

POSTCOLONIAL METAMORPHOSES OF MATERNITY IN CONTEMPORARY CARIBBEAN BRITISH POETRY

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Abstract: Caribbean literature is said to be replete with metaphors of motherhood: dead women ancestors, haunting the contemporary postcolonial writing, and a host of black women, mulattas and white women, who represent sources of self-identification or the muses and the abuses existing in the shadow of the literary text. Apart from the excessive tone of such representations, there is an insistence on what cultural critic Stuart Hall considered as “metaphors of transformation,” in which the tenor is the idea of transformation itself and which is meant to instrument otherness as a means of cultural production. Drawing on the work of several authors of Caribbean origin, on psychoanalytical theory focused on the mother/child relationship and on contemporary cultural criticism of diaspora, ethnicity and transnationality, this essay demonstrates that the concept of maternity has been rethought, so that queer and father nature can be regarded as fertile as mother nature.

In 1951, when Donald Winnicott formulates his hypothesis of the transitional objects and phenomena, he elaborates it mainly for the domain of psychoanalysis and in connection with the mother/child relation in particular. He also considers it to be the basis of science, religion and culture. Originally, he interprets transition as an intermediate developmental phase between an infant’s psyche and outer reality. In what follows, it will be argued that this approach to the mother/child relationship can contribute to the exploration of postcolonial poetry in more depth, by allowing for *the literary text as a transitional object*.¹ The association between Winnicott’s theory and the transnational cultural perspectives of the past three decades in the Western world casts a new light on the representations of the (m)other metaphors in contemporary Caribbean British poetry and reveals significant metamorphoses from a personalized, racialized, territorialized, national, colonial identity to performative identities, specific to contemporary highly hybrid cultures, such as the British or the Caribbean. In 1967, Winnicott broadened his theory by extending the Lacanian “mirror stage” and cogently affirming “the precursor of the mirror is the mother’s face” (149). Although he admits culture is not a concept he is mainly concerned with, his view puts forward a humanistic understanding of what Homi K. Bhabha (1994) defines as “the third space of enunciation [...] that carries the burden of

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¹ Previous similar approaches were explored by Peter L. Rudnytsky (1993).

the meaning of culture” (38), because it allows to associate the burden of cultural hybridity with maternity and the prospect of fertility, parenting and growth.

In the ancient cultures of the Latin and Greek worlds, hybridity always involved hubris, a component specific to any creative performance, any attempt to transcend the boundaries of a paradise lost. How can artists find, like Daedalus, a way of escaping their own labyrinth, the anxiety of their own creation? Winnicott’s theory of transitional objects makes sense in the context of creativity, because they act as a “defence against anxiety” (5). In a psychoanalytical frame, the literary text as a transitional object bears the memory of an original chaos, similar to the prelinguistic stages of a child’s psychological development and to the stages of identity reconfiguration, in the case of migrant subjects. It deals with sources of tension, such as the uncertain status of man in society. It is meant to question binaries and to recreate bonds between separated family members, immigrants and their home countries, home culture and host culture. In this case, the writer’s role is to articulate untold episodes, in order to release endless nostalgia, regrets, anger, nightmares, misconceptions, loss of faith and memory, to turn them into sources of enthusiasm and to propose reliable technologies of the self that can absorb them.

As the mother/child rapport differs from case to case, the relationship with the mother country manifests itself in various ways, but when the idea of mother country becomes (multiply) split, things complicate further. With the metaphor of the mother/child rapport in mind, what seems to be tense opposition to the Other becomes rather a whole range of repositionings, the fruit of both affirmation and adaptation to each other. The realm of pregnancy associated with the burden of hybridity may explain what Stuart Hall (1993) observed about critical theory in the second half of the twentieth century, that it has known a shift made evident by what he calls “metaphors of transformation,” which allow us to imagine how old values are challenged and consumed, while new values take shape and “provide ways of thinking about the relation between the social and symbolic domains in this process of transformation” (287). In this way, Hall implies that the tenor of the metaphorical expression is transformation itself, a myth of rebirth struggling in the belly of the social self. Indeed, as Kalra, Kaur and Hutnyk (2005) remark, the relationship between diaspora and ethnicity has become more disruptive within the body of culture, because ethnicity used to suggest a smaller version of a nation-state, while diaspora has become multi-locational, making home and abroad interact. In 1989, Hall argued in favour of “a non-coercive and a more diverse conception of ethnicity,” a shift that sustains “a positive conception of the ethnicity of the margins, of the periphery” (202), defined by the awareness of other ethnicities existing in the same place due to various diasporas. Hall (1990) defines diaspora “not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of ‘identity’ which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by hybridity” (438).

In these conditions, the migrant from one country to another is like a child with two or more motherlands, because each location may contribute to the evolution of human nature, even though the country of origin is only one. Hence the need for multiple spiritual departures from the maternal symbolic bodies, of multiple Freudian *fort/da*

games at the level of the symbolic². Of course, a homeland can be conceived as fatherland or from a queer perspective, in the context of other cultures and situations and according to the history of national symbols, language and other factors³. Contemporary Caribbean British poetry, however, dwells upon the maternal figure of the former colonies as a source of power and belonging, while the father figure is conceived as absence.⁴ Even in great works such as *Omeros* by Derek Walcott, *Turner* by David Dabydeen or *Bill of Rights* by Fred D'Aguiar, the father figure is often depicted as an estranged, troubled and difficult character, a combination between a failing trickster, an already dead hero and a successful scapegoat, who produces power *through* absence and doubt.

After the immigration wave of the 1950s, the imperial “maternal function”⁵ of Britannia has been more and more contested by the Caribbean poets on the background of a transnational discourse, later theorized by authors such as Paul Gilroy in *The Black Atlantic* (1993) and constructed beyond the binary opposition nation/diaspora. Therefore, after an initial stage, in which the symbolic Britannia has often been replaced by the black voiceless and invisible mothers of the Caribbean or the Middle Passage, otherness has been tamed into a mother/child relationship, based on autobiographical matters, in which the offspring usually empowers (grand)mother figures, endowing them with mythical aura. In addition, mainly under the influence of African cultures, otherness has been turned into a creative relationship involving natural forces, evoked to the purpose of mothering a postmodern self, in which queer and father nature have become relatively synonymous to mother nature.

In the 1980s, Caribbean British poets, both men and women, formed a chorus on the issue of the Caribbean black mother’s voicelessness, trying in various ways to depict

² Drawing on Homi K. Bhabha’s use of the term *fort/da*, Susan Stanford Friedman (1998) makes a similar association when she substitutes “an intercultural *fort/da* for the psychoanalytic game” with the purpose of “shifting the grounds of encounter from the mother/child dyad of the son’s desire – a kind of ethnography of the dwelling – to a more broadly conceived intercultural encounter in which both ‘sides’ negotiate the borders between difference, however equal or unequal the power relations between them” (155).

³ For instance, Germany or Ukraine are often referred to as fatherlands, while France, Spain, Russia or Italy are referred to using both genders. China is usually referred to as “the land of our ancestors,” no gender reference attached. Although such names seem synonymous, they may carry different psycho-cultural meanings.

⁴ This assumption is supported by sociological studies, such as that edited by Rhoda E. Reddock (2004), in which she identified an “unnatural matrifocality” (xvii) and an “abnormal centrality of mothers and absence of fathers” (xviii).

⁵ The notion of the “maternal function” was developed by Julia Kristeva in *Desire in Language* (1980) and *Tales of Love* (1987), following the work of Melanie Klein. In short, the “maternal function” consists in the acts of identification and negation prior to the subject’s entrance into language and culture. I argue that Caribbean poets performed the “maternal function” before Caribbean poetry was integrated in the literary canon. The latter would be an expression of the “paternal function.” Simultaneously, a queer function has been at work and secured their bond and continuity.

her existence as a synecdoche of the lifestyle in the region during the post-independence period. As Guyanese poet Fred D'Aguiar (1985) formulated it, “she may hold silence for another millennium.” By associating the (grand)mother figure with mother country, immigrant poets have addressed issues regarding their personal experience and the transnational Caribbean community they belong to. In her debut volume, *I Is A Long Memored Woman* (1983), Guyanese poet Grace Nichols defines black womanhood from a historical point of view, by constructing an image based on memory as a verb in past participle, an epithet that underlines the latent potentiality of “her story” in contrast with the white man’s history. The opening poem, “From One Continent / To Another,” written in third person singular, evokes the experience of pregnancy as essentially feminine, which is not always a sufficient condition for women to cope with “the new world.” The poet identifies the long memored woman’s mother with abstract configurations rooted in transatlantic individual history:

Child of the middle passage womb
 push
 daughter of a vengeful Chi
 she came into the new world
 birth aching her pain
 from one continent / to another
 moaning
 her belly cry sounding the wind
 after fifty years
 she hasn’t forgotten
 hasn’t forgotten
 how she had lain there
 in her own blood
 lain there in her own shit
 bleeding memories in the darkness [...]

The poem maps a double consciousness *avant la lettre* and connects memory and body. The time reference of the fragment hints at the biography of a contemporary woman living in diaspora and simultaneously projects the main character in a double temporality: mythical and historical. After evoking further elements of African history, Nichols concludes: “bondage / would not fall like poultice from the / children’s forehead,” and continues to expand her character’s destiny over a few centuries, compressed in metaphors and lines so cut that they transmit inherent disconcerting interruptions: “Like the yesterday of creation morning / she had imagined this new world to be – / bereft of fecundity.” Although she speaks an incomprehensible dialect, specific to a Kantian “raw man” – therefore is unable to voice her own experience in the oppressor’s language – she is still destined to become a mother, “piecing the life she would lead.” The poet reassesses the importance of the “maternal function,” in order to transform this most productive role during the slavery system in a type of discourse that empowers black women nowadays.

If Nichols usually creates positive, fertile and powerful feminine figures, especially in her next two volumes, in which she builds characters that challenge two of the most circulated stereotypes (black women as being fat and lazy), other Caribbean British poets feel the reality in their home countries regarding black women's life should be depicted as it is. They reject mythologization. One example is a fragment from "Roots, Roots" by E. A. Markham from Montserrat, a poem included in *Human Rites* (1984). The title suggesting "human rights" and "human writes" adds a militant consciousness to the act of writing. The donkey, as a symbol of drudgery and oppression and as an effect of the Enlightenment belief that blacks are not human, seems to haunt family members:

My grandmother's donkey had a name
I can't recall. It's not important
for the donkey, a beast of burden
like my grandmother, is dead.
And I am in a different place.

Perhaps the donkey was a horse, a status symbol
or a man, married to my grandmother;
and he lives on with my name.
But then, suppose there was no donkey,
no grandmother, no other place?

Markham's lines bear too a feeling of disruption, triggered by double meanings, unexpected thematic switches and the open-ended question. Capturing a specific spirit of family life, the poet goes over the ethnic irony of associating manhood with a donkey. The parallel between "a different place" and "no other place?" tracks a reassessment of diaspora not so much in terms of difference, but as destiny.

In his second volume, *Coolie*⁶ *Odyssey* (1988), Dabydeen explores the gap between a Guyanese mother's expectations regarding her emigrated son's future and the English realities. When confronted with the reality of emigration, her voice is muffled, stolen into third person singular and reduced to ridicule, all meant to induce a revision of her mentality in the new international context. In a tone both ironic and tender, the poet places his finger on the social wound that has produced frustration and broken families:

[...] Because Jasmattie heart hard, she mind set hard
To hustle save she one-one slow penny,
Because one-one dutty make dam cross the Canje
And she son Harillal got to go to school in Georgetown,
Must wear clean starch pants, or they go laugh at he,
Strap leather on he foot, and *must* read book,
Learn talk proper, take exam, go to England university,
Not turn out like he rum-sucker chamar dadee.

⁶ *Coolie* is an offensive name for an unskilled Asian laborer.

In terms of the relationship between diaspora and nation-state, the mother's interest in her son's future abroad and the references to Guyana and England generate new sites of belonging. Both countries can be considered mother countries: the former for its luxurious nature and the preservation of Indian spirituality; the latter for the prospect of modern education. The specificity of their transatlantic connection challenges the earlier tradition according to which diaspora is subordinated to the homeland.

A way out of the gap of voicelessness is to consider the chorus of these (grand)mothers, their plurality in suffering and how their experiences are similar to or differ from other women's. This is in line with the problematic addressed by Kristeva in *Strangers to Ourselves* (1989), in which she recognizes the importance of group identities in overcoming oppression, but warns against the annihilation of personal difference. For instance, Grace Nichols takes plurality and difference personally in her poem "Of Course When They Ask for Poems About the 'Realities' of Black Women," published in her third volume, *Lazy Thoughts of a Lazy Woman* (1989). By opposing "we" to "they," the poet speaks in the name of the disadvantaged women, with a significant affirmative twist regarding race:

What they really want at times is a specimen
whose heart is in the dust
A mother-of-sufferer trampled, oppressed [...]
Or else they want a perfect song
I can say I can write
no poem big enough to hold the essence
of a black woman
or a white woman or a green woman [...]

Racial stereotypes are challenged through the surrealist focus on plurality of colour and experience: apart from black and white women, Nichols introduces the "green woman," a metaphor alluding to a relational feminism that respects different essences, to a possible third space and to nature, as both human nature and natural environment.

In "Song of the Creole Gang Women," from Dabydeen's debut volume, *Slave Song* (1984), the text in Creole English renders five women's voices as various ways of approaching torment, while its translation into Standard English obliterates these differences. The women speak as mothers and slaves and find relief only when reaching the river:

Dutty-skin, distress, shake aff we babee
When we reach wataside shake aff we patakee

In the poet's own translation:
Dirty-skin, distressed, shake off our babies
When we reach waterside shake off our wombs

The word "dutty" means "piece of earth" in Creole, with no negative connotation as in "dirty." And the generic "wombs" replaces the more impudent "patakee," a local

reference for female sexual parts. The symbol of the river as a place of healing, in contrast with the harm produced by the sun, “fixed in the sky like a taskmaster’s eye,” subtly echoes the author’s Indian heritage: “Let’s go sit to the riverside, dip, sleep, die / Shade deep in cool here.” It represents the image of another mother country, where maternity is mythically valuable, hence the multiplicity of belonging, the need for a plural view on ethnicity. The poet’s endnotes attached to the translation provide insights into what is lost: the women’s endurance hides humour, vision and musicality. The role of the Creole is to express a less known psychic reality, to protect a lifestyle that enables continuity and to support opposition as fundamental to the configuration of subjectivity.

In Linton Kwesi Johnson’s poems, difference rules against the immigrant subject. The most visible domains are class and cultural heritage. In “Inglan is a bitch,” a ballad in Jamaican Creole, the poet warns England is not a mother as caring and nurturing as it used to be advertised in Jamaica, in the years of the Empire Windrush generation. The poem tackles class related issues mainly, using simple, persuasive rhymes, such as “mule” / “fool” / “tool” and “laybah” / “fayvah” or enumeration such as “day wok,” “nite wok,” “clean wok,” “duttu wok,” in order to depict the bastardization and estrangement immigrants experienced during the post-war decades of living in the new mother country. Johnson’s gloomy type of social description was taken by Paul Gilroy (1993) to a cultural and political level, when he investigated “the fatal junction of the concept of nationality with the concept of culture and the affinities and affiliations which link the blacks of the West to one of their adoptive, parental cultures” (2). He proposed the adoption of a transatlantic, more liberatory perspective for the diaspora subject.

With this variety of representations, it turns out that the “maternal function” has become a subject in progress, as poets have sensed a more intimate, intergenerational and dialogic discourse can partially compensate for the loss. On the one hand, sons and daughters address their (grand)mothers, as in “Coolie Son” by Dabydeen, which forms a pair with the previously mentioned “Coolie Mother.” If the latter is voiceless and, like a sacrificial Sati wife, lives her social death “in a Bata shoe-box,” the former writes to his relatives. He includes a parallel between life in the Caribbean and life in England. The interrogation of the social realities specific to the two geographical locations surfaces differently: while Guyana is represented by direct questions and a focus on family, England is represented by the position the coolie son managed to obtain:

I is a Deputy Sanitary Inspecta,
Big-big office, boy! Tie round me neck!
Brand new uniform, one big bunch of keys!
If Ma can see me now how she go please...

The social discrepancies are highlighted by the use of Creole English, as well as by the contrast between expectations and reality and a balance between naivety and self-mockery. That the coolie son addresses a family member and refers to his (grand)mother only indirectly is a tactic intended to place the interest in the binary nation/diaspora in a new light, conditioned by Ma’s possibility to “see.”

On the other hand, the (grand)mother herself addresses her offspring, especially as a warner. In “Letter from Mama Dot,” a poem from Fred D’Aguiar’s first volume, *Mama Dot* (1985) and in “Ma Talking Words,” from David Dabydeen’s second volume, *Coolie Odyssey* (1988), the poets reimagine the archetypal Obeah mother, who lives for childcare and the endurance of her people. Each poet adopts his grandmother’s voice to suggest setting hopes too high may not be the best choice to survive in a world with new and unexpected rules. In a queered discourse, they advocate a neomarxist approach to Caribbean socio-economic realities, in contrast to the post-structuralist one, which has placed the former colonies at a disadvantage, especially when language has been at stake. While D’Aguiar reveals Mama Dot’s interest in local politics, national and international economy and the failing radical nationalism of the former colonies,

Your letters and parcels take longer
And longer to reach us. The authorities
Tamper with them (whoever reads this
And shouldn’t, I hope jumby spit
In dem eye). We are more and more
Like another South American dictatorship,
And less and less a part of the Caribbean. [...]
With all the talk of nationality we still hungry. [...]
The fair is full of prizes
We threw out in better days and everyone wins
Coconuts. I wouldn’t wish this to anyone,
But it’s worse somehow without you here. [...]

Dabydeen portrays Ma as being worried about ethnic differences and her grandson’s intimate relationship with the white woman:

[...] And how she go understand all that burden and fruit
You bear for we?
And how she go crave your soul and seed
Who always eat plenty
From different pot? [...]

Such early poems show the authors’ concern with the theme of cultural, collective and transgenerational trauma, in the context of the Caribbean, hence the necessity of a therapeutic approach, sourced in music, broken English and (pre)colonial history, adopted in later works.

An example that reveals the importance of queer and father nature is *Turner*⁷ (1994), an ekphrastic poem in which Dabydeen approaches the theme of the (pre)colonial past. The (pre)colonial mother is represented as a combination of African, Indian and

⁷ The poem is a response to J. M. W. Turner’s painting *Slave Ship* (1840).

European symbols, often as a queer subject,⁸ from whom the child is separated by colonizers. There is an obsessive search for her, until the repetition begins to evoke a Genesis in reverse: “My mother does not answer, I cannot hear her / Calling”; “I forgot / The face of my mother.” The two caesuras subtly mark the essential loss of the Middle Passage: the natural relationship between the newborn and its mother (or parents, in general), a basic condition for speech development. The poem ends with a long enumeration of negations, suggesting that loss reaches like a disease all the universe:

[...] There is no mother, family,
Savannah fattening with cows, community
Of faithful men; no elders to foretell
The conspiracy of stars; magicians to douse
Our burning temples; no moon, no seed,
No priests to appease the malice of the gods
By gifts of precious speech – rhetoric antique
And lofty, beyond the grasp and cunning
Of the heathen and conquistador –
Chants, shrieks, invocations uttered on the first
Day spontaneously, from the most obscure
Part of the self when the first of our tribe
Awoke, and was lonely, and hazarded
Foliage of thorns, earth that still smouldered,
The piercing freshness of air in his lungs
In search of another image of himself. [...]

The fragment is in line with Kristeva’s notion of the “maternal function,” as the poet imagines an end in which old values are rejected and identifies a new, masculine self, aware of himself in the very context of the first colonial encounters, when English language was not the language of the colonized. Dabydeen hints at creativity itself as an ontological site of human evolution at a critical point: absence is an occasion to celebrate the silence as a “longed-for gift of motherhood,” originating in the natural forces of the ocean.

This short insight has shown that, due to the psychological effects of transnational migration, the mother(land)’s absence can turn poetry into a transitional object in the hands of poets. Even though Winnicott states “*there is no noticeable difference between boy and girl in their use of the original ‘not-me’ possession, which I am calling the transitional object*” (6) (emphasis in original), a difference appears when poetry as a “not-me” possession is at stake: women poets better identify with the mother figure, while male poets take over the “longed-for gift of motherhood,” queer it or consider it as father nature, for the purpose of discursive creativity. In this context, the perspective Kristeva (1997) has on pregnancy has cultural implications too. Her view suggests otherness can be articulated not only in terms of the uncanny, but as “love for an

⁸ J. M. W. Turner’s painting, the body of the submerged slave is not depicted as male or female.

other” (873). However, the change in this process of articulating otherness involves a complex set of relations that need to be renegotiated both in the cultural field and as an individual project. Poetry seems to be one of the sites suitable for such renegotiations.

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