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Abstract

Similarities between the work of Margaret Atwood, in Canada, and Janet Frame, in New Zealand, are indicative of a cross-cultural concern for the position of the woman writer in the New World. This combination of trenchant satire and introspective lyricism in their novels, for example, can be taken as deriving from a common desire to undermine the dominant power-structures of their respective societies and to re-value the inner life which those societies have violated, repressed or neglected. For both Atwood and Frame, the problems of the post-colonial writer, converging with those of the woman writer, condense into the central issue of how to express oneself freely in a language which is already 'colonized', residually Eurocentric in outlook, persistently masculine in diction and syntax. Both writers have been seen in this context as working towards the definition of a 'decolonized' poetics: a more useful alternative, however, might be to emphasize their avoidance of definition and to look instead at the ways in which, to borrow Sherill Grace's phrase, they 'articulate the space between'.[^] Seen in this light, Atwood and Frame are less writers in search of an 'identity'[^] than writers who actively resist the notion of identity by associating it with stasis, reduction, and inflexibility.

Sleeping's Beauty and the Prince Charming

That wicked fairy had really done Sleeping a favour. Yes. God does work in a mysterious way. The poor child had been so tired she really needed the seven years sleep.

Sleeping had literally had her nose, her ears, her eyes, her ten fingers and every little bit of her to the grindstone. She typed day and night. Articles kept coming out in this magazine, in this journal and that. Sleeping seemed to make no space for the critic's words: she just wrote.

But you can't fool the fairies. They knew that Sleeping dared not hear what the voices said. She cared too much that people like her and her work. 'That child must face life,' said the wicked fairy and took it upon herself to shatter Sleeping's peace. One day when Sleeping took her ten o'clock break for orange juice and wheat germ, Old Miss Wicked pinned Mr Miller's most devastating review of the *Curled Handkerchief* upon the page she had left in her typing machine and Sleeping could not but read it.

I tell you that child flaked out. Clean out. Her eyes just stared into space and as if a hammer had hit her as she tried to get up, she froze half-standing, half-sitting like the model on that new typing chair that the New York Times ad recommends for secretaries. That is how Muriel her twice weekly day's worker found her. Choked on reality and even the wicked fairy admitted that the dosage had been too strong.

The doctors ordered an antidote and gave her a shot of I don't know what that split the body from the soul. Her muscles went limp, her head fell back, a black Ophelia sleeping for seven years. But while her body was sleeping, her soul was having a ball. She dallied here, she dallied there, up-town, down-town, over hills and valleys and then she spotted this cool knight pricking on the plains. Was there ever a knight like that?

He felt her stare, picked up her heavy vibrations. But when he looked around, there was nobody. Of course there was nobody. He said to himself, 'This is very strange. I know somebody is watching me. I know what she looks like but I cannot see her.' And at the thought of seeing

something but not really seeing something, he fell off his horse before he could even finish the thought saying like Saul, 'I am a man of reason.'

Sleeping was distressed. What a knight, that black knight had fallen from his horse and a world she had begun to like was about to get sodden before her very eyes like crepe paper cartoons hanging on a line in a Port of Spain downpour. If she had any body, she would have had a catatonic seizure. Instead, she stared and the fallen knight felt her vibrations keener and raising himself up on his elbows and then rubbing his eyes, he said: 'Lord I know there is something here. I am not mad. Take these scales from my eyes and let me see.'

Sleeping watched. Those long black fingers with their neatly trimmed finger nails rubbing those sightless sunken eyes and propping the puckered brow like a sailor at sea trying to scan the distance, intrigued her. She crept closer to look at this Samson. There was hope with faith on his face as he kept saying 'Lord I am not mad. I can feel her looking into my eyes.' But there was just the slightest souring of despair as he beseeched 'Lord take these scales from my eyes.' So she whispered, 'You are not mad.' And he shook his head from side to side as if to settle his senses back into place.

It was a curious sight for those who could discern, to see the sightless Samson and the disembodied voice in conversation. He told her that his name was Charming, was really a prince who had chosen to be a travelling knight, that he had been to see the Asantehene, had gone into the pharaohs' tombs; that he had gone and got a glimpse of the unexcavated cities still sunken in Ethiopia.

He had expected to hear her make sounds that indicate that eyes have grown wide with wonder. But she simply said, 'I know. I have been dallying here and there myself and been learning how to guide crafts, read the wind and so on. I am hoping to be of some use when those seven miles of the Black Star Line reappear in the harbour.'

Then said he, 'We are on the same thing. I didn't tell you but I have been acting as a sort of ambassador for the return. I have been making arrangements for re-settlement in those places I mentioned to you. I was trying to make it to the Maoris when this happened to me. What a thing if I could see you and if you could put some body with that soul!'

'Yeah' was all she said. But he had planted the seed in her head. The business of coming back into human form haunted her. Sometimes when he lay on her lap, she wished that she had legs and could feel the pressure of his shoulders, and there were times when she wanted to feel even more than that.

Fairy Godmother thought that it was fully time that she came into the picture. 'Now,' she said. 'When that old broken down fairy put that child out of her way, I was angry because I had wanted her to finish that work before she moved into wisdom with its tears and bruises. I can now see that the poor body was over-tired and that the child needed the rest between stages. Things were going so well, so well before this dark knight turned up! Yes. I have been keeping my peace, keeping my peace but I shall have to raise the subject at the next committee meeting: everyone knows that I am this child's guardian angel. If they are to send a pricking knight into this plain, shouldn't they have informed me and given me time to prepare her? Now she'll want to get back her form before I'm ready.'

She had hardly spoken before Sleeping came. 'Child,' she said, 'I know what this is about. But tell me something. Do you think you are ready for the monthly pains, the cramps, the backaches and the general discomfiture? Do you know that soon you will be growing fibroids which make all this even more terrible? And do you know what it is like to deal with a knight, what a knight? You've had your head in your typewriter all this time; you can't even deal with a jack much less a knight.' To which Sleeping replied, 'If the porridge is hot, godmother, I will drink it.' 'I guess I must thank God for the rest you had,' Godmother said and left.

They were discussing and bewailing the discord between Garvey and Dubois, between the high coloureds and the blacks and giving thanks that Greelee had thought up Reds in the *Spook who sat by the door*, when she felt a familiar jab in her groin but worse than anything she had ever felt and she all but passed out. Prince Charming, the dark knight heard her scream and looked around to see the tall slim Afro-headed Nephertiti he had been seeing without seeing for so long, rolling in pain. And what a pain for he was excited.

Strange to say, the more she tossed and turned, the more his eyes cleared and the more sharply he could see her and the horizon.

'What is it?' he said wanting to straighten that body out and have her walk or ride or swim or sail with him to New Zealand and the Maoris.

'It is this woman thing,' she said palely.

'How can I help?' he said in pain watching the horizon steadfastly.

'I don't know but I am sure you could find a way,' she said hoping.

He thought for a very long time and her groans and her tossing rattled in his brain like a lone penny in a saving pan.

'Perhaps if you kissed me as the story goes,' she said. 'You could share the burden of this woman self and thus balanced we could walk to the ends of the earth and set up the return.'

He put his beautifully tapered black hands with the well-manicured nails to his forehead, shook his head and said through lips frozen with pain: 'I want to be as honest as I can with you. I couldn't bear one quarter of what you are going through. Let me stick to what I can do. Let me go off in the horizon. I will be back. So long.'

'Life, Love, Reality,' she muttered, then said aloud, 'So long.'

And he left her to be a woman alone and that is why black people have to wait another four hundred years before King Alpha and Queen Omega will appear to settle them in their kingdom in the promised land. For Sleeping's beauty is still only half awake, drugged in its woman's pain and she cannot properly put body and soul together for that needs the help of Charming.

Rastafari me nuh chose none.