

Of Demons, Adders and Drugs: Discourse as Instrument of Female Agency in  
Miriam Toews's *Women Talking* and Catriona Ward's *Little Eve*

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Introduction

If readers limited themselves to the blurbs, they would probably think that Miriam Toews  
and Catriona Ward's have little in common. The former is set in  
contemporary South America, while the latter is set in



what is said in Plautdietsch, the only language the women speak. Mocked by the colony for his inability to farm, August is a kind and compassionate man, whose presence does not simply serve a practical purpose: in a reversal of patriarchal order, philosophical and moral discourse is now reserved to women and it is a man who has to write down their ideas, concerns and decisions. August as a narrator plays a role similar to Nelly Dean's in *Red Rover*, as he is well aware: "My name is August Eppirrelevant for all purposes, other than that I've been appointed the minutetaker for the women's meetings because the women are illiterate and unable to do it themselves" (1).

Out of shame, the women didn't immediately denounce the attacks; however, when finding themselves pregnant and their children with venereal disease, they informed Bishop Peters, who immediately blamed them. First he declared that they were being assaulted by Satan's demons or ghosts and that God was punishing them for their sins; then he dismissed their stories as fantastic lies: "Then Peters told Mina she was making the attack up. He repeated the words "wild female imagination," with forceful punctuation after each of the words to create three short sentences" (57). Peters is a powerful representative of the patriarchal system that enslaves the women of the colony: not only is he well aware that the attackers are neither demons nor imaginary, but it is also revealed that the drug used by the rapists has always been kept in his own dairy barn and that he has prohibited medical treatment for the victims for fear of gossiping.

The debate begins with considerations on the women's status inside the community, when Greta Loewen, one of the two matriarchs, acknowledges that "we have been treated worse than animals, and . 0. and 0.7i0.e-9.(i)n[(0.7i)i (1 b3s)3 (n)-4 (8)13 (-e)88(







disturbing to say the least, including not only blood sacrifice and being bitten by an actual

repeated conversations with a caring stranger will finally guide Eve toward  
freedom.

After a local murder, Chief Inspector Black comes to investigate and discovers that Uncle  
is actually John Bearings, an ~~old~~ soldier notorious for his pedophilic tendencies. He is very vocal  
about what he sees: “You have filled all these children with nonsense and fear. Your cruelty to  
their minds is as great as that to their bodies” (



himself up in place of the law and that will not stand” (148) Black is a kind but relentless interlocutor, and his words help Eve acquire a gradual awareness of her own feelings:

“What you are saying doesn’t make sense,” I say. “would I invent the eye?”

“To satisfy the great need that lies at the heart of us all.”

“Which is?”

“To be loved. To belong.”

“That’s too easy,” I say. “It’s not worthy of you.”

“Nevertheless, it is the truth.” (149)

Although it takes years for the policeman to convince Eve that he truly has her best interest at heart, “the result of the give-and-take of face-to-face conversation with another, which allows one to ‘hear oneself think’” (Shlain 315) is that Eve eventually starts doubting what she has been taught her whole life. The full realization of the extent of Uncle’s manipulation takes place when Black confirms her suspicion that the so-called magic honey produced on the island that she has been fed for years is drugged. Identifying the flowers where Altnaharra bees feed as *Rhododendron Ponticum*, the Inspector explains that they produce a hallucinogen called *Grayanotoxin*, passed from the nectar into the honey and able, in the right quantity, to incapacitate a human being: “Just enough to keep you under the influence,” he says. “Not enough to incapacitate you—that he reserves for special days. It is clever. It is a form of assault to drug someone. He could be charged for that” (174). Not surprisingly, it is later revealed that Uncle has repeatedly raped the girls after supposedly rewarding them with honey and

Naturally, Eve's first reactions are confusion and dismay: "I am cold. I have gone to Uncle's arms for comfort all my life. Where will I go now? Who will I be?" (174). Her words remind us of Ona Friesel: "When we have liberated ourselves, we will have to ask ourselves who we are" (28). Her words are also reminiscent of the identity construction issues with which survivors of cult abuse have to deal: "Probably the most important issue that a cult survivor may face when leaving a cult is the definition of his or her identity in the outer world. . . within the cult, members introject the group's values and assume a completely introjected personality, the cult pseudo personality. Regaining a genuine identity is a challenge for the cult survivor" (Scotellaro 8).

Challenges for Eve begin very soon, when she realizes that Uncle, perhaps aware that his control over his victims is diminishing, plans to murder his whole family under the pretense of the Adder's imminent coming. She alerts her beloved sister Dinah: "I touch her hand lightly, just once. I do not think he intends us to live I can no longer see. The eye is gone. It dropped away with my belief. I have begun to see other things, however" (207).

Her conversations with Inspector Black have guided Eve in a journey of self-discovery and she starts remembering the sexual abuse: "I think of what Nora told me. Of what Uncle did to me. . . something stirs in the depths. Half memories, vague images made of fire and eyes and hands. It happened, I think" (227). And now she knows the answer to her question about who she will be; she will be a survivor: "All I know is that I must not die at Uncle's hands. Anything but that" (216). In the end, the patriarch's power over Eve is vanquished and she finally sees him for the ignoble creature that he has always been: a pedophile that she will not recognize as family any longer: "My gaze rests for a moment on John Bearing's corpse. He was quite a short man. I had never noticed" (235).

is a masterful Gothic tale and, after several shocking plot twists, we discover that Eve is not responsible for the mass murder that opens the novel. Paying a high price to leave the island she assumes Dinah's identity to find freedom, if not happiness, away from Altnaharra: "I lie down in the place made ready for me. I become a sparrow in the pointed star of the dead. I take up a stone and make ready to drive it into the place where my eye once was. I prepare to survive" (236).



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