

Review

Transcending conventional identity structures: Dorothea Smartt's re-negotiated self-projections

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Dorothea Smartt's poetics reflects an innovative paradigm by which she challenges and reshapes concepts of national and gender identities. She explores old and new world inheritances, and skillfully traverses historical, cultural, temporal and spatial boundaries to arrive at a re-negotiated and reinvigorated identity. Smartt's poetics thus evinces multiple elements: while it synthesizes Caribbean and Black British traditions, it also enlarges these traditions by incorporating mythic elements. By excavating the Medusa myth as an African legacy, Smartt re-connects old and new world inheritances, in a stratagem that empowers writers in both Black British and Caribbean literary traditions.

Key words: Black British Literature, Caribbean literary aesthetics, Medusa myth, identity.

INTRODUCTION

Discussing the poetry of Dorothea Smartt, a first-generation British-born writer of Caribbean parentage, requires an awareness of the ongoing literary and cultural debates regarding what constitutes Caribbean-ness and British-ness, and indeed whether the descriptors "black" and "British" used together constitutes a contradictory construct (Boyce-Davies, 1994). While some theorists view identity as tied to the specificities of place (Donnell, 2006) others recognize it as an inherently fluid concept (Hall, 1993). Yet emergent discourses in this regard frequently raise more questions than they answer, given the complexities that inhere within the identity matrix.

Dorothea Smartt's poetics, which, while embodying many of the elements of Caribbean and "Black" British aesthetics, reflects a "vision quest," an innovative paradigm by which Smartt challenges and reshapes concepts of national and gender identities. She explores old and new world inheritances, and skillfully traverses historical, cultural, temporal and spatial boundaries to arrive at a re-negotiated and reinvigorated identity based on her adaptation and reconstruction of the myth of Medusa, who in African mythology, was the Libyan serpent goddess of female wisdom.

CURRENT DISCUSSION OF CARIBBEAN IDENTITY

An outline of some of the current discussions on Caribbean identity, Caribbean and "Black" British aesthetics, as well as the Medusa myth provides a useful backdrop for discussing and situating Smartt's work. Some Caribbean theorists view with skepticism notions of identity in which national boundaries are erased and diasporic and transnational identities are privileged. For Donnell (2006), "...the erasure of territory in favor of cultural forms" seems both problematic and extreme. She argues, "the displacement of 'geographical location' by cultural construction further shifts debates away from the demands of *hereness* and of Caribbean place." Yet the transnational dimension of black identity, by transcending geographical location expands both the spatial conceptualization and descriptors of Caribbean identification. Jennifer (2006) notes that while "...transnational belonging has always been consonant with Caribbean-ness...the glorification of... transnationalism and global citizenship is not untroubled by ambivalences of belonging created by migration and the formation of new identity spaces." While there are concerns that the shifting

emphasis toward diasporic 'citizenship' and the privileging of transnational identity diminish critical focus on the Caribbean as a locality, both in geographical and ideological terms, equally important is the idea that 'hereness' has diminishing importance for a large segment of the Caribbean diaspora many of whom were not born in Caribbean but in the 'adopted' homeland of their Caribbean forebears. Theoretical formulations that insist on Caribbean-ness as a function of *location* become increasingly less relevant to a body of people whose sphere of self-identification is considerably more expansive.

Some theorists suggest that British writers of Caribbean ancestry embody a Caribbean cultural ethos derived from the transplanted Caribbean cultural community into which they are born. A more accurate assessment might be that these writers also inhabit a wider British social and cultural reality and are often equally immersed in the cultural particularities of the 'adopted' homeland. Salmon (1992), commenting on Indian immigrants in England, asserts, "[O]ur identity is at once plural and partial. Sometimes we feel that we straddle two cultures; at other times, that we fall between two stools. But however ambiguous and shifting this ground may be, it is not an infertile territory for a writer to occupy." Writing, then, is a fertile and fruitful ground in the exploration of identity, an idea that Senior (1994) echoes when she asserts, "the writer's country *is* writing."

For Senior, who inhabits Jamaican and Canadian cultural spaces simultaneously, multi-positionality is not a vexing prospect but a particular identity construct that takes account of various elements within this cultural negotiation, mindful of both the treasures saved in the "cultural crucible of colonization" (Donnell, 2006) and the new cultural elements assimilated within the 'adopted' environment. Like Senior, Smartt embodies a synthesis of two (or more) cultural heritages and is located within two literary traditions, in Smartt's case, Barbadian (Caribbean) and "Black" British. The present discussion, while situating her in these traditions, also explores ways in which Smartt's poetics both reflect and move beyond the particularities that define these categories, reflecting Jenkins' (2004) definition of Caribbean poetry as characterized by "strong regional belongings" and "internal divergences" as well as "cross-cultural and transatlantic allegiances." Caribbean women poets, Smartt among them, are seen as "revising the dominant tropes of male-authored writing from the region" and engaging "themes of self-fashioning, and of community variously constructed as local, national, familial" (Jenkins, 2004). As well, their work is not only "grounded in linguistic, cultural and domestic specificity" but also engages cross-cultural poetics that encompasses a diasporic reach. In her recent study, *Contemporary Caribbean Women's Poetry: Making Style* Denise De Caires Narain (2002) similarly observes that women's poetry evinces a largely woman-centered consciousness.

In this regard, Smartt's poetry is not only marked by its incorporation of the aforementioned elements, but also by a revisionary and empowering mythological archetype that derives from a decidedly matrilineal genealogy.

THE MEDUSA MYTH, BLACK BRITISH TRADITION AND CARIBBEAN AESTHETICS

A mapping of Smartt's work also situates her in the "Black" British tradition that has spawned many first-generation British-born writers who have a Caribbean ancestry. This tradition resists reductionist and monolithic categorization, and, according to Ramey (2004), encompasses "alternative and oppositional" stances, often involving a reclamation and integration of features associated with the African diasporic cultural inheritance. Works in this tradition also show a regeneration of diasporic myths reset in the present; and the incorporation of the trope of journeying which reflects a desire for reconnection to a mythical homeland (Ramey, 2004). In Smartt's case, however, we see not so much nostalgia for a mythical homeland, but the poet's reclamation and recasting of mythic structures of the ancestral home into a liberating re-formulation to create a dynamic poetics. Hence, Smartt's poetics reveals a Caribbean aesthetic, a Black British sensibility, but also extends the matrices of identity to incorporate a reclaimed and recuperated Medusa. According to Barbara (1983) in *The Women's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets*, prior to Medusa's reinvention in classical Greek mythology, she was a Libyan serpent goddess worshipped by the Amazons. As such, Medusa symbolized female wisdom, female mysteries, and the cycle of nature as life, death and rebirth. She was the Guardian of the Threshold, and the *mediatrix* between the realms of heaven, earth, and the underworld. In formulating her mythopoetics, then, Smartt privileges this interpretation of the enigmatic goddess, Medusa, who though defiled in Greek mythological representations as a vile and hideous monster, is re-presented in Smartt's formulation in a "transformed and transformative visionary dimension." Smartt's poetry, characterized by metaphysical journeying, enables her to forge a new matrilineal mythology of empowerment. Her use of myth enables her to transcend the limitations of conventional history, and to formulate a liberatory poetics that moves her beyond the dislocation engendered by colonization, migration, and cultural disarticulations.

CONNECTING MEDIUMS

In Smartt's (2001) work, *Connecting Medium*, the opening poem of the collection, "Mother Music," presents music as feminized and depicted as the black female Goddess of creation, symbolized by the drum.

Through the metaphoric representation of music as spiritual essence and creative impulse, the poet enacts a rebirth in which the speaker is drawn into the “womb’ of the drum from which she then re-emerges. Smartt invokes Medusa in her presentation of the cycle of life, death and rebirth: The speaker describes herself in a perpetual metamorphosis: “The yolk of myself opening, resonating/Vibrating/Story after story after birth after life after death” (11:11). The imagery of the poem also depicts the process of rebirth as a dormant volcano coming to life, thus reinforcing the idea of self-fashioning and self-making that is at the core of her poetic vision.

The next two poems in the series, “Generations Dreaming 1 and 2,” are sequential pieces in which the poet uses the trope of journeying to depict Caribbean migration to Britain. This journeying, however, brings about transformation both in the immigrant and in the country that s/he comes to inhabit. While the poem portrays the immigrant dream of a better life in social and economic terms, it simultaneously depicts the fear and apprehension that migration entails, as well as the loss of certainty and sure-footedness, and the inevitable vulnerability experienced in this new space:

stepping off the plane
to an unknown future
from a certain past that
became more and more like
the promise that escaped you” (Smartt, 2001:4-8)

Leaving Barbados and coming to Britain also registers the profound ambivalence that often accompanies such emigration. While emigrants wish to spare their offspring the economic hardship of life back ‘home’, they are also mindful of the challenges that await them in the new space. Smartt pays homage to the generation of immigrants who, in defiance of a life in which they are assigned to the laborious work of the cane fields, “(raised) a glass of rum/ as (they) sailed away...a generation/dreaming a world, to change” (Smartt, 2001:27-31). This latter image powerfully evokes the words of the iconic Caribbean poet, Carter (1977): “I do not sleep to dream, but dream to change the world,” a poem in which Carter speaks to the imperative of positively transforming and refashioning the self and the world one inhabits.

In the second “Generations” poem, Smartt continues the theme of transformation. The persona identifies herself not as a “Clarendon” or “Bridgetown” gal, which would privilege her Caribbean identity, nor as a “norf, sauf, west, east London/ of a girl,” but as “the kinda Blackwoman/the world ain’t seen yet,” acknowledging her hybridized identity. The radical new black woman recognizes her multi-positionality, and understands herself as a synthesis of many parts. The emergence of this new entity in Smartt’s formulation also involves the critical re-embodiment of Medusa. She expands this idea in the poem, “Medusa: cuts both ways.” Here Medusa is

the essence of the “Afrikanwoman” who “could turn a man t’stone” who, despite her severed head, bleeds, but never dies. Smartt invokes historical figures of powerful black womanhood including Yemója-Ocúti, a goddess in the Yoruba cosmology; queen-warrior Nanny of the Maroons, who fought the British forces in the West Indies; Queen Nzinga of Angola, who forged an advantageous alliance with the Dutch; and Sarraounia, ruler of the Hausas who fought the French colonists. Smartt also mentions more contemporary figures of the 1980s including Assata Shakur, Eleanor Bumpers and Cherry Groce, and Audre Lorde, paying tribute to their unconquerable spirit in their resistance to discriminatory and exclusionary practices perpetrated against black women.

In “Cane” the poet speaks specifically of black womanhood and of the black woman’s rootedness being defined by the “countless navel strings” to which she is attached within the sphere of her physical and cultural life. According to Afro-Caribbean folk belief, planting the umbilical cord signifies one’s place of belonging. However, Smartt fractures this sense of rootedness and instead evokes simultaneous images of roots and routes. The black woman is “tied to apron strings” and to “bundles of cane stalks,” to “the woman in front” and to “the child...behind.” Yet her composite image is derived from multiple routes and is reflected in the numerous roles she occupies as mother, laborer and matriarch and as “roots-worker” the shaman-like figure, who is also healer. Within her African/Caribbean tradition, the black woman is the embodiment of multiplicity, a concept that recurs in several of Smartt’s poems and underscores the poet’s vision of the black woman as an empowered essence.

In the culminating work of the collection, “Let Me Land,” Smartt portrays the mythical emergence of the speaker from the deep core of the earth. Carefully crafted images of volcanic eruption, tectonic shifts and thunderous explosion convey the majesty of rebirth accompanied by the sounds of rock ‘incantations’ and the violent roar of the sea. The figure erupts through the subterranean granite of the Caribbean Sea, “swelling under the seascape,” breaking through the rock face, “Herself and Medusa re-membered,” to land on the shore where “wind,” “sea spray” and “distant thunder” announce their arrival. This poem represents the poet’s self-invention achieved through mythic reach; it symbolizes a “metamorphic” self ‘rejoined’ with Medusa, the “uniquely terrible,” now transformed goddess. Smartt reclaims Medusa as a positive goddess, and internalizes the transformative power of the mythology. In this way, Medusa “becomes a potent symbol of resistance – a type of catalyst through which women can reclaim their own powers” (Lima, 2009).

Conclusion

Smartt’s poetics thus evinces multiple elements: while it

synthesizes Caribbean and Black British traditions, it also enlarges these traditions by incorporating mythic elements. By excavating the Medusa myth as an African legacy, Smartt re-connects old and new world inheritances, and points in her re-formulated, reconstituted mythology, toward a new stratagem of empowerment for writers in both of the aforementioned literary traditions.

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