

# Three Bleached Black Female Images and the Educational Significance in the *Cane River*

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**Abstract:** *The Cane River* is the masterpiece of contemporary African American female writer Larita Tadmi. This is a documentary novel composed of three parts: "Susette", "Philomin", and "Emily". It tells the story of the growth process of three gradually "bleached" black women in the Tadmi family under the slave system in the 1830s, reflecting their slave life, family life, emotional status, and the fears they had to face. This article intends to analyze the image of black women who sacrifice for their children under the dual oppression of race and gender from the perspective of black feminist criticism. The aim is to expose the inhumane nature of slavery from a new perspective and showcase the optimistic, upward, independent, and strong spirit of black women.

**Keywords:** 'Cane River'; The image of black women; Bleaching.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Larita Tadmi's debut work "*The Cane River*" is a documentary novel. At the age of 47, the author resigned from her position as Vice President at Sun Software Systems, one of the Fortune 500 companies. After more than five years of visits to her family and sources, she studied various historical documents, from dusty old newspapers, yellowed court records, contracts, wills, property certificates, to personal letters and family legends, connecting the history of the seven generations of the family. As a contemporary African American female writer, Larita Tadmi has inherited the tradition of black female literature, which is to "give white people a correct understanding of black people, especially black women"[1]. Tadmi's portrayal of three generations of black women has broken the traditional image of vulnerable black women. They are not black nannies like the novel "*Gone with the Wind*" that make people feel safe and familiar, or black slave images like Jezebel or Topsy. They are flesh and blood women who make choices even in a state of oppression. "[2]" *The Cane River* "does not expose the sins of slavery to the naked eye like traditional ways, but just make it a "faint shadow, forming the background for the development of the novel rather than a focal point"[2]. The concentrated description is the reality of the lives of three generations of women in Larita's family. In the mountainous and swampy areas of central Louisiana along the Cane River, a specific location where French Creole white people, free colored people, colored black slaves, and black slaves lived together, during the era of slavery, the Civil War, and the specific era of post-war southern reconstruction, it portrays the memories of black female slaves Susette, mixed race female slaves Philomin, and Emily Dreams, bumpy experiences, and disillusionment of dreams record how they support each other and strive to create better living conditions for their children than they have [2].

Literary works, such as *The Cane River* etc., have significant educational value as they provide a rich source of knowledge, insight, and understanding of the world around us. Here are some ways in which literary works contribute to education: (1) Cultural Understanding: Literature exposes readers to different cultures, traditions, and perspectives, helping them develop empathy and respect for diversity. By reading works from various periods and regions, students can gain a broader understanding of human history and experience. (2) Language Development: Reading literature enhances vocabulary, grammar, and writing skills. Exposure to well-written texts helps students improve their ability to express themselves clearly and persuasively. Additionally, analyzing literary devices like metaphors, similes, and symbolism can deepen their understanding of language itself. (3) Emotional Intelligence: Literature often explores complex emotions and psychological states, allowing readers to develop emotional intelligence by relating to characters' experiences and learning how to navigate their own feelings. This can be particularly beneficial for young adults who are still developing their self-awareness and social skills. (4) Moral Education: Many literary works address moral dilemmas and ethical issues, providing opportunities for students to reflect on their own values and beliefs. Through engaging with these stories, they can learn about the consequences of different actions and make more informed decisions in their own lives. (5) Historical Context: Literature provides insights into historical events and societal changes, helping students understand the context in which they occurred. By studying literary works from different eras, students can gain a deeper appreciation for the evolution of human thought and culture over time. (6) Creative Thinking: Engaging with literature encourages creative thinking by exposing readers to new ideas and perspectives. It challenges them to think critically about the world

around them and inspires them to imagine alternative scenarios or solutions to problems. (7) Social Studies: Literature is often intertwined with social studies topics such as politics, economics, and social justice. By reading works that address these issues, students can develop a better understanding of the complexities of modern society and its historical roots.

In conclusion, literary works play an essential role in education by fostering cultural understanding, language development, emotional intelligence, moral education, historical context, creative thinking, and social studies knowledge. Incorporating literature into the curriculum can enrich students' educational experiences and prepare them for success in both their personal and professional lives. For instance, the work *The Cane River* enlightens us that racial, class and sexual discrimination is the "malignant tumor" in human society and educate the world to get rid of the oppression in the novel. *The Cane River* "is divided into three parts: " *Suzette* ", " *Philomene* ", and " *Emily* ". It tells the story of the growth process of three gradually "bleached" black women in the Tadmi family under the slave system in the 1830s, truly reflecting their slave life, family life, emotional status, and the fears they had to face. It showcases the spiritual strength of the close unity and tenacious struggle against racial oppression of female elders who have been traced back three generations from the author's great grandmother. This article intends to analyze the three main black female images in "*The Cane River*" from the perspective of black feminist criticism, under the multiple oppression of race, class, and gender.

## 2. SUSETTE—A BLACK WOMAN SUFFERING FROM OPPRESSION AND FORBEARANCE

Susette is a key portrayal of the first generation of black female slaves in "*The Cane River*". She is the youngest child of Elizabeth and Gillhams, and also someone who dares to dream of freedom and happiness. At the age of nine, she dreamed of receiving education like Miss Olin, wearing a white dress and receiving the Catholic Communion together with the white child Olin at St. Augustine's Church. Also, she dreams of getting married to the free colored man Nicholas Muron in the church, who gave her a lucky cowhide strip, and just being like her godmother Doraues, a free colored man[3]. Susette also had a sense of resistance when she was a child. At a young age, she still didn't understand the rules of slavery. When the hostess François Durban scolded her mother for making the peach pie uncomfortable for the master's stomach, Susette actually stood up to defend her mother, "Madam, it was strong whiskey that made him vomit, not sugar" [2]. The hostess immediately became angry, feeling that her authority had been questioned and challenged. "She turned around and quickly took three steps towards Susette, using her hand in green gloves with her fingers parted, and fiercely slapped Susette's right face"[2]. And she warned Susette's mother to "let this child know her status"[2]. Due to being slapped by the hostess, Susette, who was angry, carefully slipped out in the darkness the next morning. She "chose the rose that her hostess loved the most, peed on it, and then slipped back to the sleeping mat at the foot of the young lady's bed." [2]. Through these behaviors, it can be learnt that, at a young age, Susette had vaguely learned to use her body to resist power and injustice. However, under slavery, black female slaves suffered multiple oppressions of race, class, and gender, making it impossible to receive fair treatment. Black female slaves are mules in the world, facing not only a lot of arduous physical labor, but also the risk of sexual abuse and the pain of being separated from their families.

Susette was the maid of the niece of the owner of Creole Manor, Olin, who was required to do a lot of heavy physical labor. "Her life is spent standing, standing inside and outside, in front of white people, waiting for them to decide what she needs to do for them next. The only time she is allowed to not stand is to crawl on the ground, scrub the floor, or lie down on her back in the dark. She needs to listen to many old ladies' advice, take a bite whenever she finds a chance, and wait to obey the sudden idea of the next white person of any age who meets her"[2]. In every harvest season when she worked in the field, Susette was overwhelmed by enormous labors because of the fact that "picking cotton caused her to crack her fingers, bend over and work in the cotton field without any shade for a whole day, and headache and back pain are no longer good"[2].

For black female slaves, compared with heavy physical labor, sexual persecution is the worst. "Susette's mother Elizabeth was harassed by the son of a plantation owner in Virginia when she was young; Susette's deaf and mute sister Philomene has been harassed by her owner Louis Durban for a long time; At the age of fourteen, Susette was raped by his owner's friend, a white man named Eugene, and gave birth to two children"[4]. At this point, Susette's energy was no longer able to support her in pursuing her old dreams, but rather pondered whether Eugene could give their children freedom and pondered the cruel reality of her family not being separated.

However, after the owner's death, the plantation faced disintegration. And it was the black slave auction that awaited Susette, which means that she will face the pain of family separation and that her family "Giram, Elizabeth, Palmer, Afia, and Soratel will all be sold to different places, and her children will also be sold to completely different places" [2]. In a society fraught by slavery, slave mothers and their children are the private property of their masters, and maternal love is not recognized. "Black female slaves are tools that can be reproduced. Their children are first and foremost the private property of the slave owners, valuable things that can be bought, sold, and exchanged"[5]. Susette remembered Elizabeth's words in her heart, so that she could not waver. "You do everything you can and have to do to protect yourself and your family"[2]. She knew that if the white owners were willing, someone with a surname could buy the person she loved. In order not to be separated from her children and family, she begged white people everywhere to buy her family, so that they wouldn't be sold to plantations outside the Cane River. In the end, with her efforts, Miss Olin bought Susette and her daughter Philomin, and her family were all along the banks of the Cane River. In order for Eugene to buy their son Jerante, she has been pleading with him. "Susette forced herself to kneel all the time, looking at Eugene Durat's shoelace hole as she spoke, trying to support herself with the intersecting pattern of the shoelaces. Something dangerous and uncontrollable threatened to lift her up and grab the doll man's neck. Even through her dress and inner skirt, she could still feel the sticky, warm pulsation where her knees were bleeding. She pressed her knees even harder and harder"[2]. In the end, Eugene bought Jerante.

Susette believes that children with light skin color under racism may have a better life and can be guaranteed a better future. At first, she did not approve of her daughter Philomin being with pure black Clement. Susette, who failed to defeat Philomin on this issue, "still unwaveringly insisted on the necessity and correctness of lineage bleaching" [3]. She reminded Philomin, "Don't let her (Emily) bask in the sun, you know what impact it will have on her skin. That's her future. She was born with a better life" [2]. At the age of 85, She is still explaining to Mary, the daughter of Emily and white man Joseph Beers, "You should never let black hands touch your hair." " That kind of person doesn't deserve you. You're from a higher class." "You should do this for your children"[2].

Susette is a typical representative of black women who suffered greatly under slavery. "At the age of twenty-four, which is the age that should be full of hope for life and the future, her dreams were completely disillusioned"[6]. She did receive the Eucharist, but the French man Eugene Durat who raped her on Christmas at the age of fourteen did not give her or her children freedom, and Muron's family would not allow him to marry a slave. No matter how hard she tried, "Susette's old dreams of white dress, St. Augustine's Church, and children's freedom have proven meaningless and unfulfilled"[2]. In order to protect her family and children, she chose to use silence and forbearance to resist oppression.

### **3. PHILOMIN—A BLACK WOMAN WITH A HIGH SENSE OF SELF REDEMPTION AND RESISTANCE**

Philomin is the second generation black female slave portrayed in "*The Cane River*". Her character is brave and resolute, and she developed self-awareness from a young age. When she was a child, she dared to call herself "Philomin Durat" in her master's mansion, a surname she could not truly possess. Her longing for surnames and her refusal to objectify slavery reflect the budding of self-awareness.

At the same time, she is a female warrior who dares to dream and envision the future. This is reflected in her "glimpsing": owning her own land, her own house, and the joyful reunion of her family. "This glimpsing of a happy life has always supported her in resisting the oppression and devastation of slavery"[7].

She has a strong sense of resistance, self redemption, and physical political consciousness. Philomin and Clement had a brief but unforgettable love story. However, Lord Narcissus had long coveted Philomin. He convinced the hostess Olin to sell Philomin's husband Clement to a distant place. When Philomin was informed of this news, "She didn't cry or plead. She started scratching her face, using her short fingernails to scrape blood out of her face, tearing off bloody skin." "Her fingertips were covered in slippery blood," and "She kept tearing at her clothes and hair." [2]. In the face of white power, she did not choose to endure or remain silent like traditional black women. "On the contrary, she resisted power and oppression through self harm." [8]. This form of resistance reflects Philomin's strong sense of resistance. When Clement was sold far away, she almost died of yellow fever epidemic. Her daughter died young, and other families were also facing the danger of being separated. She made a choice—to accept Lord Narcissus who had coveted her for a long time. She knew that "Mr. Narcissus has too much in his mind to stop." But in exchange, she wanted something, not something small like the ones Eugene brought to Susette from Paris. She wanted "big things—freedom, land, money and protection" for her and her family [2]. She

utilized Narcissus' infatuation with her and his superstition in her "glimpsing " scene to achieve her dreams. "She encouraged Narcissus to make her children accessible to education and provide them with a relatively comfortable material life." [2]. Twenty years later, when Narcissus married a white woman in order to obtain a legitimate heir to his property, Philomin's past glimpsing finally came true — she owned her own land, built her own house, and her family moved in with her. "She took advantage of her wisdom and courage to successfully seek better living conditions for herself and her family" [9]. This reflects Philomin's sense of self redemption. At the same time, Philomin also has a strong sense of physical politics. Body political consciousness refers to "how individuals consciously use their damaged and damaged bodies to exercise their power, rebuild their derogatory subject consciousness, and thus rewrite or re-establish their identity under the conditions of being controlled, violated, and disciplined" [10]. Faced with the multiple oppression of race, class, and gender, "Philomin transformed her body into a powerful political weapon, gradually establishing and completing her subjectivity through the use of her body to exercise reasonable power, thereby transforming from a controlled object identity (the other) to a subject identity" [10]. These behaviors all reflect that Philomin is an independent individual with self-awareness.

Philomin inherited Susette's skin colorism. In order to give Emily a better future, she often teaches her, "Emily Frido, how many times do I have to tell you not to let the sun shine on your skin? Lead your brother in together. The sun will make you an ordinary person" [2]. "She believes that Emily, who has a creamy white skin, is destined to be superior to others" [2].

#### **4. EMILY—A BLACK WOMAN PIRSUING SPIRITUAL INDEPENDENCE**

Emily is a mixed race person with a quarter black ancestry, and she is no different from white people in appearance. She is well cared for by her parents, dressed in appropriate clothes, and has received a good education. The Civil War had been ended when she was a child. "And soon after she was born, she became a legally free person" [11]. But the outcome of the War of Independence only gave them physical freedom, and at the spiritual and legal levels, they were still "invisible people" [12]. While studying in Orleans, she met one of her father's French friends - Joseph. She has a sincere love relationship with the white man Joseph. In that era, "intermarriage between races was not protected by law," which also meant that their children did not receive the legal protection they deserved. However, Joseph bravely stayed with her. Emily voluntarily married a white man named Joseph and dedicated herself to him, but she had no financial status at home. Joseph is in charge of the economic power of the family. She runs Joseph's store alone, working hard without any compensation. The hard work day after day gradually deprived her of self-awareness, and as Joseph continued to leave home under the threat of white extremists, she realized that she had to seek economic independence for herself and her children. At first, she only begged Joseph to give her some allowances, but gradually she firmly demanded that he increase the money he gave her. "In the eyes of the law, we have no rights, I do not, nor do the four children I brought into this world. If you love the children, protect us now with land and money" [2]. "This way of seeking economic independence reflects her self-awareness as an independent individual and the determination to strive for equal rights with men" [13]. After awakening, Emily began to actively approach black culture. She learned to listen and understand her mother's generation. "She desperately needs her family, always thinking about her grandma" [2]. "She spends a lot of time with her family across the river" [2]. The family provides Emily with a source of strength, allowing her to experience the process of mother's identification in her heart, and prompting her to reflect on her true situation as a black woman. Although Joseph wanted to be a man like before, ruling everything in his own family. But Emily decided that she couldn't be the same as before.

Emily has a strong sense of self-esteem. After the Civil War, the atmosphere of white racism became increasingly tense. After living with Joseph for thirty years, under the pressure and threats of white extremists, Joseph had to marry a white wife to protect the safety of his family. When Joseph asked Emily to move out of his house, she did not cry and just demanded that the children never cry in front of white people. She kept herself and the children clean and tidy, always holding her head high. When Joseph asked her what she wanted to take away, "she smoothed her dress again, lifted her chin, straightened her chest, and slowly walked out onto the front porch" [2]. She gave up any belongings Joseph wanted her to take away, and her voice loudly demanded to take the roses left by her mother. These reflect Emily's strong self-esteem.

Emily has a strong skin color bias. "She barely tolerates being called a person of color, never tolerates the term black" [2]. "She will mercilessly drive away her daughter's dark skinned suitor because she believes that black people cannot match her daughters. She discriminates against her son's dark skinned wife" [2]. Due to Emily's skin color bias, Josephine and Mary never married because they couldn't find an equally shallow skinned suitor that could be accepted. " [3]. Years later, Her daughter Josephine complained, "If I had known what I knew today then,

I would have married the darkest man I could find, and had a house full of my own children" [2]. At this moment, Emily began to realize that her daughter's failure to marry seemed to be her fault. In the end, she decided to confront racial discrimination head-on. So after years of living in the countryside, she decided to go to the city. When she was shopping at the grocery store, she was humiliated by the salesperson who recognized her identity: he hung out the goods she had originally picked and greeted the white customers who came later, saying, "She should know her status. I can serve you now" [2]. As she left the store empty-handed, she heard politicians preaching that black people needed to accept their lower status. When she witnessed a black person squatting under a tree at the back of a restaurant for lunch, she thought bitterly, "I will never be so hungry as to go to anyone's back door"[2]. The apartheid policy made Emily very angry. So while taking the bus home, she made a bold move. She shook off the dust from Colfax, slightly raised her chin, put the penny into the driver's waiting palm, and calmly walked to the front seat. Although Emily's act of sitting in the front row of a bus is small, it is very dangerous in the racially discriminatory South. This move has revolutionary significance. Before the Civil Rights Movement in the South, many black people took nonviolent action to resist racial discrimination, believing that "these outrageous little things would lead people to an important awakening process"[14]. As the black feminist Collins once said, "In many cases, black women use personal protests to resist unfair rules and regulations" [15]. Emily is one of them, using silent body language to resist the unfair policies of racial segregation.

## 5. A BIG FAMILY CENTERED ON WOMEN

The mother-daughter relationship in "*Cane River*" has been the one between the garden and flowers. "If Emily is the beautiful flower of the Philomin Garden, and Elizabeth is the root deeply rooted in the soil to fix herself and search for nutrition, then Susette is the soil itself, hit by the wind, washed by the rainstorm and baked by the sun"[2]. When Emily was hit and humiliated by the leaving of Joseph, Philomin said to her in a calm voice that was as light as a low moan, "I am the rock in your garden, Emily. You are the flower in my garden. You can rely on me" [2].

In this large family centered on women, "Mother is the root, the soil, as well as the rock of this garden, and the child is the flower. Mother always uses her own strength to protect the flowers in her garden from withering" [3]. When Susette was nine years old, she was not very familiar with the rules of slavery. It is surprising that she talked back to her mistress François Durban, saying, "Madam, it was strong whiskey that made him (Louis Durban) vomit, not sugar" [2]. She tried to defend her mother, trying to make the hostess understand that it wasn't her mother who made the peach pie that made the master vomit for stomach discomfort. The hostess was very angry and thought her authority had been challenged, so she slapped Susette. Susette was very angry, and in the next morning, "she chose the hostess's favorite rose and peed on it." [2]. When Susette began to dream of a white dress, a wedding, and freedom, but suffered the pain and oppression caused by slavery, Elizabeth brought her back to the harsh reality: "Do everything you can think of to protect yourself and your loved ones" [2].

Every generation of mothers takes care of their children like this. "On the day when the big family united in Philomin's house, Elizabeth personally guided them to plant their own roses in front of the house"[16]. When Emily moved out of the family to live with Joseph, Philomin gave her roses, which symbolized the bond and love between three generations of mother and daughter. Thirty years later, when Emily had to move out, she proudly gave up any belongings Joseph had asked her to take, but insisted on taking her mother's roses and letting her son take them to plant in her new home. A large family centered around women is closely connected, and they jointly maintain the flowers in the garden. Their stubborn dreams and spirit of struggle make their mother's garden forever flourishing"[3]. As the translator said, "*The Cane River*" is the flower that blooms in the hands of a daughter under the cultivation of several generations of mothers.

In addition to telling the stories of her ancestors, Larita Tadmi hopes that, through the work '*Cane River*', more people can understand the lives of mixed-blood people under slavery and hear their voices. "Their identities are complex, and in the face of multiple oppression from race, class, and gender, they can still closely unite and support each other"[17]. The relationship between the three generations of women is characterized by inheritance and development. "From the restrained black women who were oppressed by slavery to the black women who had a sense of redemption and resistance, and then to the black women who rose up to fight for spiritual independence. Generations of women sacrificed themselves to unite their strength for the next generation"[18].

## 6. CONCLUSION

In summary, "*The Cane River*" examines the growth process of three gradually "bleached" black women in the Tadmi family under slavery, reflecting their slave life, family life, emotional status, and the fears they must face. From Elizabeth to Emily's daughter Angelette, "their skin tones range from coffee to cocoa to cream to milk lilies, consciously and unconsciously bleaching the family lineage" [2]. In order to provide their children with a better future, they are practicing the strategy of lineage bleaching. This work also showcases the spiritual strength of three generations of black female elders who have closely united and fought against racial oppression. As Tadmi said, "If it weren't for Philomin's determination and ingenious methods, her clear mind, her strictness and extraordinary focus, where would each of them be? If it weren't for Susette's characteristic of bending down in the storm, and if it weren't for her retreat into herself to safely take herself to another dawn and start anew, where would Philomin be? If it weren't for the halo of others around her, which serves as both a lighthouse and a shield, whether it is enough for Emily to become the one who is happy, spoiled, free from sadness and sorrow, and different from others around her?" [2].

Tadmi inherited and developed the literary tradition of black women, using a unique narrative perspective to shape the image of black women different from the mainstream white culture—black women stubbornly pursue physical and spiritual freedom, pursue themselves freely, and advocate independence. They are not black nannies like the novel "*Gone with the Wind*" that make people feel safe and familiar, or black slave images like Jezebel or Topsy. They are flesh and blood women who make choices even in a state of oppression. "[2]. Tadmi presents a unique perspective that is different from the familiar picture of slavery. This unfamiliarity with familiar themes prompts people to think more. In an unequal society, if black people want to achieve true equality, freedom, and liberation, they must bravely defend their national cultural traditions and racial identity. To have a future, they must uncover the veil of history and face the personal and collective memories of that period of history [19].

Literary works, such as *The Cane River* etc., have long been a powerful tool for exploring and addressing issues of racial, class, and gender discrimination. By examining these themes in literature, we can gain a deeper understanding of the complexities of human experience and the ways in which societal structures and systems contribute to inequality.

One of the primary educational benefits of studying literary works that address discrimination is that they help us develop empathy and compassion for those who have experienced marginalization. Through reading about characters who face prejudice and oppression, we can begin to understand the impact that discrimination has on individuals and communities. This can lead to greater awareness and a more nuanced understanding of the experiences of people from different backgrounds. Additionally, literary works that address discrimination can serve as a catalyst for social change by highlighting the need for greater equity and justice. By bringing attention to the ways in which discrimination affects individuals and communities, these works can inspire readers to take action and work towards creating a more equitable society. Finally, studying literary works, such as *The Cane River* etc., that address discrimination can also help us develop critical thinking skills. By analyzing the ways in which authors represent discrimination in their work, we can learn to identify patterns of bias and discrimination in our own lives and in society at large. This can help us become more aware of our own assumptions and biases, and work towards challenging them in order to create a more just and equitable world.

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