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Face to face

### [Novelist of symbols](#)

ANUPAMA R.

French novelist Paule Constant's world goes well beyond feminist-feminine concerns.

Photo: Anupama R



### **Importance of location: Paule Constant. .**

I have roughly 45minutes with Paule Constant, Prix Goncourt-winning French novelist, essayist, critic and professor. The first thing that strikes me is she is wearing two watches. "I try to know where I am," she says, weary from crossing several time zones. To me, the watches symbolised her need to be located in time and space. Indeed, Paule Constant is a novelist of symbols.

In a career spanning decades, Constant has written nine novels, essays and published several studies. All the while, this widely translated writer has constantly used symbolism to her advantage. "I believe that to be a human being, is to be a symbol...90 per cent of what we do symbolises something," she explains. So, washing and cooking stand for something, she quickly adds. Everything tells a story.

#### **Feminine realities**

The recourse to conventionally "feminine" activities such as cooking and washing also reflect a strong female consciousness in her work. Her best-known novel, *Confidence Pour Confidence (Trading Secrets*, Nebraska Press, 2000) portrays the feminine reality through the life of four European women, all delegates at a feminist conference.

Though "feminists", the protagonists need their men and their disillusion revolves around men. For this reason, perhaps the novel could be termed

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anti-feminist and feminist at the same time. The novel is typical *huis clos* (no exit) with the action taking place in a claustrophobic kitchen in a sealed house in the U.S. The kitchen at once becomes a symbol of the dying feminist dream and the decaying American dream.

So why the U.S.? "After the Second World War, everything was, for us occidentals, American. We ate American, watched American movies. These European women (in the novel) concretise the American dream. This dream is not marvellous because, at the end, it's a kitchen," explains Constant, her elegant pearls shining in agreement.

The women are successful feminists but unsuccessful in their personal lives. And she doesn't really distinguish between the feminine and the feminist: "I showed women as they are, not extraordinary, not heroic... the way I saw them", says Constant who was in India on a French Embassy-sponsored tour.

Her path-breaking essay, "Un monde À l'usage des demoiselles" (1988) translated as "A world for the use of the young ladies", analysed "feminine virtues" as imposed on women by the Christian Church. The essay that won the prestigious French Academy Award looked at how aristocratic women were educated to help men succeed in an androcentric society. But how relevant is the essay in the modern world where "feminine virtues" are passé, I ask rather impatiently. "It's a historical point of view and the principal arguments rest on religion. These are, of course, not the virtues we would give the girls of today," she clarifies.

However, Paule Constant's world goes well beyond feminist-feminine concerns. From her first novel, *Ouregano* (1980) to *La bête À chagrin* (2007), we are confronted with a vision rooted in her childhood life in Africa, colonialism and justice. As she says, there's no "solitary novel"; what links them all is the autobiographical strain.

*Ouregano* (A Place in Africa) set in motion a series of African themes and also led her to write *La fille du Gouvernator*, (*The Governor's Daughter*, 1998, Nebraska Press) a decade later. "With this I arrived in the sphere of justice; it's the same quest in *Sucre et Secret*, 2003, (*Sugar and Secret*) and *La bête À chagrin* (*Animal of Sorrow*)," says Constant. Many of these are mirror novels, with characters reappearing in consecutive novels.

Interestingly, mirrors play an important role in her work. *Trading Secrets* has been said to be a mirror. As Constant says in the introduction, the title is a "falsely sweet" mirror. The women are disconnected from themselves, unable to see their true selves. Constant believes that mirrors don't reflect reality. "What troubles me is that we see an inverse image...in literature, it's a metaphor for a lie," she adds.

#### Quality of compassion

Equally engaging is the way Constant uses animals in her novels. "The deeper I go, the less difference I see between man and animal," she says. Many of her characters communicate with animals — ants, monkeys, dogs. "I'm moved by humans, but I'm equally moved by animals that represent for me innocence."

It could be this compassion which Constant calls "the grandest sentiment" that draws her to writers like Patrick White, Salman Rushdie and Arundhati Roy. "I love France but I'm in permanent exile and when I see writers with such generosity, it's like a book is accepting me with open arms," she says.

No wonder then that Constant's universe has always been concerned with human suffering and isolation. It could also for this reason that she cares little for "the woman writer" tag. The future will see "a desexualisation of texts" and there would be lesser fuss about gender in literature, she feels. And with that my 45 minutes are up.

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