

The Beautiful Abortifacient

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[...] Deliver me from these problems!
Be less beautiful
So I can recover my poetics.
Be a typical woman
Of kohl, perfume, pregnancy and childbirth. [...]
*Nizār Qabbānī*¹

This chapter examines abortifacients that have been described as beautiful flowers by European researchers in colonial settings. My main objective is to analyze why the beauty of the blooming flowers has been emphasized by researchers of past and present, almost in opposition to their abortifacient and contraceptive qualities.

1. Celebrating Male and Female Fecundity Differently from European Societies

In Chinua Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart* (1959), the Nigerian novelist describes a festivity in which people of the fictitious village Umuofia cel-

1 Nizār Qabbānī, *Less Beautiful* (2011), translated into English by A.Z. Foreman, <http://poemsintranslation.blogspot.com/2011/03/nizar-qabbani-less-beautiful.html> (accessed January 18, 2024).

celebrate a fertility goddess. The narrated community in colonial Nigeria connects the blessings of this goddess to the fertility of both soil and humans with the beginning of the yam harvest.² As a matter of fact, throughout many regions of West Africa, people have been celebrating annual festivals dedicated to the new yam, but two British colonial reporters observed a particularly strong connotation of fertility and celebrating a fertility goddess among the Yoruba people of Nigeria.³ For many years, West African women have been commonly eating more yam to boost their fertility.⁴ Interestingly enough, the image of the festival Achebe paints in his novel is that of a celebration of highly masculine behaviour with a traditional wrestling match among two strong young men of the community as a highlight of the festivity.⁵ In another part of the world – the Sepik region of New Guinea – colonial observers of such new yam harvest festivities and anthropologists spoke of a ritual amongst young men, emphasizing a heightened sexual, phallic, and stereotypically masculine connotation.⁶ Among the latter community, rivals in a form of contest would exchange long yam tubers, with the prerequisite

2 Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* [1959], New York, NY: Anchor Books, 1994, pp. 35–38.

3 Donald Gilbert Coursey and Cecilia K. Coursey, *The New Yam Festivals of West Africa*, in: *Anthropos* 66, no. 3/4 (1971), pp. 448–463.

4 Obiwanne Ugwonal, *What's in a yam? Clues to fertility, a student discovers*, in: *Yale School of Medicine* (2021), <https://medicine.yale.edu/news/yale-medicine-magazine/article/whats-in-a-yam-clues-to-fertility-a/> (accessed January 07, 2023). Please note that this essay deals with the bodies of cis-gender women in the past. However, pregnancy and female-bodied procreation do not have to be linked to gender. I made the intentional choice not to explicitly mention the bodies of other genders who can become pregnant as well. This partial silencing of non-female bodies with wombs is meant to reflect the historical reality of the primary sources. No colonial observer or author regarded any genders beyond the binary biological model common during the time of their production.

5 Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, 1994, pp. 46–51.

6 Cf. Coursey and Coursey, *The New Yam Festivals of West Africa*, 1971, p. 455; Donald F. Tuzin, *Yam Symbolism in the Sepik. An Interpretative Account*, in: *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* 28, no. 3 (1972).

that each subsequent root given to the other person had to be longer than the previous one. This ritual's purpose, as described by anthropologists in the 1970s, was material wealth, male pride, and achieving polygyny.⁷ Thus framed, these societies appear more focused on male procreative ability as a form of power rather than on female fertility.

The purpose of focusing on male encounters here and the celebration of general fertility as something determined by vegetables symbolizing the phallus is to contradict other plants that instead symbolize female fertility. By celebrating the phallus, these communities revered the male procreative ability over female fecundity. Within such patriarchal societies, valuing the penis more than any female reproductive organ might not appear as striking, even though only anatomically female bodies can give birth. The history of women's capacity for reproduction has always been entangled with the history of controlling female reproduction. Thus, celebrating the phallus and virility, and thereby heightening the male role in procreation, simply mirrors patriarchal dynamics and embodies just one cultural practice of such a performance.

Neither the cited colonial observers nor Chinua Achebe, however, referred to the yam or the male genitalia it sometimes symbolized as beautiful. Contrarily, compared to the ritualistic signification of the male reproductive organ, overt symbols of female genitalia and reproductive organs find less representation. Nevertheless, the connection between blooms and vulvas, flowers and female reproduction time and time again has been rather strong. Joela Jacobs' contribution to this edited volume exemplifies this dynamic distinctly.⁸ Europeans viewing the flowers and blooms of the geographic locations they colonized carried even more loaded and specific connotations than in the European context. The flora and fauna of the colonial landscape aroused heightened interest from various scholars, such as botanists and anthropologists, who examined the 'exotic' as imperial outsiders at the time. Following the example of botanist Maria Sybilla Merian in

7 Cf. Tuzin, *Yam Symbolism in the Sepik*, pp. 231–232.

8 Cf. Joela Jacobs, "Diese wollustgierenden, blutschänderischen, perversen Geschöpfe". Eine phytopoetische Geschichte von Pflanzen und Sexualität in this volume.

the early eighteenth century, the late art historian Viktoria Schmidt-Linsenhoff described the context of the colonizing gaze focusing on tropical nature as variations of paradise on earth or a type of green hell. Rarely, if ever, were the plants and flowers narrated and interpreted as an indigenously shaped and purposively cultured landscape.⁹ My article focuses on the highly gendered perceptions of certain flowers within the colonial sphere and the ensuing associations of colonial contemporaries as well as the unchanging associations that this past carries into the present day.

Specifically, this essay explores the wider connotations and interpretations of the descriptor 'beautiful' for flowers and plants used for abortifacient, contraceptive, and emmenagogue compounds. For this purpose, I contextualize two colonial settings in which women aborted and prevented pregnancies with the help of flowers in more detail. Common to both contexts is the exploration of a uniquely German colonial gaze, with the analyses being predominantly undertaken by women. Undoubtedly, colonial case studies of abortion present a stark contrast to a festive ritual of virility celebrated through a phallus-shaped vegetable. Focusing on the analysis of abortifacient flowers instead of rituals, such as the exchange of yam tubers, could suggest a rather binary opposition. The objective is to explore the rather outdated and gendered semantics that botanists and anthropologists connected to the interpretations of the beauty of abortifacient and contraceptive flowers.

2. The Meaning of Abortion and Contraception

Whereas the settler colony presented an opportunity for indigenous and colonizing women to exchange plants and knowledge, during the latest period of European colonialism, the Global South saw less of such an

9 Cf. Viktoria Schmidt-Linsenhoff, *Ästhetik der Differenz: Postkoloniale Perspektiven vom 16. bis zum 21. Jahrhundert; 15 Fallstudien*, Weimar: Jonas-Verlag, 2014, p. 157.

exchange.¹⁰ Rather the two primary sources under study here were emphasized as exotically different from the German metropole and mainland. This dynamic completely disregards that abortion and contraception have not solely been common occurrences among colonized people. To European colonists, colonized women needed civilizing measures primarily to control their fertility. Within 'civilized' Europe, women frequently practiced birth control and birth spacing. As I will show here, in the case of tropical flowers used for birth control measures, the colonial gaze increased an aestheticization of difference. Nonetheless, it is first necessary to examine what reproductive choice means in more detail.

For my work, I decided against a strict distinction between abortion and contraception following current biomedical understandings unless indicated otherwise. Here, any form of 'reproductive choice' refers to the action of avoiding offspring as a form of agency by a woman or her community. Historically, the answers to the question which types of 'birth control' constituted abortion have often depended on who responded. The prevailing understanding of abortion nowadays (and during colonial times) is a culturally ingrained concept, which emerged in direct connection to contested ideas about when a fetus is alive in the womb, about contraceptive practices, and means of menstrual regulation. Since antiquity and during the early modern period, women have used medicinal plants with emmenagogue powers, not solely for the purpose of regulating their menses. The writings of ancient Greek and Roman sources, as well as medieval sources such as the writings of Hildegard von Bingen reveal that the removal of early pregnancy from the womb through the ingestion or insertion of medicine was viewed as different than many intrusive techniques of aborting progressed forms of pregnancy.¹¹

10 See Mary Fissell's forthcoming book *Long before Roe: Abortion Histories from Antiquity to Antibiotics* for an example of how indigenous American women and European women settling in North America learnt about different abortifacient and contraceptive plants from each other.

11 Cf. Olivia Campbell, *Abortion Remedies from a Medieval Catholic Nun (!)*, in: *JStor Daily* (October 13, 2021), <https://daily.jstor.org/abortion-remedies-medieval-catholic-nun/?fbclid=IwARoEk5VhHj4YvUMdiuRGANXaijQv3iezTSyskHXfrMZpKinOSZId39zAUGg> (accessed November 09, 2021); Etienne van de

Extending the idea that the conceptual boundaries between contraception and abortion fluctuate to the colonial environment can lead to the conclusion that, arguably, there was even less understanding of abortion and of local ideas about reproductive control among colonial doctors and other agents. Particularly, the reporting of accounts of botched abortions by the standards of colonial medical doctors was extremely rare.¹² Therefore, knowledge of the various practices and what the women in question defined as abortion has frequently remained vague for many reporting voices. The first out of two examples of describing the beauty of an abortifacient flower is a historical source derived from anthropological research on a Pacific island.

3. The Krämers among 'Art-Inclined Cannibals of the South Sea'

During the first two decades of the twentieth century, the married couple Elisabeth Krämer-Bannow and Augustin Krämer undertook many anthropological studies in their travels of the 'South Sea' colonies together. Augustin Krämer was a trained doctor who became an anthropologist.¹³ Together, they produced a book fittingly titled 'With art-inclined cannibals of the South Sea' on the island of then 'Neu-Mecklenburg' (today New Ireland) and its inhabitants.¹⁴ As a colleague to her husband, Krämer-Bannow was one of the very few women who actively participated in the

Walle, *Flowers and Fruits: Two Thousand Years of Menstrual Regulation*, in: *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 28, no. 2 (1997), pp. 183–203.

- 12 One such example can be found in *Medizinal-Berichte über die Deutschen Schutzgebiete. Deutsch-Ostafrika, Kamerun, Togo, Deutsch-Südwestafrika, Neu-Guinea, Karolinen, Marshall-Inseln, Marianen und Samoa für das Jahr 1909/10*, ed. Reichs-Kolonialamt, Berlin: Ernst Siegfried Mittler und Sohn, 1911, p. 256.
- 13 Cf. Sven Mönter, *Dr. Augustin Krämer. A German Ethnologist in the Pacific*, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2021, pp. 1–2, 22, 88–92.
- 14 Elisabeth Krämer-Bannow and Augustin Krämer, *Bei kunstsinnigen Kannibalen der Südsee. Wanderungen auf Neu-Mecklenburg 1908–1909*, Berlin: Verlag Dietrich Reimer, 1916, <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:gbv:46:1-8338>.

field of anthropology. When it came to colonial anthropology of the Pacific region, historian Livia Loosen points out that women accompanying their husbands for research was more common than in the anthropological research of other parts of the world. Loosen argues that 'indigenous' women entrusted female researchers more with restricted female areas of their lives and specifically mentions contraception, birth rites, and menstruation. In that sense, Elisabeth Krämer-Bannow fulfilled an important role for her own and her husband's research.¹⁵ This type of intense female research involvement provides a stark contrast to the male-dominated primary publications on German colonies.

In this book, the Krämers describe achieving abortion and contraception through the means of a medicinal herb more closely. Again, the sometimes blurry lines between contraception and abortion become quite evident in this account. Aside from stating the 'mechanical' method of roughly kneading the lower abdomen as a common and widespread means of causing abortion on the island, anthropologists Krämer and Krämer-Bannow wrote of eight different commonly used abortifacients, which female islanders also used for the 'prevention of fertilization' (*Verhütung der Konzeption*).¹⁶ Technically, the German *Verhütung der Konzeption* in relation to reproductive choice can refer to a technique that both prevents fertilization or removes the already fertilized egg. The Krämers' observation touches on both uses:

Of the beautiful *kuvugúmba* = chlerodendron [sic] with red blooms and velvety leaves, for example, only the blueish-green fruits are used for the purpose of abortion, the smooth leaves serve cleaning the little ones, when they had dirtied themselves. Naturally, I asked Bariu [name of cultural broker] why the women did not wish to have children, but I did not get the proper information, as usual. Many girls, she said then, get these poisonous remedies already during

15 Cf. Livia Loosen, *Deutsche Frauen in den Südsee-Kolonien des Kaiserreichs. Alltag und Beziehungen zur indigenen Bevölkerung, 1884–1919*, Bielefeld: transcript, 2014, pp. 143–145.

16 Krämer-Bannow and Krämer, *Bei kunstsinnigen Kannibalen der Südsee. Wanderungen auf Neu-Mecklenburg 1908–1909, 1916*, pp. 110–113.

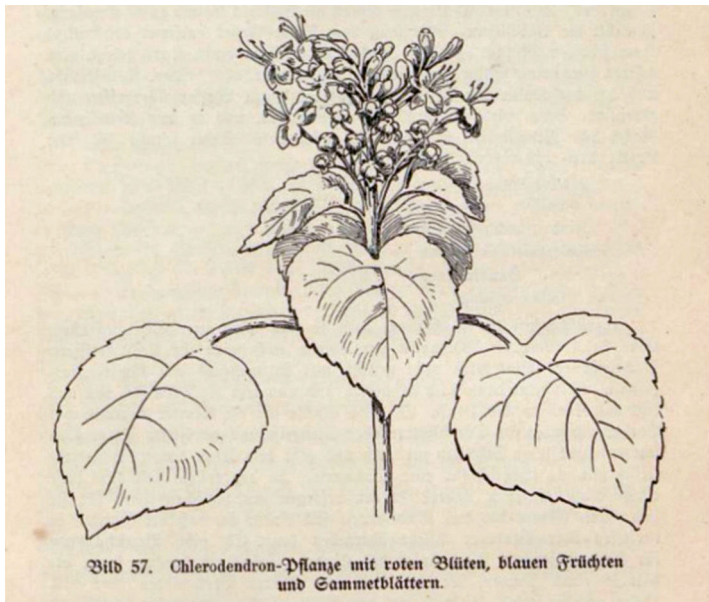
a youthful age preventively, which makes them infertile. Later on, some of them wish to have children, but then it is too late. I asked for the customs of child delivery and thought, due to the little care given, that it is very understandable when the women have no desire for [having] children.¹⁷

The anthropologist couple refrained from mentioning that within the community, there were warnings given on the dangers of infertility through “over-using” the contraceptive powers of the plant. Thus, it is dubious whether the perception of risking infertility was as high as the Krämers described. Here, one of the main interpreted reasons not to have children – the idea that childbirth is an uncomfortable experience – is exacerbated by the treatment given to birthing mothers. Thereby, the Krämers read the decision not to have children as a decision to avoid the assumed terrors of giving births. The Krämers did not solely make this point as an attempt to express sympathy with colonized women experiencing labour pains. They interpreted the local birthing practices of the community as so rough that few had any desire to become new mothers. The description of the chlerodendrum flower provides an opposition: the velvet-like textured leaves sustain babies and toddlers by wiping them clean, whereas local women employed the fruits to end an emerging new life in its earliest tracks of pregnancy. Describing the blooms as beautiful and the leaves as similar to velvet contrasts with the abortifacient and contraceptive compounds of the plant.

17 Ibid., p. 110. Original quotation: “Von den schönen, rotblühenden, sammetblättrigen kuvugúmba = Chlerodendron [sic], werden z. B. nur die blaugrünen Früchte zur Abtreibung benutzt, die samtigen Blätter dienen zum Reinigen der Kleinen, wenn diese sich beschmutzt haben. Natürlich fragte ich Bariu, warum die Frauen keine Kinder wünschten, bekam aber wie üblich keinen rechten Bescheid. Viele Mädchen, hieß es da, bekämen diese giftigen Mittel schon im jugendlichen Alter gleichsam vorwirkend beigebracht, wodurch sie unfruchtbar würden. Später wünschten sie dann zuweilen Kinder, aber dann sei es zu spät. Ich fragte nach den Gebräuchen bei der Entbindung und fand da so wenig Schonung waltend, daß es wohl zu verstehen ist, wenn die Frauen keinen Wunsch nach Kindern hegen.” [Translation is mine, A. O.]

The Krämers' claims about abortion and contraception on the colonized island were a second-hand account. Despite this limitation, the account as a case study offers a rather unique insight: Elisabeth Krämer-Bannow went so far as to add a drawing of the most widely used abortifacient to the anthropological research.

Figure 1: Drawing by Elisabeth Krämer-Bannow



Krämer-Bannow and Krämer, *Bei kunstsinnigen Kannibalen der Südsee. Wanderungen auf Neu-Mecklenburg 1908–1909*, Berlin: Verlag Dietrich Reimer, 1916, <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:gbv:46:1-8338>, p. 111.

The Krämers described the chlerodendrum plant and its use as an abortifacient with a heightened specificity that is unusual for an anthropological, non-botanical publication. Singling out one plant and describing its use as a contraceptive and an abortifacient more closely

rather than mentioning a multitude of ‘medicinal’ options, allows for a varied and detailed analysis. The example allows us to look at the reproductive agency of women in another way, as it adds a material dimension to researching the relevant abortifacients and contraceptives. By clearly naming the botanical information of the herb, this knowledge became available to other scientists, such as German colonial botanists and toxicologists. Additionally, the description of the *chlerodendrum* and its use by women and young girls on the island draws our attention back to the fluidity between abortifacient and contraceptive, that was in stark contrast to the biomedical differentiation between the two concepts.

When examining the description of the Melanesian *chlerodendrum*, one can recognize the material dimension Krämer-Bannow’s drawing added to the research of colonial reproduction. Unlike her husband, she connected a drawing of the flower to the study; thus adding a proof of the flower’s beauty.

4. Maria Sibylla Merian’s Reproduction of the Peacock Flower in Current Historical Writing

The fact that Elisabeth Krämer-Bannow made that drawing and her reporting on its use is somewhat reminiscent of how German botanist and artist Maria Sibylla Merian reflected on the peacock flower in the Caribbean during the turn of the seventeenth century:

Figure 2: “Plate 45” by Maria Sibylla Merian



Maria Sibylla Merian, *Metamorphosis Insectorum Surinamensium*, Plate XLV (1705), https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/c/c9/Merian-grafic-senkenberg_hg.jpg (accessed February 24, 2024).

Instead of using another historical source, I now turn to historian Londa Schiebinger's analysis.¹⁸ In doing so, I appreciate Schiebinger's

18 Cf. Londa Schiebinger, *Plants and Empire. Colonial Bioprospecting in the Atlantic World*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2004, pp. 31–34 and pp. 107–113.

description of the peacock flower itself as beautiful, instead of specifically describing Merian's drawing as being independently beautiful. Thus, Schiebinger's renarration of a flower's reproduction serves as the second example of accentuating an abortifacient and contraceptive flower as beautiful on a metalevel. Therefore, in this analysis, Merian's contributions as a botanist are considered more significant than her artistic achievements. The merit of comparing the drawings of two abortifacient and contraceptive plants from two different parts of the world lies not merely in contrasting two distinct eras of European colonialism. In addition, the similarity of the drawings provides an opportunity to compare colonial anthropology with colonial botany. In *Plants and Empire*, Schiebinger describes how European scientists mapped the newly colonized lands of Latin America as well as the flora and fauna encountered there. Furthermore, Schiebinger highlights the importance of 18th-century female scientists' work for colonial gender history.¹⁹ Although Schiebinger frames her botanical and colonial narrative as a historical study, she admires the beauty of the peacock flower as follows:

I lavish attention on this plant not because it is exquisitely beautiful and grows in stunningly inviting places, but because a number of naturalists independently identified it as an abortifacient widely used in the West Indies. [...] The flaming reds and yellows of this elegant flower, sometimes also called Barbados Pride or the Red Bird of Paradise, made it a favorite among Europeans.²⁰

Again, the elegance, the lavish beauty, and the vibrant colours Schiebinger describes as characteristics of the peacock flower stand in apparent opposition to its abortifacient use.

Using solely the example of one herbal abortifacient, namely the peacock flower, Schiebinger details the effect of the flower on the human body, how enslaved people used the herb to terminate pregnancies, and how female and male European scientists reflected on

19 Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 31–34, 107–113.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 4.

their observations of these abortions in different ways. Unlike her male counterparts, German botanist Merian saw the efforts of Surinamese women to abort pregnancies as a form of political resistance against colonialism. Contrarily, many other scientists and European doctors equated abortion, infanticide, and other similar efforts as proof of the brutality and inhumanity of the 'indigenous people'.²¹ By comparison, about two centuries later, Elisabeth Krämer-Bannow did not express the potential for abortion constituting a form of colonial resistance or refusal to bring new colonized life into the world. Rather, the Krämers' book suggests that reasons for avoiding births were entirely intrinsic to the culture of the island people they encountered and stood in no relation to the outside world.²² Theirs and similar reports informed other participants of the German colonizing project, whether academically or otherwise interested in the European colonies, about abortion and contraception practices.

The gynecologist and anthropologist Herrmann Ploss published his extensive findings on the female sex in one sizable book in 1899. He covered a vast number of topics all concerning female physicality and psychology, and what he coined as typical behaviorisms and characteristics. Among other subjects, he also investigated the subject of abortion. To him, the termination of pregnancies was common practice across women in civilized societies and even more numerous among 'indigenous people'.²³ This German interpretation, by extension, assumed that other colonial powers likely faced similar concerns. The colonial encyclopedia of former colonial governor Heinrich Schnee of 1920, similarly stated that all 'native' peoples all over the world knew and practiced "[...] abortion of the fruit of the womb [...]".²⁴ Given the aim of

21 Cf. Schiebinger, *Plants and Empire*, pp. 31–34, 107–113.

22 Krämer-Bannow and Krämer, *Bei kunstsinnigen Kannibalen der Südsee. Wanderungen auf Neu-Mecklenburg 1908–1909*, 1916, pp. 110–111.

23 Hermann Heinrich Ploss, *Das Weib in der Natur- und Völkerkunde*. 1. Band, ed. Max Bartels, Leipzig: Th. Grieben (L. Fernau), 1899, pp. 743–749.

24 *Abtreibung der Leibesfrucht*, in: *Deutsches Koloniallexikon*. I. Band A–G, ed. Heinrich Schnee, Leipzig: Quelle & Meyer, 1920, pp. 6–7.

Schnee's publication, this entry explicitly described the territories under prior German control. The encyclopedia merely claimed the ubiquitous occurrence of abortion and equated it to infanticide to some degree. It did not suggest solutions or even argue for colonial interventions to stop these practices. Neither Schnee's encyclopedia nor Ploss specified any examples nor differences between societies throughout the world, which raises the question of how German colonizers concluded that abortion was widespread in 'their' colonies. Likewise, the Krämers' publication was anything but a case of isolated reporting within the colonies Germany occupied in the Pacific. Thus, even before Germany besieged and colonized or Maria Sybilla Merian set foot in the Dutch colony, the agreed-upon territories, the German researcher, missionary, or colonial agent expected to encounter measures of reproductive choice, regardless of whether a beautiful flower or a more mechanically induced measure became the vehicle of that desire.

The beautiful flower on its own became another object in colonialism. More often than not, the peripheral colonial landscape changed as a result of European involvement. Plantations and monocultures emerged, and general interest in plants mainly revolved around the economic gain derived from them for the colonial project. Undoubtedly, the colonized women's fertility and reproduction showed a parallel to this.²⁵ The individual flower as a *corpus delicti* for hindering the female body from procreating stood out and gathered unique anthropological interest. The untamed plant and its effect on the female womb presented another aspect of colonial extraction: not capitalistic gain but grasping the colonial for the purpose of knowledge and (sometimes) more efficiency in civilizing efforts.

One arising argument in studying this material is that the various descriptors used to express the beauty of these flowers have never been

25 See, for example: Roberta Biasillo and Claiton Marcio da Silva, *Cultivating Arid Soils in Libya and Brazil during World War Two: The Two-fold War between Colonial and Neo-Colonial Experiences*, in: *Global Environment* 12, no. 1 (2019), p. 38; Mackenzie Luke, *Sowing the Seeds of an Invisible Presence in Barbados*, in: *The Funambulist. Politics of Space and Bodies* 51 (January–February 2024), pp. 6–9.

neutral. Its use generally refers to an act of great intensity – abortion or the avoidance of offspring through contraception – and the highlighting of beauty is framed as a contradiction not as unrelated to the contraceptive and abortifacient qualities of the plants. It is almost as if the extreme nature of the act of abortion becomes more extreme because the plant medicine used happened to be beautiful. Conceptually, beauty yields reproduction, an artistic copy.²⁶ Merian's entire purpose of travelling to Surinam was to capture plants and insects on paper to pursue her venture from self-taught artist to self-taught botanist. Contrastingly, Krämer-Bannow's decision to replicate the beauty of the chlerodendrum flower could not have been planned prior to the anthropologist couple's departure to the German colony.

While the act of 'birth control' has never been not political within nation or colonial states that demand a reproductive mandate from female wombs, beauty in itself holds other forms of political criticism. One, by drawing attention to the beauty of something, there is the risk of distracting from its wider societal implications, and two, through the perception and reference of the beautiful object we already and partially sabotage it by connecting it to our own interpretations.²⁷ For the second argument, the reproduction of Krämer-Bannow and Merian in the form of a drawing and a botanical painting certainly carries a destructive element. By default, their own interpretation of the flower reduced it. When it comes to the first political critique, I argue, however, that the emphasis on the beauty of the two abortifacient flowers did not so much distract from their use as birth control measures but accentuated a contradiction: the supposed horrors of abortion against the splendid allure of flowers. The plants maintained their innocent and untouchable beauty until women put the fruits of these flowers to radical use as abortifacients. At its very essence, the existence of the abortifacient flower shakes the very core of the binary philosophical concept that associates the beautiful with the female and the sublime with the male.

26 Cf. Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just*, Princeton, NJ: ⁵Princeton UP, 2001, p. 9.

27 Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just*, p. 63.

In *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* (1764), Immanuel Kant connected the so-called 'Sublime' with male attributes and the 'Beautiful' with female ones.²⁸ Pre-dating Merian's travels to Surinam, this semiotics continued to have a long shelf-life well into the twentieth century. For instance, in 1989, Terry Eagleton wrote:

Aesthetics was born as a woman – as an idiom of the body to supplement and modify an austere male discourse of the mind. [...] The sublime is on the side of enterprise, rivalry and individuation: it is a phallic 'swelling' arising from our confrontation of danger [...] The sublime is the anti-social condition of all sociality, the infinitely unrepresentable which spurs us on to finer representations, the lawless masculine force which violates yet perpetually renews the feminine enclosure of beauty.²⁹

It would be beyond the scope of this essay to detail in full how Kant and Eagleton argued the beautiful to be inherently female or feminine, but we can see clearly how Eagleton subscribes to this outdated binary that equates the male to an explorer and an adventurer. The other side of the coin – the female and beautiful – thus had a different biological and societal programming. The colonial project emphasized the need of civilizing measures according to ideals that divided roles between male and female.

In the context of demographic mandates, whose burden has been falling disproportionately more on female-bodied shoulders than on men, the nation state was hardly different from the colonial state. In Europe, revered femininity in an idealized bourgeois sense encompassed a woman to be a source of solace for her husband, as he had to face the disintegrating influences of public life, commerce, and politics. Her

28 Immanuel Kant, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* (1764), in: *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime and Other Writings*, ed. Patrick Frierson and Paul Guyer, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2011, pp. 11–29.

29 Terry Eagleton, *Aesthetics and Politics in Edmund Burke*, in: *History Workshop Journal* 28 (1989), p. 53 and p. 57.

confines of the home, in which she consistently reproduced humanity within the nuclear family, cohesion, and peace, embodied a unique creating power that culminated in the consistent reproduction of new life.³⁰ This type of paternalistic colonial natalism denied that even the European homeland assumed a bourgeois idealism that remained far away from working-class realities. As mentioned above, when it came to the colonies, it was assumed that ‘uncivilized women’ merely had a greater propensity for abortion, but only in comparison to bourgeois classes, whereas studies show that abortion and contraception were rather common phenomena among proletarian women during the German colonial era.³¹ Therefore, I argue that calling the flowers ‘beautiful’ became a tool working against a prescribed or predetermined female role.

5. Concluding Thoughts

The emphasis on the beauty of the abortifacient flowers can be read as a contradiction but also as an expression of the ‘primitive’ desire to free the traditionalized female role. In the latter sense, the flower becomes particularly beautiful because of what it potentially promised for German women at the time: a narrative of freedom and liberty from the traditional mother role. Not only did Judeo-Christian religions expect women to be idealized mothers, but also the German nation-state expected women to give birth to the whole nation and, simultaneously, disappear from public life behind a stove. Still, in the present day, the notion of abortion has never been viewed as neutral. Access and rights to true

30 Cf. Joan Wallach Scott, *Sex & Secularism*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2018, pp. 83–88.

31 Cf. Ploss, *Das Weib in der Natur- und Völkerkunde*, 1899, pp. 743–749; Max Marcuse, *Zur Frage der Verbreitung und Methodik der willkürlichen Geburtenbeschränkung in Berliner Proletarierkreisen*, in: *Sexual-Probleme* 9 (November 1914), FFBIZ-Archiv | Berlin, no. A Rep 400 BRD 14.3.15 (Geschichte im Kaiserreich).

reproductive choice have constantly been under threat. Present-day historians, such as Londa Schiebinger, cannot ignore that abortion rights are either phrased on radically opposite ends of a spectrum that hardly knows a middle ground between positive and negative. For either side of the spectrum, the contradiction of naming the plant beautiful possibly accentuates the relation to the abortive act itself or even defends it. In addition, there is also the fact that we have always been inclined to find flowers beautiful, regardless of their potential medicinal compounds. Rarely, if ever, has an author gone as far as to say that abortion in itself can be viewed as beautiful, as it can give birth to another female reality, unbothered by expectations that are placed on women to maintain a beauty chosen by societal circumstances.

The excerpt of the introductory poem by Nizār Qabbānī summarizes one man's appeal to a woman he desires to be normal in more than one sense: a normal amount of beauty combined with what he views to be typical for women: a feminine appearance accentuated by perfume and eyeliner, as well as being pregnant and giving birth. Qabbānī expressed that any deviation from these norms unsettled him, the one desiring the subject of this poem. At home and in the colonies, many Germans similarly had predetermined ideals of what women should do, focusing on their roles of adorning themselves as beautiful beings and reproducing offspring and the home. Flowers that were not used for purposes other than marvelling at their beauty or enhancing, then, present a paradoxical juxtaposition. Interestingly enough, those in support of reproductive choice can also express this rather binary juxtaposition of a beautiful abortifacient flower as opposed to an ascribed beauty of the feminine role.

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