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Woman image in *Las tres vírgenes de Santo Tomás* from the africana womanism and stiwanism perspectives

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Abstract: By applying Africana Womanism and Stiwanism theories to *Las tres vírgenes de Santo Tomas* (2009) written by Equatoguinean author Guillermina Mekuy, we aimed to analyze a corpus written in Spanish by an African author through feminist frameworks rooted in African socio-cultural realities. Set in Equatorial Guinea, the novel traces the lives of three sisters as they navigate a society shaped by the intersection of traditional African customs and colonial Catholic influences. Through the lens of both theories, the novel offers a powerful exploration of African women identity, resistance, and empowerment in a postcolonial African context.

Keywords: Women. Africa. Africana womanism. Stiwanism

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1 INTRODUCTION

The representation of African women in literature often serves as a mirror reflecting the sociopolitical, cultural, and spiritual challenges faced by women in postcolonial societies. Guillermina Mekuy's *Las tres vírgenes de Santo Tomás* (2009) stands as an exploration of these complexities. Set in Equatorial Guinea, the novel traces the lives of three sisters, María Fátima, María Lourdes, and María Inmaculada as they navigate a society shaped by the intersection of traditional African customs and colonial Catholic influences. Through their struggles against societal expectations, the novel reveals the constraints imposed on women and the various strategies of resistance they employ. Choosing a novel to analyze how the woman image is projected resides in the fact that books have always been the witnesses of world history as well as loyal transcribers of said history. As Carole B. Davies (1986, p. 75) writes:

Literature, because it mirrors and/or recreates social, historical and economic realities, is one of the channels through which negative attitudes and stereotypes of women are perpetuated, even created. Modern African literature too, because it has adopted many of the Western patriarchal modes of thoughts and expression, often conveys some of these biased attitudes to which we refer.

This novel has been the object of other academic works such as *Sex, Identity, and Narration in the Equatoguinean Diaspora* by Mahan Ellison (2023), *Transforming National Identities: Race, Gender and Sexuality in Contemporary Hispanophone Caribbean and African Literature* by David Robinson Dwyer (2020) and *Transcultural Bodies: Comparative Approach to Dissident 'Minor' Women's Writings in Portuguese, Italian, and Spanish* by Joana Mota Pimentel (2018). All those works on Guillermina Mekuy work have used western-centered theories for some and overall general theories for others that cannot capture the complexities of the Africana people in general and Africana woman in particular. This book offers a fertile ground for analyzing the image of African

¹ The word “feminist” is used here as an adjective and has nothing to do with the Feminism current as both Africana womanism and Stiwanism are against mainstream Feminism.

women through the two lenses of Africana Womanism and Stiwanism, two feminist¹ frameworks rooted in African socio-cultural realities. Analyzing the image of women in this text through the frameworks of both perspectives opens a pathway to understand how Mekuy envisions a space for women’s empowerment within their cultural and historical realities.

Africana Womanism, as theorized by Clenora Hudson-Weems (1994), provides a culture-orientated lens to examine African women experiences. Distinct from mainstream feminism which often prioritizes individualism and Western ideals, Africana Womanism is rooted in African socio-cultural realities. It emphasizes community, family, and cultural preservation while advocating for gender equity within a framework that respects African traditions. This perspective is particularly relevant to *Las tres vírgenes de Santo Tomás*, as the novel is deeply entrenched in Equatorial Guinean society, where colonial legacies of Catholicism are intertwined with traditional African values. The struggles faced by the characters María Fátima, María Lourdes, and María Inmaculada exemplify the dual pressures of cultural preservation and personal agency, central concerns of Africana Womanism. On the other hand, Stiwanism (Social Transformation Including Women in Africa), proposed by Omolara Ogundipe-Leslie (1994), focuses on systemic change and the inclusion of women in the development of African societies. Stiwanism advocates for women’s active participation in politics, education, and governance, emphasizing the need to dismantle patriarchal and colonial structures that perpetuate inequality. While Africana Womanism often prioritizes balance within familial and community contexts, Stiwanism adopts a more radical stance, seeking structural reform to achieve gender parity. The selection of both theories to analyze the image of women in Mekuy’s work resides in the fact that, as Serie McDougal explained in *Research Methods in Africana Studies* (2014), the analysis of black people should be done from an Afrocentrist perspective. Therefore, it is more judicious to do the analysis by applying African-rooted theories to the

corpus. Other feminist theories like womanism or feminism would not be contextual enough to capture the complexities of the African societies.

This essay examines how Mekuy's *Las tres vírgenes de Santo Tomás* portrays the image of women as shaped by patriarchal and religious constraints and explores how the characters' responses resonate with the principles of Womanism and Stiwanism. By juxtaposing the two frameworks, this analysis highlights the novel's multifaceted critique of gender inequality and its vision for societal transformation. The study further situates Mekuy's work within the broader discourse of Afro-Hispanic literature, emphasizing its contribution to feminist thought in postcolonial Africa. This analysis will proceed in two parts. First, it presents how women are portrayed through the Africana Womanism lens, emphasizing the centrality of family and cultural identity in the sisters' resistance. Second, it analyzes the novel's alignment with Stiwanism principles, focusing on the systemic challenges faced by the female protagonists and their implications for societal transformation. By applying the frameworks of Womanism and Stiwanism to *Las tres vírgenes de Santo Tomás*, this study aims to illuminate the novel's portrayal of African women and their struggles for liberation.

2 PORTRAIT OF WOMEN FROM THE AFRICANA WOMANISM PERSPECTIVE

Africana Womanism emerged as a critique of mainstream (Western) feminism and even Black feminism, arguing that these movements did not adequately reflect the unique historical, cultural, and social realities of African-descended women. In her book titled *Africana Womanism: Reclaiming ourselves.*, Hudson-Weems (1994, p. 24) defines it as:

[...] an ideology created and designed for all women of African descent. It is for grounded in African culture, and therefore, it

necessarily focuses on the unique experiences, struggles, need and desires of African women. It critically addresses the dynamics of the conflict between mainstream feminist, the black feminist, the African feminist and the Africana womanist.

Africana Womanism places a strong emphasis on family, community, and race, acknowledging the interconnected struggles of Africana men and women against racism, sexism, and classism. It is ruled by 18 key principles that Clenora Hudson presents in her book. In the present work, we will present how Mekuy's three principal characters follow some of these principles, embodying therefore the vision of the woman as theorized by the Africana womanism theory.

The first two principles of Hudson's theory are Self-naming and Self-definition. The principle of self-naming emphasizes the importance of Africana women defining themselves on their own terms, free from external labels imposed by dominant frameworks such as Western feminism or patriarchal systems. According to Clenora Hudson-Weems (1994), self-naming is a critical first step toward reclaiming identity and resisting misrepresentation. For Africana women, naming themselves means asserting their autonomy and grounding their identities in their unique cultural, historical, and social experiences. Self-naming in the novel is reflected in how each sister seeks to define her identity in opposition to or within the confines of the father's authoritarian rule. Their father, a deeply religious man who represents the hybridized forces of colonial Catholicism and African traditions, imposes rigid identities on the sisters, rooted in traditional expectations of virtue and submission. This can be seen in the first page of the book when María Fátima speaks about her teenager years:

In the early days of my adolescence, the struggle to find out what my path should be was subject to the greatest turbulence. The sea of my blood clashed in waves with the inner hardness of the rules imposed by my parents and tried to calm down in the external vision of a different world, the one I believed I could glimpse as the realm of freedom).² (2009, p. 15).

María Fátima embodies the principle of self-naming most explicitly by challenging her father's oppressive control and questioning the restrictive roles assigned to her as a woman. Her resistance, though met with

² En el inicio de mi adolescencia, la lucha por la búsqueda de cuál debía ser mi camino estuvo sujeta a las mayores turbulencias. El mar de mi sangre chocaba en oleadas con la dureza interior de las normas impuestas por mis padres y trataba de remansarse en la visión exterior de un mundo diferente, el que yo creía adivinar que era el reino de la libertad. (This translation and all the followings are mine unless otherwise indicated.)

punishment and isolation, is an act of reclaiming her right to self-identify beyond the label of “obedient daughter”. This can be seen in the dialogue she had with her parents at an early age on what they expected from her and her sisters:

³ - María Lourdes, con esta cruz nunca conocerás el pecado de la carne, ni sentirás el aroma del deseo. Tu piel no se erizará con ninguna caricia masculina, porque no serás mujer de ningún hombre. No has nacido para ser besada, dominada, hija...
 - No has nacido para ser tocada, añadió Tomás.
 - No has nacido para reproducir, siguió Teresa. María Lourdes, mi María Lourdes, mi hija. Entre los gritos de mamá y las lágrimas de papa y María Inmaculada, me sentía confusa.
 -Mamá, mamá, entonces, ¿para qué ha nacido María Lourdes? No pude terminar mi pregunta. Entre la bofetada de mi madre, los gritos de mi padre y mi caída al suelo sin poder evitar contemplar la decepción de mis progenitores.

- Mary Lourdes, with this cross you will never know the sin of the flesh, nor will you feel the aroma of desire. Your skin will not prickle with any male caress, because you will not be the woman of any man. You were not born to be kissed, dominated, daughter...
 - You were not born to be touched, Tomás added.
 - You were not born to reproduce, Teresa continued. Mary Lourdes, my Mary Lourdes, my daughter. Amidst the screams of mom and the tears of dad and Mary Immaculate, I felt confused.
 - Mom, mom, then why was Mary Lourdes born? I could not finish my question. Between my mother's slap, my father's screams, and my fall to the ground unable to avoid contemplating the disappointment of my parents [...] ³ (2009, p. 25).

Such scenes were common in the family and the sisters began to rebel against their parents' domination. Though less vocal than María Fátima, María Lourdes demonstrates an understanding of self-naming within the context of her personal agency. María Inmaculada, the youngest and most compliant, initially seems to accept her father's-imposed identity. However, her quiet reflections and eventual questioning of her role suggest an internal struggle toward self-naming. Self-definition for its part involves articulating and asserting one's experiences, perspectives, and identity based on an authentic understanding of one's cultural and historical reality. While self-naming is about rejecting externally imposed labels, self-definition goes a step further by actively constructing a positive and accurate identity. This principle underscores the importance of African women speaking for themselves, instead of being spoken for by external agents such as colonialists, feminists, or scholars unfamiliar with their realities. In *Rethinking Androcentric Representations of Women in African Literature*, Omar Sougou (2010) writes about the importance for African women to free themselves from the way they have always been perceived in literature and in reality and calls them to rewrite their story from their own perspectives.

⁴ Estoy llenando tu casa
de mujeres, Tomás. Sé que
somos un accidente, pero
nunca dejaré que la
desesperación llene
nuestras almas.

Along those lines, the three protagonists had to outgrow the idea of the conception of womanhood their parents instilled in them from an early age. When María Lourdes was born, her mother referred to her as an accident, stating that “I am filling your house with women, Tomás. I know we are an accident, but I will never let despair fill our souls.”⁴ (2009, p. 21). The girls grew up constantly listening to that kind of words from their parents and this can change the way someone might self-define. But as theorized by Hudson, they tried to self-define themselves according to how they view themselves. María Fátima defines herself as an intellectual and moral rebel, rejecting the constraints of her father's religious dogma. Her character challenges not only patriarchal authority but also the broader societal norms that limit women's autonomy in Equatorial Guinean society. Her insistence on questioning and redefining her role reflects the Africana Womanist emphasis on self-definition. María Lourdes defines herself through her strategic use of charm submitting to the parents' expectations while maintaining a sense of control over her life. This duality highlights how Africana women often navigate traditional roles while subtly asserting their independence. María Inmaculada, despite her initial conformity, begins to carve out her identity by observing her sisters' struggles. Her eventual internal transformation suggests a move toward self-definition, as she tries reconciling tradition and personal freedom. Through the lens of Africana Womanism, *Las tres vírgenes de Santo Tomás* showcases the struggle for self-naming and self-definition in a society that imposes rigid roles on women. The sisters' journeys highlight the importance of reclaiming identity within cultural and historical frameworks, aligning closely with the principles of Africana Womanism.

Two other principles that are present in the book are family centeredness and genuineness in sisterhood. Africana Womanism prioritizes the family unit, emphasizing the interconnectedness of all members and the central role of women in nurturing and sustaining families. This principle emphasizes the central role of the family in the lives of Africana women, highlighting how their identities and actions are often deeply tied to their

familial relationships and responsibilities. Despite how conflictual and complex the sisters' relation with their parents became as they grew up, they were still close to them and most importantly close to each other. In fact, the family in *Las tres vírgenes de Santo Tomás* is both a source of strength and a place of conflict. The sisters' interactions with their father and with each other underscore the importance of familial bonds, even amidst disagreement and struggle. The family remains the central unit through which the characters navigate their identities and societal expectations. In a letter addressed to her sister after being separated for a while, María Lourdes, restates the love she has for her sister in those words: "I believe the time has come to break my silence and return to you some of the love accumulated all these years. Some of the love that has accompanied me in the distance through your letters [...]"⁵ (2009, p. 167). In the first words of the book, María Fátima presents herself in these words:

⁵ Creo que ha llegado el tiempo de romper mi silencio y devolveros algo del amor acumulado todos estos años. Algo del amor que me ha acompañado en la distancia a través de vuestras cartas [...].

⁶ Me llamo Fátima y soy la mediana de tres hermanas. La mayor se llama María Inmaculada, y la pequeña, María Lourdes. Entre nosotras existe un vínculo especial creado por una extraña vida compartida envuelta en placer y dolor.

My name is Fátima and I am the middle child of three sisters. The eldest is named María Inmaculada, and the youngest is María Lourdes. There is a special bond between us created by a strange shared life wrapped in pleasure and pain.⁶ (2009, p. 5).

Introducing herself through the bond she shares with her sisters proves that sisterhood is the most important trait of her person. Despite their differing approaches to resistance, the sisters share a bond of mutual understanding and solidarity. This reflects the communal values central to Africana Womanism, where family is not only about biological ties but also about emotional and cultural support. The family remains the central unit through which the characters navigate their identities and societal expectations. It is also important to state that family-centeredness in the novel is deeply influenced by the cultural and historical realities of postcolonial Equatorial Guinea. The father's strict adherence to colonial Catholic values represents the impact of colonization on African families' structure. The sisters' struggles to assert their autonomy while maintaining familial bonds reflect the dual pressures of resisting colonial influences and preserving African traditions.

Another principle of the Africana Womanism theory is spirituality. For Hudson, spiritual connection and faith are central to the Africana experience, and Africana Womanism respects this deeply rooted cultural element. This is probably the principle that is most apparent in the novel as it revolved about Catholicism and African traditional values. The girls' father self-proclaimed himself as the reincarnation of Santo Tomás and gave Catholicism-inspired names to his daughters. On the other hand, the mother is a white Hispanic woman who believes in African traditional values. The father in the novel embodies a rigid and authoritarian interpretation of Catholic spirituality, which he uses to control his daughters. His strict adherence to colonial Catholic beliefs enforces a narrow understanding of morality and virtue, confining the sisters to predefined roles of purity and obedience. For the sisters, this version of spirituality becomes a source of conflict as they struggle to reconcile their personal desires and identities with the expectations imposed upon them. The father's frequent use of prayer, religious rituals, and moral lectures underscores his belief in spirituality as a guiding force for the family. However, these moments also highlight the tension between his rigid worldview and the sisters' emerging sense of selfness. In fact, the sisters engage with spirituality on their own terms, transforming it into a source of inner strength and resilience. This is evidenced in a conversation between María Fátima and a priest:

One afternoon when the chapel was empty, I approached the tabernacle with devotion and fear and was about to open it to check if the Lord was inside, when, behind me, I heard a voice. It was the voice of Father Andrew saying to me:
- What are you looking for, María Fátima?
- I'm looking for God, isn't He inside?
I remember that Father Andrew smiled, for at my eleven years old, my naivety must have seemed incredible to him. The fact is that he answered me:
- He is inside, but He is also outside, He is everywhere, only we don't see Him. (2009, p. 68)⁷.

María Fátima's question to the priest reveals that she questions the spiritual belief she grows up with and a need to challenge them in order to have a mind of herself. A continuous quest that follows her and her sisters

⁷ Una tarde cuando la capilla estaba vacía, me acerqué hasta el sagrario con devoción y miedo y estaba a punto de abrirlo para comprobar si el Señor estaba allí dentro, cuando, detrás de mí, oí una voz. Era la voz del padre Andrew que me decía:
- ¿Qué buscas María Fátima?
- Busco a Dios, ¿no está ahí dentro?
Recuerdo que el padre Andrew sonrió, pues, a mis once años, debía de parecerlo increíble mi ingenuidad. El caso es que me contestó:
Está ahí dentro, pero también esta fuera, está en todas partes, solo que no Lo vemos.

throughout their respective lives and in which they find strength and solace at times. The girls' connection to spirituality reflects the Africana Womanism perspective that sees spirituality as a sustaining force in the face of adversity. María Fátima's rejection of her father's authority is also a rejection of his interpretation of spirituality. However, her actions are not devoid of spiritual grounding; rather, they reflect an attempt to reclaim a more authentic and liberating form of spirituality. María Inmaculada being the most compliant sister, her spiritual journey initially mirrors her father's teachings but her growing reflections on her role within the family hint at a deeper and personal engagement with spirituality. In the broader context of Equatorial Guinea's postcolonial society, spirituality in *Las tres vírgenes de Santo Tomás* also serves as a bridge between traditional African beliefs and colonial Catholic influences. The sisters' spiritual struggles reflect the tension between these two forces. The principle of spirituality in *Las tres vírgenes de Santo Tomás* is portrayed as a complex and multifaceted force. While the father uses it as a tool of control, the sisters transform spirituality into a source of resilience and self-definition. This dual portrayal aligns with Africana Womanism's emphasis on spirituality as both a grounding and liberating force, deeply rooted in cultural and personal identity.

The principle of flexible roles in Africana Womanism emphasizes the adaptability of Africana women in navigating the various roles they play within their families and societies. It recognizes that Africana women often shift between traditional and unconventional roles based on the needs of their communities, balancing responsibilities while asserting their agency. In *Las tres vírgenes de Santo Tomás*, this principle is vividly embodied by the three sisters as they negotiate their identities within the patriarchal and religious framework imposed by their father. María Fátima exemplifies the principle of flexible roles through her dual identity as both a rebel against her father's rigid authority and a protector of her sisters' freedom. She challenges the norms by rejecting the strict Catholic morality imposed by their father and asserting her right to autonomy. She encourages her sisters to think critically

about their circumstances and supports their emotional well-being, demonstrating a commitment to the family unit. In scenes where María Fátima confronts their father about his authoritarianism, her role as a challenger becomes clear. However, her private conversations with her sisters reveal her nurturing side, as she provides them with emotional and moral support. María Lourdes assumes the role of a mediator within the family, balancing her father's expectations with her sisters' growing desire for freedom. Her humor and tact allow her to navigate tensions without directly confronting authority. Her ability to maintain peace within the family highlights her role as a harmonizer. She seeks to bridge the gap between tradition and change, ensuring that familial bonds remain intact even as they evolve. She uses her charm to subvert her father's control, creating small spaces of autonomy for herself and her sisters without directly challenging his authority. As for María Inmaculada, her early adherence to her father's rules showcases the weight of traditional roles. However, her growing introspection leads her to consider alternative paths, illustrating the fluidity of her character. As she contemplates her place in the family and the community, she transitions from passive acceptance to an active pursuit of self-definition, embodying the flexibility of Africana women in redefining their roles. In sum, In *Las tres vírgenes de Santo Tomás*, the principle of flexible roles is portrayed through the dynamic and evolving identities of María Fátima, María Lourdes, and María Inmaculada. Their ability to adapt to the challenges of their patriarchal family and postcolonial society underscores the resilience and agency of Africana women. By shifting between roles as rebels, mediators, and nurturers, the sisters demonstrate the power of flexibility in transforming their circumstances and redefining their identities.

The last principle of Hudson theory we analyzed in the novel is the strength of black women. By strength, Hudson refers to the capacity of black women to endure and overcome hardships while maintaining their cultural and family values. It is deeply rooted in their role as the backbone of the family and community, navigating systemic challenges, personal struggles,

and societal expectations. In Guillermina Mekuy's *Las tres vírgenes de Santo Tomás*, this principle is vividly portrayed through the lives of the three sisters. Despite the oppressive control exerted by their father and the societal constraints imposed on them, the sisters demonstrate remarkable strength in their individual and collective responses to these challenges. Their strength appears in the book through some elements such as: adaptation, endurance, rebellion against oppression and emotional resilience. María Fátima refuses to conform to the standards of chastity and submission dictated by her father's religious beliefs remarking at an early age that the way her sisters and her have been raised will make them different from the other children:

⁸ Mi cabecita sabía que,
mientras otras niñas de
mi edad jugaban a
descubrir el mundo, mi
vida a llevar otro rumbo,
destinada a un camino de
perfección cuyo
significado no conocía
bien. Un camino de
objetivos extraños
basados en la sabiduría de
un hombre que creía
tener todas las claves de
la existencia.

My little head knew that, while other girls my age played at discovering the world, my life was to take another direction, destined for a path of perfection whose meaning I did not fully understand. A path of strange goals based on the wisdom of a man who believed he held all the keys to existence (2009, p. 50-51)⁸.

From the day she noticed this, María Fátima did what she could to break free from the constraints of patriarchal control. Despite facing rejection and harsh criticism from her father, she remains steadfast in her convictions, showcasing the emotional strength central to the Africana Womanist understanding of strength. María Lourdes navigates her father's strict rules with tact, avoiding direct confrontation while finding ways to express her autonomy. As a mediator between her father and her sisters, she exemplifies the strength required to maintain familial bonds and support her siblings in their struggles. The sisters also showcase collective strength amplified by the bond they share. They find solace and empowerment in their shared experiences, demonstrating the communal aspect of Africana Womanist strength. The sisters' private conversations, where they share their frustrations and dreams, underscore the importance of their bond in sustaining their strength and resilience.

Guillermina Mekuy's novel *Las tres vírgenes de Santo Tomás*, embodies the Africana Womanism principles of self-naming, self-defining, strength,

family-centeredness, sisterhood, spirituality, and flexible roles into the lives of María Fátima, María Lourdes, and María Inmaculada. Each sister embodies a journey toward self-naming and self-defining as they navigate their father's rigid expectations and assert their individuality within a patriarchal framework. Their strength is evident in their resilience, whether through rebellion, adaptability, or quiet introspection, as they confront societal and familial constraints. Family-centeredness and sisterhood serve as the foundation of their unity, with the sisters supporting one another emotionally and spiritually in their shared struggles. Their bond exemplifies the collective strength inherent in Africana Womanism, where individual growth is tied to communal well-being. Spirituality is woven into the narrative, not only as a source of tension with their father's strict Catholicism but also as a means of finding solace and empowerment in their inner faith. Finally, the sisters demonstrate the importance of flexible roles, shifting between traditional and non-traditional identities to navigate their environment. Through these principles, the novel underscores the multidimensional experiences of Africana women, highlighting their agency, resilience, and interconnectedness in the face of adversity.

3 APPLICATION OF STIWANISM TO *LAS TRES VÍRGENES DE SANTO TOMÁS*

Stiwanism (Social Transformation Including Women in Africa) is a feminist framework conceptualized by Nigerian scholar Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie. It focuses on incorporating women's contributions and perspectives into social transformation processes in Africa. Unlike Western feminism, Stiwanism avoids isolating gender issues and instead integrates them into broader struggles for socio-economic and political change. In the preamble

of the 18th chapter of her book *Re-creating ourselves: African women & critical transformations*, Ogundipe-Leslie (1994, p. 206) affirms that:

There is a difficulty in having a feminist discourse in Africa today because of the context and backgrounds of certain issues, for instance, the issue of racism in the social sciences and scholarship on Africa in general, and in white feminist movements which want to see all other human social organizations as less developed and less evolved in the linear and social Darwinian scale often constructed in order to have a hierarchical superiority.

She (Ogundipe-Leslie, 1994, p.215) later adds that she:

[...] wanted to stress the fact that what we want in Africa is social transformation. It is not about warring with men, the reversal of role, or doing to men whatever women think that men have been doing for centuries, but it is trying to build a harmonious society. The transformation of African society is the responsibility of both men and women and it is also in their interest. The new word describes what similarly minded women and myself would like to see in Africa. The word “feminism” itself seems to be a kind of red rag to the bull of African men. Some say the word by its very nature is hegemonic or implicitly so. Others find the focus on women in themselves somehow threatening.”

These quotes explain why she decided to distance herself from feminism as theorized by non-Africans people who can't understand the particularities of the African people in general and African women in particular. She also defines Stiwanism as feminism in an African context. To analyze Mekuy's novel through the Stiwanism lens, we will put the focus on the four major key points of Stiwanism.

The first point is inclusive social change. For Ogundipe-Leslie, women should be included in the transformation of African society and shouldn't be treated as second class citizens which in Mekuy's novel is the way Santo Tomás considers his daughter. The fact that the sisters mother referred to them as accidents and their father affirms that: “It is clear, my beloved Teresa, that once again I am to blame for the birth of a girl”⁹ (2009, p.15), showing how women are not considered as valuable by some African people. Both parents consider that birthing a woman is totally useless and lament on the fact that they couldn't have any male child. This is something

⁹ Está claro, mi amada Teresa, de nuevo tengo la culpa de que haya nacido una niña.

Stiwanism fights against as Ogundipe-Leslie considers that the African society needs men and women as well. In fact, she advocates for the integration of women into all aspects of social, political, and economic transformation of Africa where women will be seen as active participants in shaping and rebuilding society, not just as passive beneficiaries. In the novel, despite not being treated as worthy social beings, the sisters fight to be recognized by their parents and the society as essential elements of the society. As the book critiques patriarchal authority, particularly in the form of the father's rigid control over the sisters' lives, we see that each of them in her own way, seeks for autonomy and self-empowerment. María Fátima challenges the oppressive familial structures by seeking to live her life on her own terms, thus actively contributing to her own transformation. María Lourdes adapts to the situation with wit and resilience, influencing those around her. María Inmaculada gradually asserts her identity and begins to see her role in society in new ways. Their efforts to claim for autonomy reflect the idea that women should be at the forefront of shaping both their personal lives and the society.

The second key point highlighted by Ogundipe-Leslie theory is practical and tangible outcomes. Stiwanism calls for tangible improvements in women's lives through their active involvement in social, political, and economic change. In *Las tres vírgenes de Santo Tomás*, the sisters' journeys toward independence signify practical efforts at achieving personal transformation. The novel critiques the societal and familial restrictions placed on the sisters, but through their resistance, we see the potential for concrete change. María Fátima's defiance and María Lourdes' negotiation with their father's expectations highlight women's agency in seeking practical solutions to fit in the society and participate in its change. By rejecting her father's-imposed limitations, María Fátima takes concrete steps toward personal autonomy. Her transformation is not just ideological; she seeks for real changes in her environment and situation, choosing to act independently and assert her own path in life. Through her journey, the reader sees that women can take concrete actions that disrupt the societal

order. Her resistance is not merely about abstract ideas of freedom but involves real, personal, and societal consequences. Although the novel does not present an idealized resolution, the subtle victories of the sisters illustrate how women's active participation in their own transformation can result in real societal shifts. At the end, the three sisters also take a step forward towards their parents in order to rebuild the bridges between them as they understand them more since they are grown-ups now.

Another key point is intersectionality which considers how gender intersects with other factors like class, colonial history, highlighting the complexity of the challenges faced by African women. In *Las tres vírgenes de Santo Tomás*, the father's colonial Catholicism represents a form of neocolonial control, which intersects with the patriarchal values of the family, creating a double layer of oppression on the sisters. Their experiences reflect how African women are not only constrained by gender norms but also by the lingering effects of colonialism. The sisters' differing responses to their father's authority also underscore the complex ways in which African women navigate these intersecting forces. As women, María Fátima, María Lourdes, and María Inmaculada are subjected to the gendered expectations of the family, where their primary value is often defined by their obedience and submission to their father. This patriarchal structure limits their autonomy and restricts their capacity for self-definition and also shows that the intersection of gender with their African identity complicates their father's expectations further. María Fátima's resistance is directly tied to her understanding of this colonial legacy. She challenges not just her father's patriarchal rule but also the colonial mindset that influences his behavior. In doing so, she seeks to reclaim an African identity that is free from colonial distortions, seeking an authentic self-definition that includes both gender autonomy and cultural reclamation. Another important layer of intersectionality in *Las tres vírgenes de Santo Tomás* is the socio-economic status of the family. While the novel does not focus exclusively on class, the father's position as a figure of authority suggests a certain level of privilege, one that

contrasts with the struggles of the sisters. The family's social position affords the father power, which he uses to enforce control over the women. But despite the multiple layers of oppression they face, the sisters find ways to assert their identities in order to include themselves in the society. Each sister, in her way, challenges the intersectional oppression she faces. Their actions reflect how Africana women can navigate the complex layers of their identity shaped by gender, traditional values, class, and colonial history and assert their autonomy in a society that seeks to marginalize them.

The last key point is the critique of patriarchy and neocolonialism. While advocating for the implication of women in the African society transformation, Stiwanism also fights against patriarchy and neocolonialism which are clearly in contradiction with the liberation she wants for the woman. Fighting against patriarchy for her does not mean fighting against men as promoted by the white feminism but rather finding a compromise between the freedom of African women and a harmonious relationship with African men. Through the Stiwanist framework, this critique can be explored by focusing on how patriarchal control in the family is not only enforced through traditional gender roles but also reinforced by the neocolonial forces that shape the sisters' lives. These forces are subtle but powerful, affecting their personal autonomy, cultural identity, and social roles. The father's strict authoritarian rule in *Las tres vírgenes de Santo Tomás* represents the patriarchal and neocolonial systems that subjugate the sisters. His imposition of colonial Catholic values serves as a vehicle for maintaining power and control over the women in his life. This can be seen in this extract:

My mother's name is Teresa and she, like her husband Thomas, also considered women as beings dependent on men, whom they should serve and honor throughout their lives. The woman, having been extracted from Adam's rib, according to the idea transmitted by the Bible, was an inferior being. For Teresa, as for my father, only the masculine being represented the true and sublime image of God (2009, p. 16)¹⁰.

The novel critiques these systems by showing how they limit the sisters' potential and autonomy. As the sisters challenge their father's authority, they also resist the patriarchal and colonial structures that have

¹⁰ El nombre de mi madre es Teresa y ella, como su marido Tomás, también consideraba a las mujeres como seres dependientes de los hombres, a los que debían servir y honrar durante toda su vida. La mujer, al haber sido extraída de la costilla de Adán, según la idea transmitida por la biblia, era un ser inferior. Para Teresa, como para mi padre, solo el ser masculino representaba la verdadera y excelsa imagen de Dios.

shaped their lives. María Fátima, in particular, rejects the gender roles imposed on her by her father, signaling her resistance to both patriarchy and colonialism. In doing so, the text highlights the need for social transformation that includes women's voices and actively critiques systems of control that seek to limit their agency.

Applying the key points of Stiwanism to *Las tres vírgenes de Santo Tomás* illuminates the ways in which the novel critiques patriarchal authority, explores women's agency, and advocates for cultural relevance in the fight for gender equality. Through the characters of María Fátima, María Lourdes, and María Inmaculada, the text demonstrates the importance of solidarity, collaboration, and practical action in the transformation of both personal and societal structures. The novel ultimately suggests that true transformation in African societies requires the active inclusion of women in shaping the future, grounded in both cultural understanding and resistance to external forms of control.

4 CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of *Las tres vírgenes de Santo Tomás* through the lenses of Womanism and Stiwanism provides a rich and nuanced, multi-dimensional understanding of the portrayal of African and Afro-Hispanic women within the context of postcolonial societies. Both perspectives offer frameworks for interpreting the complexities of African womanhood from an Afrocentrist point of view. Through the stories of the three sisters María Fátima, María Lourdes, and María Inmaculada, the novel brings forth the struggles and resilience of women in navigating the intersection of gender, culture, and colonial legacies. The principles of womanism as developed by Clenora Hudson (1994) demonstrate that each sister's journey reflects a process of self-discovery, where they challenge both familial and societal norms. The

sisters' defiance against their father's patriarchal rule in order to seek their own path is a key example of self-naming and self-definition. Through the concept of sisterhood, family centeredness, spirituality and flexible roles, Africana womanism is powerfully illustrated in the relationship between the three sisters. Their shared experiences and mutual support create a foundation of strength that helps them resist the gendered and societal constraints placed on them. The sisters embody the African Womanist belief that women's lives cannot be isolated from one another, and that social change for women comes through solidarity and shared experiences. Together, these principles reflect the complexity and richness of Africana Womanism, revealing the multidimensional struggles and triumphs of Africana women in both their individual lives and collective solidarity. Through this lens, the novel offers a powerful exploration of Africana women identity, resistance, and empowerment in a postcolonial African context.

Stiwanism on the other hand, as a theory, emphasizes the necessity of practical, tangible outcomes and solutions for African women, advocating for social, cultural, and political change that directly improves their lives. In *Las tres vírgenes de Santo Tomás*, this can be seen in the ways the sisters, though their paths differ, seek for material transformations in their lives. María Fátima's dramatic rebellion is an assertion of her autonomy, where she actively pushes against the patriarchal family structure and seeks to find out a future that aligns with her own desires, even at the cost of family and societal rejection. Her resistance is an act of reclaiming agency over her future, aligning with Stiwanism principles that highlight the importance of practical action in resisting oppression. María Lourdes' more strategic approach demonstrates another facet of Stiwanism: the idea that resistance is not always about direct confrontation but can also manifest in subtle and strategic actions. Her ability to negotiate with her father and to find ways to influence him offers a nuanced perspective on how women in postcolonial societies can assert their autonomy, even within restrictive systems. This shows that practical change can also occur through adaptation, negotiation, and finding spaces for agency within existing structures. Finally, María Inmaculada's gradual journey

towards self-awareness and self-empowerment represents the key points in Stiwanism. As the novel exposes how the intersectionality between gender, patriarchy and neocolonialism shape the lives of Africana women, it also shows through the sisters' lives how Africana women can reclaim their autonomy in order to become part of the society.

In conclusion, both Womanism and Stiwanism offer powerful insights into the ways in which African and Afro-Hispanic women are portrayed in *Las tres vírgenes de Santo Tomás*. These theories allow for a deeper understanding of how the characters challenge, resist, and navigate patriarchal and neocolonial systems. Through their distinct but interconnected stories, the sisters show that women's autonomy and empowerment can be pursued in diverse ways, whether through active resistance, negotiation, or personal development. The image of womanhood presented in *Las tres vírgenes de Santo Tomás* is multi-faceted and complex, and it underscores the necessity of recognizing African women in general and Afro-Hispanic women in particular as agents of change. While most discussions on Stiwanism and Africana Womanism focus on African or African-American literature, this study brings Afro-Hispanic literature into the conversation. Guillermina Mekuy's work provides a unique context for exploring these frameworks, given its blend of African traditions, Spanish influences, and Catholic patriarchal structures. This intersection offers a fresh perspective on how Africana Womanism and Stiwanism manifest in an Afro-Hispanic context. Using both theories also permits to capture all the complexities of Africana women with the help of the principles and key points of each theory. The fact that we did not find any analysis of Mekuy's novel from an African feminist perspective permits it to add to the other novels that have been analyzed through an Africana lens and also restates the need of Africana people in general to be analyzed through adequate perspectives. The sisters' story and this work provide a meaningful reflection of the struggles, strengths, and resilience of Africana women in postcolonial contexts from an Africana point of view.

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La imagen de la mujer en *Las tres vírgenes de Santo Tomás* desde las perspectivas del womanismo africano y el stiwanismo

Resumen: Al aplicar las teorías del Womanismo Africano y del Stiwanismo a *Las tres vírgenes de Santo Tomás* (2009) escrito por la autora ecuatoguineana Guillermina Mekuy, nuestro objetivo fue analizar un corpus escrito en español por una autora africana a través de marcos feministas enraizados en realidades socioculturales africanas. Ambientada en Guinea Ecuatorial, la novela traza las vidas de tres hermanas mientras navegan en una sociedad moldeada por la intersección de las costumbres africanas tradicionales y las influencias católicas coloniales. A través de la lente de ambas teorías, la novela ofrece una poderosa exploración de la identidad de las mujeres africanas, la resistencia y el empoderamiento en un contexto africano poscolonial.

Palabras claves: Mujeres. África. Womanismo africano. Stiwanismo.

Imagem de mulher em *Las tres vírgenes de Santo Tomás* a partir das perspectivas do womanismo africano e do stiwanismo

Resumo: Ao aplicar a teoria do Womanismo Africano e a teoria do stiwanismo a *Las tres vírgenes de Santo Tomás* (2009), escrito pela autora equatoguineense Guillermina Mekuy, nosso objetivo foi analisar um corpus escrito em espanhol por uma autora africana através de estruturas feministas enraizadas nas realidades socioculturais africanas. Ambientado na Guiné Equatorial, o romance traça as vidas de três irmãs enquanto elas navegam em uma sociedade moldada pela interseção de costumes africanos tradicionais e influências católicas coloniais. Através da lente de ambas as teorias, o romance oferece uma exploração poderosa da identidade das mulheres africanas, resistência e empoderamento em um contexto africano pós-colonial.

Palavras-chave: Mulheres. África. Womanismo africano. Stiwanismo.