Sila's act of infanticide is borne of the desperation of a 'good' mother. In a society where slave mothers are treated as nothing more than the producers of future slaves, Sila's unwavering maternal instinct leads her to commit infanticide and 'send' her son 'away' to the only safe place she knows.

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