

## A Multiplicity of Voices in Grace Nichols's Work

[Review of Pavlína Flajšarová, *Grace Nichols Universal and Diverse: Ethnicity in the Poetry of Grace Nichols*. Olomouc: Palacky University in Olomouc, 2016. 318 p. ISBN 978-80-244-4970-8]

The monograph *Grace Nichols Universal and Diverse: Ethnicity in the Poetry of Grace Nichols* (2016) by Pavlína Flajšarová presents British author of Caribbean descent Grace Nichols (\*1950) and her works of poetry and prose. The introductory chapter describes Nichols' childhood and adolescence in Georgetown, the capital of Guyana. It goes on to describe her life in Great Britain, where she has lived since 1977. *Universal and Diverse* also examines the formative significance of Guyanese culture and mentality in Nichols' work. Flajšarová does not fail to recognize the awards Grace Nichols has received, and also focuses on Nichols' extensive activities in literary and other realms. It should be emphasized that Grace Nichols is the first British author of Caribbean descent whose work has been officially listed in the British National Curriculum.

In addition, the logical and well-structured chapters focus on Grace Nichols' poetic work, first on the poems for adults and later those for children. Attention is likewise devoted to her prose work, also for both adults and children. In this respect, this book provides erudite commentary that confirms not only the author's detailed knowledge of Nichols' work, but also the author's adept and extensive use of secondary sources. I especially appreciate the broad contextualization of the book, which is not limited to an analysis of Nichols' work, but also places Nichols into a wider cultural and historical transatlantic framework – a triangular scope including topics such as the slave trade and other relevant details. Pavlína Flajšarová deftly interprets Nichols' poetry relating to the creation of slave plantations for sugarcane, which in the poetic work of the British-Caribbean poet is both a commodity and a symbolic expression of slavery and slaveholders (e.g. *Sugar Cane*). The author elaborates upon these themes by using motifs connected to the marginalized position of female slaves, whose womanhood (e.g. *We the Women*) and sexual abuse (e.g. *Love Act*) are denied, including examples from other poems in the collection entitled *I Is a Long Memored Woman* (1983).

The author's analysis includes scholarly interpretations of the collection of poetry entitled *The Fat Black Woman's Poems* (1984). These works are typical in their construction and deconstruction of stereotypes linked to the positions of "black women." As mentioned previously, Flajšarová in this context places emphasis on the social roles of women (e.g. the position of mother: *The Fat Black Woman Remembers*) and the female body (e.g. *The Fat Black Woman Goes Shopping, Invitation, Looking at Miss World*). The author devotes specific attention to poems that draw on classical works (e.g. *With Apologies to Hamlet*), to which Nichols lends her own exotic flavour. The author's interpretation of parallels between the work of British romantic poets (primarily William Wordsworth) and Nichols' poetry (e.g. *Island Man, Like a Beacon*) also shows careful research and adept analysis. Flajšarová documents effectively the strong and highly nostalgic relationship Grace Nichols has to her native Caribbean, to which the poet returns repeatedly, using it as a contrast to the climatically, geographically and socially dissimilar environment of Great Britain.

Regarding the poetry collection *Lazy Thoughts of a Lazy Woman* (1989), Flajšarová reveals and provides commentary on allusions to the work of Walt Whitman (e.g. *The Body Reclining*), William Shakespeare (*With Apologies to Hamlet*) and John Donne (*My Black Triangle*). At the same time, Flajšarová does not fail to focus on the issue of identity which is strongly reflected in Grace Nichols' poems, as well as the recurrently appearing nostalgia for her native Georgetown and Guyana.

The author also provides a persuasive analysis of Nichols' poetry collections including *Sunris* (1996), which describes the associations evoked by colour and aesthetic experiences linked to the perception of colour; *Startling the Flying Fish* (2005), which deals with the theme of identity; along with *Paint Me a Poem* (2004) and *Picasso, I Want my Face Back* (2009), which are linked to Grace Nichols' poems inspired by works in the Tate Modern gallery in London, where she was poet-in-residence from 1999–2000. The section dealing with Nichols' writings for children (e.g. *No Hickory, No Dickory, No Dock*, 1991; *Asana and the Animals*, 1998; *The Poet Cat*, 2000; *No, Baby, No!*, 2011) is just as effective, as the author captures the essence of Nichols' poetic language, its distinctive characteristics, and its semantic aspects. The work is concluded with a discussion of Nichols' anthologies of children's poetry and her prose work for both adults (*Whole of a Morning Sky*, 1986) and children (*Trust You, Wriggly!*, 1980)

The author systematically analyses the main motifs in Grace Nichols' poetry and prose work, which intrigue the reader through colourful poetic language and, primarily, the themes involved. Throughout her book Flajšarová provides well-founded, systematic and scholarly interpretations supported by appropriately selected citations from secondary literature which supplement the author's findings and conclusions. In this regard, I value the inclusion of the chapter entitled *Visual and Textual Aspects*, which offers a coherent and well-presented recapitulation of Nichols' poetic works including descriptions of the underlying topics and motifs within individual collections. The playfully poetic names of the work's individual chapters also deserve appreciation.

Generally speaking, Pavlína Flajšarová's successful book provides a complex view of the work of Grace Nichols, an author who is unfortunately still rather obscure in the Czech environment.

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