

## Theme of Escapism in Edwidge Danticat's *A Wall of Fire Rising*

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### Abstract

This paper attempts to focus on one of the short stories of Edwidge Danticat's noteworthy short story collection "Krik? Krak!" which expresses the protagonist's inner fire to attain freedom from his present situation. The Guy in the story, struggles for his family's survival and by any means wants to escape from his state of affairs. Eventhough he got a job in the sugar mill, he is not contented with that and ashamed of expressing it to his son. He longs for the better prospects of life yet he is rejected of gaining it. The story is filled with the Guy's agony to get rid of his poverty stricken life and unending tribulations.

**KEYWORDS:** Escapism, freedom, affairs, expressing, agony

Edwidge Danticat being an author of numerous award winning books throws light on various themes in her novels and short stories such as migration, sexuality, gender and history. Born in Haiti, she was raised by her uncle and aunt as her parents were immigrated to Newyork. It was this time she developed her interest in writing which was influenced by Haitian practice of storytelling. When Haitians tell a story, they say "Krik?" and the eager listeners answer "Krak!" This is how at the age of twenty-six, in 1995, she became a finalist for the National Book Award for Krik? Krak! It is about Haiti and Haitian Americans before democracy. One of the major themes in this story collection is the diversity of suffering. One way or other, someone has experienced suffering in his or her own way. In fact, it explores people's intense desires and of course the reality of their lives. According to San Francisco Chronicle, this story collection is soaked with mythology and tradition of the sustained generations and it really illustrates the healing power of storytelling."

The term "escapism" denotes the tendency to seek distraction and relief from unpleasant realities by seeking entertainment or engaging in fantasy. Escapism is caused by a person who seeks comfort, an escape from his/her sadness and difficulties. As a result, it carries negative notion and the person who engages in this kind of escapism might never connects himself/herself with the society. People of certain kind, perhaps, misses out the happiness they have around them or content with what they have, rather seeks escapism. Here, in the story the protagonist does the same act of escaping from his present frustrated life by involving himself in the act of fantasy.

"A Wall of Fire Rising" presents one man's desire for freedom and also shows the distance between reality and fantasy. The story begins with the Guy entering the house to provide some information "listen to what happened today"(WFR 45) but it was interrupted by his son who wants to provide him an amazing news. Lili, wife of the Guy takes privilege to disclose her husband that her son is acting in a play. When enquiring about the character he plays, "pepper head" as he is called by other boys, little guy enthusiastically huffed out that "I am Boukman"(WFR 46). Little guy is shown as an optimistic young boy and enjoys his present condition with the lack of

things in his tiny shack. On the contrary, his father laments over his circumstances and develops inner turmoil.

Dutty Boukman was a great rebel leader of Haitian Revolution who served as the catalyst to the 1791 Slave Revolt. This slave revolt was considered as the beginning of the Haitian Revolution. The slaves who joined the revolt killed whites and destroyed sugar plantations. Ultimately, Boukman was killed by the French Planters and colonial troops in 7 november 1791. Eventually listening to the recitation of those rebellious lines, it kindles the Guy's inner feelings. In fact, both father and mother experiences a kind of strange feeling that they could not express.

“A wall of fire rising and in the ashes, I see the bones of my people. Not only those people whose dark hollow faces I see daily in the fields, but all those souls who have gone ahead to haunt my dreams. At night I relive once more the last caresses from the hand of a loving father, a valiant love, a beloved friend.” (WFR 48)

The writer has also illuminates the poverty stricken life they had through these lines, “That night, anyway, things were good. Everyone had eaten enough to put all their hunger vermin to sleep”(WFR 49). Moreover, they never had the facility of electricity at home and used only kerosene lamp. Besides, if there is little kerosene, the boy has to sit by the side of the road and study under the street lamps. There is even some reference of a large television screen in an iron cage which the government had installed for the shanty town dwellers to watch the news. As all the dwellers finds solace in gathering in crowds, making bonfires and involving themselves in ideal chats, the guy goes to their favourite spot in the sugar mill with his family. Basically the Guy is not happy and so he tries to get happiness in petty things as he takes one of the mushrooms and keeps it in his wife's hair and teases her.

The sugar mill is owned by the Assad family and had a son of peculiar manners, who, recently bought a hot- air balloon to Haiti from America. The hot-air balloon is the symbolic representation of freedom or escaping from his life of poverty whereas for young Assad it is a kind of pleasure and reflects social standard in the society. Whenever the guy reaches the spot where they see the balloon, he let go of the hands of his wife and his son. Lili understands him from the look on his face that his heart is longing to sit and fly on the balloon. He is so frantic that,

“he lit the paper until it burned to an ashy film. The burning paper floated in the night breeze for a while, landing in fragments on the grass...Did you see how the paper floated when it was burned? This is how that balloon flies”. (WFR 52)

The guy is fully obsessed with the hot-air balloon that he even says that he can fly the balloon without any crew for assistance. Actually he has the intelligence of guessing things correctly of where the balloon would land when others do not.

The guy finally opens up with his news that he got a job of scrubbing the latrines in the sugar mill. On hearing this Lili is very happy and exclaims “it's an honest work” (WFR 55). She is content and glad of what they have but Guy is worried of his number on the permanent hire list. As a father, he wants to secure his son's life by putting the boy on the list so that by the time he becomes a man he can

get a job. But the mother is firm not to keep his son on any lists that might influence his destiny.

The hot-air balloon symbolises escapism or freedom. The guy is always has the intention of escaping from his hardships and fly in the sky as an act of escaping from those trials and tribulations he is facing in his day today life. Moreover, he wants to be a man who makes his son proud. He does not want his son to have the same memory as he has for his father. After a tiresome day, he likes to sit under a tree and have a leisurely smoke, “but he did not want to set a bad example for his son indulging his very small pleasures” (WFR 59). He asks question to his wife how a man would be judged after he had gone. She answers that the man is judged by his deeds. The guy has his own answer for it and remembers his own poor struggling father which he never want to be. He tells his indepth secrets to Lili that he has been hiding deep inside his heart for so long.

“Sometimes, I just want to take the big balloon and ride it up in the air. I’d like to sail off somewhere and keep floating until I got to a really nice place with a nice place with a nice plot of land where I could be something new. I’d build my own house, keep my own garden. Just be something new.” (WFR 61)

The guy fancies of having new land, building new house and keeping garden for his own. He lives in the world of fantasy which he knows it won’t work. Anyhow he could not resist himself from this unusual way of thinking and one can comprehend his trauma of escapism through his characterisation. He is pretty sure that Lili would take good care of their son and make him a performer. Both Lili and little guy looks at the world optimistically unlike the Guy and they are ambitious too. He just wants to make his son feel proud of his father by showing that he is not the struggling father like his grand father. Dawning of the next day seems to be strange because the guy has left his house and approaching towards his lifetime hectic activity.

The rainbow coloured balloon is floating aimlessly above their heads. The crowd is watching this with excitement. They are all cheerful, calling out his name and encouraging him. There arrives young Assad who frantically makes a comment of the need of a whole crew to operate this. Surprised by this act of the Guy, flying this balloon all alone, Assad is perplexed. Eventhough he takes pleasure in riding the balloon on his own and in fact made his son feel proud by the frantic act, he gets out of his fantasy of seeking a new land, building a new house or having his own garden. He, ultimately, accepts the reality and understands the incredible notion he had. Suddenly, he jumps out of the balloon and dies. “The balloon kept floating free, drifting on its way to brighter shores” (WFR 65). After yearning for a better prospects of life, the guy misses all the meagre happiness he could get around him. Lili, after his death leaves his eyes open as he always likes to look at the sky. The son began to recite the lines from the play before his father’s dead body.

“There is so much sadness in the faces of my people. I have called on their gods, now I call on our gods. I call on our young. I call on our old. I call on our mighty and the weak. I call on everyone and anyone so that we shall all let out one piercing cry that we may either live freely or we should die.”(WFR 66)

The story, “A Wall of Fire Rising” suggests the protagonist’s plight of escaping from reality at the same time gaining name and fame for the sake of his son,

little guy. The “wall of fire” represents the rising emotions which is burning inside the hearts of each and every Haitians. Furthermore the little boy’s speech invokes the spirit of revolution which leads to the father’s daring deed of riding the balloon alone and rising high up on the sky by leaving his son a positive memory of a daring father. His long lasting dream has come true yet the desire to be free out of the situation made his family grieve after this tragedy. Lili did her best to keep him calm after noticing his longing to ride the balloon but unfortunately she could not cease him. He had the inner turmoil right from the beginning of the story which nobody could heal.

**Reference:**

1. Danticat, Edwidge. Krik? Krak!