

GRACE NICHOLS – PRAISE SONG FOR MY MOTHER

Grace Nichols was born in Guyana in 1950. She started out as a journalist and teacher, working in the Caribbean, then moved to the UK in 1977. She often writes about the interlinking nature of the two cultures in her poems. She is married to the poet John Agard.

The poem is attributed to her mother and tries to capture the feelings she had for her. The title suggests an obvious love of her mother and uses the religious term Praise to describe the reverence she feels. The idea of this being a song fits in with Nichols' Caribbean origins where songs and poems intermingle. The poem is short and simple which is reflective of the structure of a song.

The opening line of the poem sets it in the past so the reader assumes that this is a tribute to her mother after her death.

She begins by using the image of water and the oceans to describe her love. Water is a beautiful analogy because it is life giving and universal – no-one can survive without water in the same way that no-one can exist without a mother – they are both essential to life. This also suggests that there is a sense of dependency in their relationship – the Nichols relies on her mother as the giver of life.

The adjectives Nichols uses in her description of the water show how complex it is and is used as a metaphor for the complexity of the relationship she has with her mother and perhaps the complex nature of her mother as a person.

'Deep and bold and fathoming'

The adjective deep suggests the vast depth of the oceans and also the depth of her mother's character and her love for her. Like her mother, the ocean is bold – it can't be ignored.

Fathoming has a double meaning to it – a fathom is a measure of the depth of water. It is also used as a verb – 'to fathom something out' – to work out a problem. Either meaning can be linked to her mother – she is as difficult to work out as the oceans – they both have hidden depths and unexplored areas – there are always new things to discover. The idea of fathoming may also mean that she sees her mother as wise and able to fathom out any problem that faces her.

The anaphoric repetition of the beginning of each verse '**you were**' gives a rhythm to the poem that is redolent of a song, chant or prayer. It reinforces the person she is talking about and makes clear that Nichols is speaking directly to her mother.

The second verse compares her mother to the moon. It suggests that she is a force of nature and is extremely powerful:

'You were

Moon's eye to me'

She can clearly imagine her mother who has sight of everything in her world just like the moon sees everything.

The use of the verb **'pull'** on the next line likens the pull of the moon on the tides as being like the pull of her mother on her. There is something more powerful than she can control herself pulling her towards her mother.

Just as the moon gives a mantle over the earth, her mother's love covers every aspect of her life – hence the use of the verb **'mantling'**.

The idea of her mother's love being a complex emotion is indicated through the word **'grained'** - its surface is not simple and smooth but rough, patterned and irregular much like the grain of wood. Just as the grain of every tree is different, so the love of every mother towards their child is complex and unpredictable. This image also leads the reader to think of the idea that the grain of wood is only revealed after the tree has been felled – just as Nichol's doesn't realise the true nature of her mother's love until after she has died.

The natural imagery is continues with:

'You were sunrise to me'

The image of the sun rise suggests that her mother is there for her every day – her mother's love is as certain as the sun rising. There is also no way of preventing the sun from rising or preventing her mother from loving her. The metaphor conjurs up an image of something that is beautiful, positive and reassuring, just like her mother's love feels to her.

The metaphor continues with a line to describe the movement of the sun:

'rise and warm and streaming'

The use of verbs here confirms the image created in the first part of the metaphor and invites the reader to consider how she responds to the feeling of being loved by her mother. The words **'warm'** and **'streaming'** emphasis the comfort she feels because of her mother's love and the fact that it is everywhere (streaming), filling her life.

The penultimate verse deals with the food she associates with her mother. It is all food from the Caribbean, and has comforting and reassuring connotations for Nichols.

You were

Fishes red gill to me'

The gill is the part of the fish that controls breathing. She is inferring that her mother was as essential to her life as the red fish that would be a staple part of the Caribbean diet, but also that the very breath of her life is linked to her mother. Her mother provided her with sustenance through food and love.

The verse moves on to another metaphor:

You were

The flame tree's spread to me'

Likening her mother to the 'flame tree' demonstrates how she felt sheltered by the love and presence of her mother. She felt protected from life.

The imagery moves back into food in the final part of this verse:

'the crab's leg/the fried plantain smell'

These foods are also typical of those found in the Caribbean and would be fond and comforting memories associated with her past and her mother's cooking. The idea that she can smell the food shows that her mother's love affected all of her senses and reminds the reader that a smell can be just as evocative as a sight or sound. Memories of her mother are triggered by the smell of Caribbean cuisine.

There is a caesura (pause) before the end of the verse and the words:

Replenishing replenishing'

Show us that Nichols is thinking of the best way to sum up the love of her mother – it gives the effect that she is speaking to us and describing how she feels.

The verb replenishing suggest to the reader that her mother's love is an endless stream that never ends. It links back to the sun rising every morning to replenish the earth in the same way that her mother's love is always replenished and renewed – it never ceases.

The final line of the poem:

'Go to your wide futures, you said'

This is a direct quote from her mother. It is a typical piece of motherly advice – wishing the best for her child in the future. The idea of a wide future indicates that it includes the whole world, perhaps leaving the Caribbean, which is what Nichols does.

The idea of the poem being a 'Praise Song' suggests that it could be sung in tribute to her mother. It is also a public declaration of her love for her mother.

There is very little punctuation in the poem. This gives the effect that the ideas all flow along together rather than being separated. This reflects the idea that the love between her and her mother is not a group of separate events, but rather a big picture.