

Context: Grace Nichols and 'Praise Song for My Mother'

Grace Nichols (1950–)

Grace Nichols was born in Guyana, where she spent her first eight years living in a small coastal village. Her family then moved to the capital, Georgetown, where she experienced Guyana's struggle for independence from the UK, the inspiration for her first novel (*Whole of a Morning Sky*). In 1977 she migrated to England with her partner, John Agard, who is also a poet.

As a teacher and journalist in Guyana, she spent a lot of time in the more remote parts of the country. This gave her an interest in the folk stories and myths of her country – something that has strongly influenced her work. In all of her writing, her own history and that of her country have clearly had a profound impact. Nevertheless, she has written about how she is caught between her past and present: 'I am a writer across two worlds; I just can't forget my Caribbean culture and past, so there's this constant interaction between the two worlds: Britain and the Caribbean.'

In the poems 'Island Man' and 'Hurricane Hits England' Nichols describes this coming together of the two worlds. She also explores the difficulties that women face when emigrating in her celebrated collection *The Fat Black Woman's Poems*. In the poem 'Tropical Death', she describes how:

The fat black woman want
A brilliant tropical death
Not a cold sojourn
In some North Europe far/forlorn

Nichols enjoys exploring these cultural differences in the language she uses in her poetry: 'I like working in both Standard English and Creole. I tend to want to fuse the two tongues because I come from a background where the two worlds were constantly interacting, though Creole was regarded, obviously, as the inferior by the colonial powers when I was growing up.'

‘Praise Song for My Mother’

Praise songs are a type of poem of African origin, and are written to celebrate the lives of the people they are written about. In African literature, the praise songs would have been part of the oral tradition, handed down from generation to generation. In fact, praise songs remain an important part of African culture and often reflect the modern world as well as the traditional.

‘Praise Song for My Mother’, Nichols says, is based on personal recollections from her youth, along with the poems ‘Be a Butterfly’, ‘Iguana Memory’ and ‘Waiting for Thelma’s Daughter’. Most critics writing about her work have focused on the poems which include Creole but as Judith Kinsman argues, ‘the strength and resourcefulness of the women who speak through the poems is one of the most remarkable and memorable aspects of Grace Nichols’ work’.

This is certainly true of ‘Praise Song for My Mother’ in which she celebrates a woman who gave her both roots to grow from and wings to fly with. Writing about her own mother, Nichols has commented that she was a ‘... warm, intelligent, loving woman who was full of stories, anecdotes and songs from her own childhood. People loved being around her and I can’t remember a single day when our home wasn’t visited by some friend, neighbour or relative who had dropped in “just fuh minute” but ended up staying hours.’

We get a clear sense of this in ‘Praise Song for My Mother’, in which she talks of a mother who is ‘deep and bold and fathoming’ and who ‘replenishes’ her whenever she needs comfort.

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