Diasporic Caribbean Women Transcending Dystopian Spaces and Reconnecting Fragmented Identities in Nalo Hopkinson’s novels

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Caribbean Canadian author Nalo Hopkinson’s plural geographical experience and hybrid identity are reflected in her novels as her characters journey into a futuristic dystopian world where spatial and temporal dimensions constantly shift. Hopkinson’s genre itself is not static but rather innovative and although her work is often referred to as part of magical realism, it is still very hard to classify. In the writer’s own words, her work is an attempt at ‘subverting the science fiction genre’. This subversion of the dominant culture lies in the fact that Hopkinson’s science fiction and fantasy novels draw on the African Caribbean folk culture, language and history. Her specific use of the Caribbean demotic in her work is an essential part of her attempt to resist and to defy the dominant linguistic system as well as her need to reconnect to the African Caribbean community.

Her first novel Brown Girl in the Ring (1998) is a fantasy-horror narrative set in a deteriorated near-future Toronto left abandoned by its inhabitants while her second work, Midnight Robber (2000), is a postcolonial science fiction novel depicting the futuristic planet of Toussaint, a hybrid society where traditional African Caribbean folklore and advanced technologies intermix. Discontinuity and fragmentation are constant features in both novels as Hopkinsonian characters shift from present to future, from here to elsewhere, from inside to outside, from dystopian to utopian worlds. Growing up at the margins of this spatial and mental chaos, the young Caribbean female protagonist is confronted with the paradoxes of a schizophrenic identity. As a gendered racial subject in this very hostile environment, she has to resist economic hardships, racism and patriarchal domination. It thus appears vital to the diasporic Caribbean female subject to remap new diasporic spaces, to construct new safe spaces allowing her survival and assertion of her specific hybrid female identity. She needs an in-between space to reconcile her split self, maybe this ‘Third space’ that Homi K. Bhabha refers to, not one based on exoticism or multiculturalism but on hybridity.

This paper aims at analyzing the extent to which Hopkinson author(izes) her two main Caribbean female protagonists to reconnect their fragmented identities and to move from powerlessness to self-assertion. Overall, to what degree can the diasporic female text be considered as an instrument for redemption, innovation and reconnection? Last but not least, considering Hopkinson’s counter-discursive subversion, how do Caribbean diasporic women writers move from postcolonial conformism to postcolonial recreations through diasporic imaginations?

Bio/bibliography

Myriam Moïse completed her undergraduate studies and Masters Degree in English at Université Antilles Guyane in Martinique and her BA Honours in English and Caribbean Studies at London Metropolitan University. She did an MPhil at Université de la Sorbonne Nouvelle and is currently a doctoral student in Postcolonial Literatures at Paris III- Université de la Sorbonne Nouvelle. She previously worked as an ATER at Université de Montpellier III and she is still an associate member of the CERPAC. (Research Centre in Commonwealth Studies) Her research work is involved in an international co-supervision agreement with the University of the West Indies, in Trinidad. She has done work in Postcolonial studies and in Women’s Studies, specifically on Caribbean women’s achievements in Britain and on Black British women writers such as Zadie Smith and Andrea Levy. She has also written a paper on the female Indo-Caribbean diasporic literature, more specifically on Lakshmi Persaud’s novels. She is now engaged in her PhD research project, a comparative literary analysis on women writers of the Caribbean Diaspora in Britain, Canada and the USA.