



Erna Brodber and Michelle Cliff As A Post Colonial Writer

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Among the women writers of the Caribbean, the name of Erna Brodber appeared with the publication of her first novel, *Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home*. With it, Miss Brodber occupies a strategic position in the emerging tradition of women prose writers. In it, the balance between artful tale and crafted telling is tipped in favour of the telling. Brodber's narrative is as much about the felt shapes of the people, the configurations of their language and the rich texture of their place, as these are received into her young heroine, Nellie. Rather than the subject embedded in setting, the two are made to coalesce by the author's particular choice of narrative mode.

The places and times, moods and events are the remembering of Nellie. The story of her progress through experience is the detailed account of how, from her re-visioning of her ancestors, she discovers, or begins to discover, her own integrity, or, as her Aunt Alice puts it, how to 'do her part'. It is from the rehearsing of their experiences [revitalized in her recalling in such a way that the choice, and shape of the language of memory, is itself the revivification] that Nellie becomes able to discover and assert herself. By this process of exhuming the being, wit and wisdom of her people, Nellie learns to operate as Anancy counsels Tacoma to do:

"Don't follow no firefly boy. Look inside of yourself and row. Them will los' you. Them will put you out of your way When you find out where you want to go, you watch for them other one what going there and you use their light."

The telling catalogues synchronic time no less adeptly. The reference of 'they' and 'them' are pointedly ambiguous. The dialectic continues as Nellie presses on to her experience, in the enigmatic 'To Waltz with You', of life in a government yard [which tenants must pay 25 cents to leave] as a member of a zealous political group. Their activities offer Nellie little solace after –

"the night [her] young man got caught up in the spirit and burnt to grease like beef suet caught in a dutchie pot."

These events accumulate in an eclectic fashion. It is in symbolic rather than chronological order. Evelyn O'Callaghan finds the development of the novel as a sort of analogue of the psychic progress from fragmentation through reconstruction to a tentative wholeness. The entire first section of the novel, the early experiences and conversations from the heroine's childhood represent the personality in its state of disintegration. It serves as a case study of the dissociative personality of the novel. Later on, these bits and pieces are explained and developed as the healing process of reconstruction getting underway. Finally, as the personality attains coherence, the fragments of the part come together and eventually, in O'Callaghan's interruption –



“In one of the episodes of the novel, ‘The Moving Camera’, the film is allowed to run smoothly, unedited recounting the family history that has produced Nellie. This is the final state of reintegration.”

No doubt, the reader is tempted to question the idea of coherent personality. The novelist’s purpose is to seek an increasing relatedness between things. This coherence can be seen as a product of the growing affirmation of her origins and personal history as Nellie touches them again and again with diminishing reluctance, in her memory. Out of Nellie’s memory and unconscious, historical and psychic events are summoned so that they may be, gradually, accepted and assented to. Sometimes, as with the series of events signified by the trail of the snail – and the related image of the slimy yam her father feeds Nellie [in Section 4 of “Still Life”] – the arbitrary manner of the remembering affects its own catharsis: the subconscious wrestles with its own symbols and resolves them by its own methods.

The novelist’s use of language in the novel is also a significant part of perception. Brodber ranges through the overlapping system of dialects from Creole to ‘standard’ English, deploying them at will, code-sliding and code-switching through registers and formal and informal linguistic devices with a kind of abandon that seems, increasingly, a special talent of the women writers in the region.

The snail [in its crudest and narrowest significance, a symbol of the male sexual member] is determined to get into Nellie’s kumbla. Sequentially, in the last section of the tale, it does. But, precisely, Nellie’s mother has also run from the snail. So, from generation to generation, the fecundity in woman, her promise of sexual as well as personal fullness, has not been accommodated by the community. Successive communities that Nellie has encountered have defined what it is to be a woman in the narrowest terms, as by ‘achieving’ sexual contract with a man –

“You want to be a woman, now you have a man, you’ll be like everybody else. You’re normal now! Vomit and bear it.” [28]

But, Nellie knows there is something basically wrong with this. Somehow, the accommodation of this snail is related to her release into enjoying the completeness of herself. Somehow, it has to do with equipping her to deal honestly with whatever is to sustain her being, for –

“Cane don’t sweet in false teeth brother. Can’t you salt those snails so that I can face you, so I can chew my bounty with my own teeth thirty two times as I know I should.”

The settling in is for Nellie a way out of her kumbla. Nancy, in his, leads Nellie out of hers. This duplicity about the snail / kumbla image obtains almost every time it is used. Nellie tries hard to push her relationship to Baba in the direction of the man-woman contact she has shared with Robin, her dead lover. When Baba will not succumb, she describes his reluctance:

“And like a snail he would curl up into himself. A little bit of sweat but no tears and a snail’s sweat can hardly even erase a common i “



The snail is at once the rawest sexuality. Here, there is a reticent disavowal of it for the sake of a larger kind of contact. Baba tells her,

“that sex will come later, after I have met you.”

Towards the end of the novel, Nellie explains –

“The trouble with the kumbla is getting out of the kumbla. It is a protective device. If you dwell too long in it, it makes you delicate. Makes you an “albino” skin white but not by genes. Vision extra-sensitive to the sun and blurred without spectacles.”

The individual in and through the community, and the community itself, must find out and assent to their identities. To shy away from these, however, puzzling or ugly or potentially dangerous they are, is a route to a kind of self-preservation, but hardly one worth having. In the meeting of community and the assertion of its language, nationality, culture and traditions is the promise of personal self-realization, at once release from the kumbla and the happy accommodation of the snail inside it.

Though Brodber never directly addresses issues of power and colonization, the whole novel is a potent metaphor of reawakening and healing of postcolonial wounds that are still affecting both the bodies and the minds of Jamaicans. *Myal* is set in an unspecific, post-slavery, and pre-independence time when free, black Jamaicans were living side by side with white British. In such a context, the colonizing presence acts no longer through the violence of slavery, but by exerting a subtle leverage on the population, mainly at the level of spirit / mind, through either Christian religion or the imposition of negative representations that shape black people’s individual and collective self-consciousness.

The novel is in fact a celebration of cultural hybridity as a means to question the essentialist representations of the Caribbean. As a sociologist, Brodber is extremely aware of the complicity between cultural productions and colonization. Through Ella, she gives voice to awareness on those images of the noble savage, the construction of Caribbean identities. An instance of that in the novel is the children’s story dealing with a bunch of farm animals whose effort to escape from men’s control to go back to the wild ends miserably as they realize that they cannot survive outside of the domestic, safe [although claustrophobic] environment created for them. Having now recovered from *zombification*, Ella is able to see what is behind that apparently innocent story: its author has deprived the characters of their possibilities, inferring that their natural condition is to belong to someone else, justifying in this way their captivity and co-opting them into silence.

Cliff has not returned to Jamaica since 1975, believing that there she might not have been able to write. Years earlier, like *Abeng*’s adolescent protagonist Clare Savage, Cliff was moved by Anne Frank’s diary to begin her own. But her parents’ humiliating exposure of her diary stopped young Cliff from personal and creative writing for many years. This silence was finally broken in 1978, when she wrote *Notes on Speechlessness* for a New York woman’s writing group. About this, Cliff states that Frank gave me permission to write and to use writing as a way of survival. Moreover, she credits feminism for supporting her choice to become a writer – not at all encouraged in the world in which she grew up. She also foregrounds women’s



lives and their resistance to interacting oppressions of class, race, gender and sexual orientation.

In 1978, Cliff published *Notes on Speechlessness* in *Sinister Wisdom*, a feminist journal of lesbian culture. In the same year, she edited *The Winner Names the Age: A Collection of Writings by Lillian Smith*, a white, southern social reformer and writer whose issues parallel Cliff's own – the power of language, the political responsibility of the creative person, the symbol-making possibilities of the mythic mind and requirement of diversity. Her first collection of prose poetry, *Claiming an Identity They Taught Me to Despise* affirms her title claim to be a whole person. In 1980-81, Cliff took teaching positions at Hampshire College and the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. From 1980 to 1989, she served on the editorial board of *Signs: A Journal of Women in Culture and Society*. From 1981 to 1983, she edited and copublished *Sinister Wisdom* with Adrienne Rich. The opportunity to spend six weeks of uninterrupted writing came with a Mac-Dowell Fellowship in 1982. At the MacDowell Colony, Cliff produced much of her first novel, *Abeng*.

No doubt, the life and work of Michelle Cliff resist categorization – by nation, race, gender, history, class or genre. The question of identity, liminality and national struggle is examined in the fiction of Cliff. Clare Savage is a light-skinned, mixed-race woman who appears in both *Abeng* and *No Telephone to Heaven*. Stylistically, the novel, *Abeng* is a fairly linear narrative that follows the young Clare as she grows to adolescence in Jamaica. A parallel narrative running through the first section of the novel retells the history of colonialism and enslavement on the sugar plantation Runaway Bay, now a housing development called Paradise Plantation. This narrative also recovers the resistance story of Grandy [Granny] Nanny and the Maroon community, whose guerrilla warfare tactics the novel calls a contributing factor in the 1834 emancipation and whose story reappears in *No Telephone to Heaven*.

By avoiding the conflation of mother, nation and self, Clare is able to select the elements of this triangulation that are useful and meaningful for her and to dismiss the rest. In doing so, Clare descends from literary maternal figures who have observed that while women, especially as mothers, signify the nation, nationalist projects often dismiss the needs of women and mothers. These give burden to women with maintaining racial purity and in so doing also justify sanctioned controls on female sexuality. In this context, women novelists find the vexed social construction of maternity alongside and through the personal relationships between mothers and daughters. In her study of four women novelists, Judith Raitskin observes the trend that—

“The main characters of each of the novels experience the painful loss both their dreams of acceptance by the ‘mother country’, England, and of their own mothers, who are either dead when the novels open or die, deserting their daughters when they need them most. That the daughters’ political disillusionment, alienation, and loneliness are figured by this very personal and irreparable loss highlights the gap between the symbology of the national ‘family’ and the lived experiences of these women.” [Raitskin: 1996: 7-8]

Clare's death is signaled when “Shots found the bitterbush”; the shooter, the target, and even the one who betrayed the group remain unknown, suggesting the arbitrariness and anonymity of this violence [208]. The ending of Cliff's novel



reminds the reader that the collusion of representative and physical violence enables colonialism. The violence of erasing people from history and distorting narrative is – “backed up by the planned institutional violence of armies and law courts, prisons and state machinery.” [McClintock: 1995: 16]

The return to the motherland serves, at one level, as a surrogate for Kitty and represents a significant ‘bonding ritual’ and political gesture with her maternal line. On the other level, the return also initiates a series of disappointments and rejections signalizes opposite to an ideal locale to reestablish the maternal bond, the locale actually registers all of ambiguities and complications that already existed in the maternal relationship.

Moreover, the imagery of the womb and the grave align in Clare’s death verifies the lack of procreation and maternal legacy parallel actual and political fatality in the novel. The ruinate of the grandmother’s estate, as well as the relics under the house, show how the fertility of the island is compromised by too much growth. The novel creates a life-cycle that moves from womb to ruination to death. This cycle returns on itself over and over so that these three stages become indistinguishable from one another. Cliff shows how Kitty and Clare advance an activism embodied by these earlier figures, but their failures suggest that this model of resistance is no longer entirely viable. Mass media and global capitalism render Marronage-like tactics fruitless. Ultimately, *No Telephone to Heaven* is a lament for histories lost and a call to create more meaningful modes of resistance that do not just copy the past, but honor it by adapting to the contemporary world.

In brief, in critical responses to *Abeng* and *No Telephone to Heaven*, there is a tendency to merge Cliff and Clare, and certainly there are many autobiographical connections between the novelist and her characters. Moreover, it is the tendency to internalize Clare’s perspective, the effect of which is that Clare is often posited as an ideal, nuanced subject. Thus, Cliff’s novel reminds the reader of the dangers of idealizing maternity as a site of power and invites to consider other modes of feminist recovery. This represents a mode of political and social action that is both old and new again.

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