Contradictory (W)omens?- Gender Consciousness in the Poetry of Una Marson

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Abstract
Scholarship during the last decade has successfully highlighted the wealth of creative talent and literary innovation from contemporary Caribbean women writers, yet there remains a dearth of research and criticism on early women's writing in the region. Even Out of the Kumbla, the recent study on Caribbean women and literature, introduces its volume of scholarship with the bold declaration that 'Out of this voicelessness and absence, contemporary Caribbean women writers are beginning some bold steps to creative expression.' In general terms it might well be significant to note that Caribbean women's writing, like many other literary traditions outside of Western metropolitan male interest, has been subjected to a whole range of material obstacles and critical biases which have affected the quality of literary production and reception.
Scholarship during the last decade has successfully highlighted the wealth of creative talent and literary innovation from contemporary Caribbean women writers, yet there remains a dearth of research and criticism on early women’s writing in the region. Even Out of the Kumbla, the recent study on Caribbean women and literature, introduces its volume of scholarship with the bold declaration that ‘Out of this voicelessness and absence, contemporary Caribbean women writers are beginning some bold steps to creative expression.’ In general terms it might well be significant to note that Caribbean women’s writing, like many other literary traditions outside of Western metropolitan male interest, has been subjected to a whole range of material obstacles and critical biases which have affected the quality of literary production and reception. However, such an observation should not suggest that being silenced is synonymous with being voiceless, or that neglect is somehow the same as absence. By focusing all attention on the exciting and acclaimed writings of the last two decades, scholars interested in Caribbean women’s writing have only further marginalized the early literature (with perhaps the exception of Louise Bennett). Indeed, I would contend that there is a neglected archive of early Caribbean women’s poetry which merits critical attention, and that readers interested in this region’s literature might be surprised and rewarded by a closer look at its almost forgotten heritage.

One of these early writers, Una Marson, is now well recognized as an important literary role model for Caribbean women and there is no shortage of tributes to her. In the introduction to Watchers and Seekers (1987), Rhonda Cobham and Merle Collins remind us that

In the search for foremothers to the writers presented in this anthology, the figure and work of the poet and playwright, Una Marson, cannot be overlooked.

While such gestures are significant in sentiment, the brief biography and scattered quotations from her poems which this piece offer will not effect any unearthing of her as a poet. Similarly, E.A. Markham’s introductory comments to the anthology Hinterland (1989), only revive
interest in Marson in line with the prevalent politics of reading, rather
than through a desire to give voice to a poet of the region who has been
wrongly neglected.

We note with some satisfaction, the general revival of interest in pioneering
figures like Claude McKay (Jamaica/USA, 1889-1948) and Una Marson. McKay's
somewhat visionary quality and his early use of nation-language and Marson's
near feminist perspectives and wide social sympathies appeal to the present
time. 3

None of her work is included in the collection.

Despite several such vague, appreciative gestures (which generally
signal to Marson's pioneering awareness of gender as a significant
determinant of cultural identity and endorse her historical significance),
there has been no detailed or substantive reading of her work. Even
those critics who have pioneered a literary recognition of Una Marson's
work have adhered to criteria which make an uncompromised
acknowledgement problematic. The elements of mimicry and pastiche
within her poetry, along with her use of orthodox poetic forms and
archaic language continue to elicit embarrassed critical silences or
excuses.

My project here is to map out how Marson's poems have been read
by previous critics and moreover to try to theorize the variously
gendered narratives within which her work has been written and the
particular exclusions from her range of work upon which these
positionings are founded. I then wish to engage in a close reading of
two of Marson's early poems, 'In Vain' (a love sonnet) and 'If' (a
Kipling parody), in order to place what have previously been seen as
oppositional poetic and ideological positions side by side and thus put
forward a different, consciously speculative, reading of Marson's
troubling texts.

My reading is motivated by the belief that revised analytical practices
and notions of poetic excellence do not only allow us to acknowledge
the biases and silences which have suppressed serious evaluations of
the work of black women writers, but should also be seen as a means
through which to focus on the creative potentialities engendered by
multiple modes of self-identification. I hope that it will become evident
through my readings that I am eager to turn the focus away from the
persistent meditation on the problems and adverse effects of being a
colonial woman writer, in order to reveal the textual possibilities which
such an identity can provide.

For the majority of critics, the writing of Una Marson, and moreover
the whole of the early period of Caribbean Literature, does not advance
beyond blatant aesthetic mimicry or crude political posturing. In West
Indian Poetry 1900-1970 A Study in Cultural Decolonisation, Edward
Baugh voiced a common belief when he stated of Jamaican poets of this
period, the 1930's and 1940's, that 'such interest as their work can hold
now is almost exclusively historical'. 4
Certainly the commonest criticism of Jamaican poetry during the first half of the twentieth century was its reliance upon British models and its lack of experimentation and 'authenticity'. Aesthetic critics challenged the worth of the poetry on the basis that it relied too heavily upon poetic models to offer any exciting or innovative insights into the possibilities of language, imagery or form. Cultural critics disputed the poetry's worth on the basis that it was too dependent upon the experiences and ideas of the colonial centre to merit the label 'Jamaican'. Both charges reveal that imitation was seen as the principal stumbling block to real literary achievement.

Although there might be some value in understanding that imitative forms were often an attempt to seize all that went with a centrality of discourse - recognition, publication and even money, many critics have argued that imitation should not be viewed in a purely pejorative light, as the single most shameful failing on the part of the individual writer, but rather as an inevitable consequence of a historically and culturally specific situation. An appreciation of the Caribbean's oral tradition along with an understanding of the various vehicles of imaginative indoctrination employed during colonial rule enables the critic to realize that an early Jamaican writer would probably have received a notion of literature in which originality figured less significantly than their European contemporaries.

Yet, some critics have moved beyond excusing the practice by offering historical and cultural reasoning for it, in order to re-evaluate the process itself and assess the potential it holds for subverting from within and mobilising the very conventions which it appears to submit to. The line between a mere imitation of a European literary model and a re-writing of it is difficult to draw and in many cases is as reliant upon a politics of reading as of writing. The use of stylized English language and the conscious adoption of British literary models should be viewed suspiciously by the critic searching for an imitative lineage in order to substantiate claims of unbroken colonial domination in the work of both white and black writers.

Even given the power of the dominant or authoritative literary discourse in Jamaica during this period, the poetry of Una Marson testifies to the possibility of appropriating and inverting the 'mother tongue' in order to resist and expose its cultural politics and release the language and life of a culture repressed by it. Indeed, I hope to show that by reading Marson's poems with an alertness to gender and cultural issues, it is clear that her treatment of conventional Anglo-centric poetic models is multi-valent and draws the reader's attention to the shifts from emulation to parody, and from mimicry to travesty.

It might be useful to contextualize my own reading of Marson's poetry in the line of critical positions previously articulated, before offering close readings. Although the number of critics who have written on Marson remains small, there are significant traits to be observed. The only indications of the critical response to Una Marson's
poetry contemporary to its publication in the 1930's and 1940's are those opinions expressed by male academics in the introductions to three of her four volumes. Introducing Marson's third volume of poetry, *The Moth and The Star*, in 1937, Philip Sherlock identifies the nationalistic feeling with which her poems are imbued and interprets her sentiments of cultural belonging as an extension of her emotional generosity: 'how strong is Miss Marson's love of her homeland and its people'. Although, he condones the expression of her 'love' in this respect, Sherlock seems to believe that her emotional utterance tends towards the excessive in certain other poems, displaying 'more of sentimentality than of sentiment'.

It is interesting that sentimentality is employed here as a disparaging term, denoting Marson's inability to restrain emotional expression, as this signals an implicitly gendered evaluation in which the 'feminine' quality of her verse is seen to jeopardize its literary merit. Indeed, together with Sir William Morrison's introduction to *Heights and Depths* in 1931 and L.A. Strong's introduction to *Towards The Stars* in 1945, Sherlock's critical commentary alerts us to the progressiveness of Marson's poetic voice in terms of cultural politics, yet fails to appreciate her equally powerful and innovative exploration of gender identity.

In their move to contextualize her solely amongst her contemporaries and thus prioritize those aspects of her poetry which linked it to the dominant trends in Jamaican poetry at this time, these critics simply overlooked the added complexity and interest of her poetry engendered by her exploration of gender related issues. Nevertheless, their inscription of her verse as 'strongly indicative of the poetic temperament of its Author' seems to establish a transparently gendered and curiously tenacious version of Marson's poetics as somehow releasing or compensating for personal truths, even 'women's problems'. As with many other female poets, the blurring of poet and poetic persona in analysis of Marson's poetry leads to spurious and simplistic readings and seems to licence scant attention to the specific formal and linguistic dynamics of the poetry itself.

In the 1970s, as Caribbean Literature began to be acknowledged by the 'centre' and accepted as worthy of serious publishing attention, two definitive studies which drew attention to the major figures and tropes of the emergent tradition appeared. Una Marson makes a brief appearance in two chapters of *West Indian Literature* (1979), edited by Bruce King. In the first, her poetry is alluded to under a group identity along with that of many of her contemporaries as 'sentimental, imitative of Romantic and Victorian nature poetry, and strives too hard to seem elevated'. Although such terms of appraisal predominate even today, they are clearly rooted in an inability to assess the value-laden assumptions within accepted literary criteria, and consequently create unfounded generalizations about Marson's work, and that of other early poets.

However, in *West Indian Poetry* (1978), Lloyd Brown devotes more
attention to Marson, providing a fuller analysis of her verse. Indeed, he makes a significant claim for her as 'the earliest female poet of significance to emerge in West Indian literature' and foregrounds the importance of gender within her work. Nevertheless, Brown remains unable to offer any sustained evaluation of Marson's early poetry and simply dismisses Tropic Reveries as 'extremely immature ... adolescent love lyrics' suggesting that her poetry is, in these romantic and devotional poems, unsuccessfully a woman's verse. It is interesting that even though Brown is the first critic to identify the significance of gender within Marson's work, he perceives the poetry of Tropic Reveries as obscuring this argument rather than elucidating it. In his desire to discuss gender only in terms of an awareness of oppression, a position clearly motivated by the political claims being made for women's literature and black peoples' writing during the 1970s, he dismisses a vital aspect of Marson's poetic archive and consequently fails to negotiate the complex representation of gendered consciousness which her poetry as a whole offers.

Indeed, it was not until the 1980s, almost half a century after the publication of Marson's four volumes, that any critical essays devoted solely to her poetry appeared. Erika Smilowitz's biographical article 'Una Marson - A Woman Before Her Time', in 1983, and her critical reading, "'Weary of Life and All My Heart's Dull Pain': The Poetry of Una Marson', in 1984, redressed this absence. The biographical essay has been of central importance to the act of unearthing Marson as a significant figure, and reassessing her creative achievements alongside those of her male contemporaries. Smilowitz catalogues Marson's diverse interests and achievements in journalism, social work and broadcasting, as well as her steadfast and vehement commitment to cultural expression as a crucial source of national pride and development. While Smilowitz's research was evidently rigorous, and certainly much needed and appreciated, her involvement with the textual seems to have been complicated by a temptation towards romanticizing Marson's life.

Smilowitz does not deny the significance of gender within Marson's poetry, but rather declares that she 'wrote as a woman. Her poems tell of passion, of desire, of frustrated love and above all, of loneliness'. This construction of 'woman' is not only limited, but more importantly selective. Smilowitz moves swiftly from Marson's personal crises to her poems in order to fix an arresting and powerful image. The lack of close analysis, which would reveal the ironies within many of these ostensibly tragically romantic poems and also draw attention to the contrasting vision of the parodies, facilitates the consolidation of one gendered line of analysis. In a sense Smilowitz's literary-biographical line of enquiry does not position itself too distantly from Sir William Morrison's first critical pronouncement in 1931; her focus on the relationship between 'feeling' and authentic 'femininity' is also reminiscent of earlier comments.
While Smilowitz's endeavour seems to be simply to describe or explain Marson's poetry with the aid of biography, the icon of the sad woman which she presents becomes evaluative in the male criticism. Brown's 'immature' and Boxill's and Sherlock's 'sentimental' are brought into sharper focus by a comment which John Figueroa makes in his review of the Penguin Book of Caribbean Verse in English. Objecting to the amount of space dedicated to Marson's poetry, he terms her work 'blethering'. The received 'wisdom' of Marson as 'a lonely person, and ... a hard worker in many a good cause' seems to suggest that her creative work should be treated with pity rather than intellectual rigour. This is a view which I have encountered throughout my efforts to research Marson's poetry and one which I believe is inextricably bound to the notion that women's poetry is somehow merely a vehicle for unreconstructed repressed emotions. Although Smilowitz may have been struggling for a reading which did not deny the significance of lived experience to the work of a black woman poet, in this biographical piece her analysis slips into a gendered discourse which I find uncomfortable and uncritical.

In the slightly later critical essay, Smilowitz does pay close attention to the poetry and identifies many of the subtleties and ironies which her earlier piece left unexplored. She continues her examination of gender within the poetry, viewing this as Marson's area of originality 'beyond the racial themes of her male contemporaries'. Nevertheless, to Smilowitz, Marson's first volume, Tropic Reveries, strikes a note of honesty: 'The emotions are straightforward, distressingly sincere and depressing'. These early images and voices of the 'lonely woman' continue to arrest Smilowitz's attention too powerfully. She advocates that there is 'no escape for women in Marson's poetry' and that 'Marson leaves no doubt in her reader's mind as to her perception of the plight of women, and it is a convincingly despondent picture'. In contrast, I wish to argue that Marson constantly leads us to doubt the finite nature of despair in her poetry, both by presenting alternative paths for fulfilment and by her radically unstable aesthetic which mocks easy assumptions of gender identity.

Even when Smilowitz does discuss the balance between resignation and rage which Marson sets up in Tropic Reveries, through her inclusion of poems which both celebrate and ridicule self-sacrificial love, she cannot reconcile the two images as coexisting, and insists on a model of linear progression in terms of feminist consciousness.

On the one hand, she writes that she wishes to be a 'slave' to her lover ... on the other hand ... she implies that husbands make their wives seem foolish ... Marson's own philosophy, unformed at this point, may have been emerging. It is my intention to stage a reading of these two positions as non-conflicting later on in the article.

It is crucial to be aware of Smilowitz's critical orientation in order to
position her way of reading, Smilowitz draws our attention to (her unreconstructed reading of) aesthetic failure within Marson's poetry.

Her poetry, it must be noted and emphasized, is of uneven quality; many of her poems barely rise above the level of greeting card doggerel and hardly belong to any serious discussion of serious poetry.

This appeal to seriousness and consistency as essential for poetic achievement signals Smilowitz's alignment with conventional criteria of literary criticism. Certainly this is an important factor, considering the impact of colonialism upon the conventions and expectations of the 'poetic' within the Caribbean and the ways in which this discourse of aesthetic norms has served to marginalize women writers within Caribbean societies. As many prominent critics of Caribbean literature have argued, such criteria have been developed by and for those outside of the colonial experience and this argument seems even more pertinent to women poets who are also marginalized by many literary criteria which dismiss any considerations of gender whilst being covertly informed by patriarchal thought. Indeed, in many ways the criteria on which we base literary criticism are as dominated by an Anglo-centric, white, masculinist bias as the canon which they sanctify, and therefore, are as useful in revealing the true substance of Jamaican women poets as a fishing net is to reveal the substance of the sea.

Gordon Rohlehr has proposed the notion of 'an aesthetic continuum', a model of literary evaluation which acknowledges the heterogeneity of standards and styles in the attribution of literary value. The proposal of a continuum blurs the entrenched boundaries constructed to contain and defend the realm of literary excellence. Certainly it is crucial to take account of the variables of history, culture and gender when determining any equation of poetic excellence. It is also important to be open to the possibility of aesthetic failure as a particular kind of success, which displays not simply an inability to match up to a model tradition, but a crucial, even if unconscious, rejection of that tradition as the standard to be matched. It is the lack of sensitivity which Smilowitz shows to this revision of evaluative methodology and its attendant imperative to re-read aesthetic values, which drives her prescriptive and limited view of gendered consciousness and serious poetry.

The same insistence upon a single focus for a discussion of gender appears in Honor Ford Smith's article 'Una Marson: Black Nationalist and Feminist Writer'; the only other article of length to investigate Marson's poetry. Ford Smith's paper is undoubtedly important for its contextualising of Marson's work within women's organizations and 'race associations' of her time, and is also of great significance in its exploration of Marson's work as a playwright, an aspect of her work which has been almost completely neglected (mainly due to the fact that the plays have survived only in manuscript form). Although Honor Ford Smith explores Marson's involvement in countering racial
oppression, she also draws our attention to the specifically female presence within her poetry. However, whereas Smilowitz had pursued the ‘feminine’ identification established by the early male critics, highlighting the icon of the ‘lonely, frustrated woman’, Honor Ford Smith extends Brown’s line of enquiry and inverts this axis to focus on ‘the feminist’, both within Marson herself and her literary work. Again, the construction of boundaries around and singular concentration on one icon of womanhood, here that of the feminist, precipitates another prescriptive critical framework with certain blind spots.

Unlike Smilowitz, Honor Ford Smith acknowledges the class affinity in Marson’s work and is also sensitive to Marson’s insistence upon the act of social re-vision through artistic and cultural means: ‘She pioneered an approach which expresses and articulates women’s issues through aesthetic forms’. However, she shares with Smilowitz a desire to prove Marson’s baptism into feminism as a linear, consequential raising of consciousness, misreading the date of Marson’s address to the first Women’s Congress as 1938, rather than 1935, in order to resolve the conflicting views of women’s psychological and social lives presented in *The Moth and The Star* in 1937.

Ford Smith’s article does not discuss the early material which Smilowitz concentrates on, and this absence could be interpreted as an unwillingness to engage with those poems which may appear to militate against a clear feminist reading. Her analysis of Marson’s poetry is suggestive of the desire to foreground elements of ideological resistance and play down elements which are associated with essentialist notions of women’s difference. Indeed, it may be that Honor Ford Smith’s analysis can be traced to a particular point in feminist literary criticism when a sensitivity to charges that women’s poetry was characteristically emotional produced a distancing from material which might be used to substantiate such a claim.

Certainly the sentimental, self-sacrificial love sonnets disrupt the securing boundaries which late twentieth century feminism has constructed around our notion of the post-colonial female subject, and consequently we might trace Ford Smith’s discussion of the politics of Marson’s poetry as being informed by a desire to reassert identity-based politics through an identification of the points at which resistance seemed most startling. While I am sympathetic to such a reading, it is important not to confuse the project of recuperating and analysing a neglected writer’s work with an over zealous desire to find feminist foremothers. There is a danger that the poetic work of a figure like Marson, who was clearly involved in the struggle against female oppression, can become misrepresented as uniformly harmonious with an agenda of contemporary feminism and consequently denied a substantive reading which is sensitive to the particular complexities and culturally specificity of her version of gendered identity.

Clearly, the two women critics who have analysed the writings of Una Marson have given new prominence to the issue of gender politics.
Nevertheless, in seeking to produce readings which are of contemporary interest and critically coherent, they have also suppressed the crucial element of ambivalence in her writing and ultimately facilitated readings which promote ideas of resolution and closure. To a certain extent both have reinscribed an insistence on an integrated self (a liberal humanist myth which feminism has, in other contexts, sought to displace), they both appeal to the reality behind the representations and look to biography to substantiate their readings – the spinster or the active women's campaigner. In these respects, I would suggest that both readings are reductive in their approach.

Indeed, this brief history of Marson's critical reception seems to suggest a fundamental conflict between a series of poems which aim not to present a unified, fixed female subject and a series of critics who struggle to establish this very object. I would argue that in their desire to give Marson a poetic voice, critics have failed to realize that it is the multiplicity of her voices which so consummately reveals her aesthetic exploration of the conflicts and paradoxes which informed the cultural and gendered consciousness of her time. It is this problem which appears to be the crucial 'impasse' yet to be negotiated in approach to Marson's poetry. The readings rehearsed above together work towards the suggestion that Marson's poetry is coded by oppositional experiences: it is the literature of a fragmented, decentred subject of (having been subject to) the constructs of patriarchy and colonialism in the slave sonnets, and yet somehow a centred, whole, self-determining subject in the explicitly feminist poems. There has been no reading to date which has attempted to reconcile, or even to stage a meeting of, the perceived ideological failings of a black woman poet and her perceived triumphs, even though Marson herself published poems articulating these two positions within a single volume – thus refusing any absolute disassociation.

In the close readings to follow, I wish to contest the mutually exclusive categorising of these two poetic modes (the sentimental and the polemical) and thereby release Marson's poetry from the tyranny of cognitive binarism (that well-known accessory to imperialism). I hope to show that to perceive the collision of two language systems, two ideological positions as oppositional is to read the constitution of female subjectivity too simplistically (the feminine or the feminist), as well as to read the poems transparently. Should we not now be able to celebrate the difference of Marson's poetry in its fullness, not simply drawing attention to the ways in which her poetry is different from that of white women or black men writing in Jamaica during this period, but also highlighting the difference within. We must be careful not to let the search for the legitimate post-colonial female subject (whether constructed in the form of the oppressed [Smilowitz] or the resistant [Honor Ford-Smith]) obscure or deny the complexity of the poetry.

Within Marson's first volume, *Tropic Reveries*, the startling and somewhat disturbing sonnet sequence in which the Elizabethan
language of imperialism denotes the romance saga in classical terms, is set alongside parodies of Shakespeare and Kipling which boldly redress tradition with the aim of giving language the power of woman's experience. By reading examples from these two genres side by side, I hope to explore the range of possibilities which surface in the poetry of a black woman schooled in the patriarchal, canonical and colonial notion of literature.

I have chosen to look at ‘In Vain’ because it disrupts the assumption that a poem written in a form as conventional as a sonnet will be proportionately reliant on that structure’s eurocentrically gendered system of signification. This poem also raises the issue of mimicry, as it holds many echoes of Elizabethan and courtly love poetry but is crucially different to that genre.

**IN VAIN**

In vain I build me stately mansions fair,
And set thee as my king upon the throne,
And place a lowly stool beside thee there,
Thus, as thy slave to come into my own.

In vain I deck the halls with roses sweet
And strew the paths with petals rich and rare,
And list with throbbing heart sounds of thy feet,
The welcome voice that tells me thou art near.

In vain I watch the dawn break in the sky
And hope that thou wilt come with coming day:
Alas, Diana calmly sails on high,
But thou, king of my heart, art far away.
In vain one boon from life’s great store I crave,
No more the king comes to his waiting slave.  

The language and imagery of imperialism, which surfaces in a number of Marson’s ‘love poems’ with such disturbing and shocking effect, could be traced to the Elizabethan sonneteers. Both offer the same classical framework, in which the lover is apotheosized with the characteristic blurring of religious and amatory imagery. The frustration of fulfilment (all is ‘in vain’) could also be seen as mere convention, the portrayal of necessary cruelty and indifference on the part of the lover. Marson does present an inverted imitation of the paradigm of courtly love; the man is unattainable, placed on a throne rather than a pedestal, and the woman is actively, and inevitably unsuccessfully, wooing.

Yet, by inverting the gender roles, Marson brings new meaning to the genre. The adoration of woman and her fictive ability to wield power through indifference and abstinence within male courtly love poetry is revealed as playful and even derisory, since the real power structures of
society frustrate any such notion of female power, an issue especially pertinent in the Caribbean. The politics of such poetry exist then in the space between art and life. Whereas, in Marson’s poem it is the relation between the art and life of a black woman which makes the ‘slave image’ such a disturbing, difficult and fascinating one. However, while this poem obviously provokes consideration of the power politics of eroticism and relationships within heterosexual, patriarchal, colonial societies, I would suggest that it takes us beyond a commentary on what has elsewhere been termed ‘the pornography of Empire’.

As I have already stated, criticism to date has attempted to either suppress or dismiss sonnets such as this one, which is part of an eight poem sonnet sequence. These approaches are strongly suggestive of the fact that such poetry is considered to be a saccharine sub-genre of gendered verse and embarrassingly colonial. Within the Jamaican context ‘A Lover’s Discourse’ is not only ‘unwarranted’ (to quote Barthes). The sentimental and sacrificial proves a particularly treacherous territory for the post-colonial feminist critic for whom such poems occasion a fighting back both of charges of emotional excess and of literary dependency.

However, the poem ‘In Vain’ seems to offer us a point from which to resist these readings. The proposition of the first stanza that submission and servitude represent an opportunity ‘to come into my own’ undermines any static notion of conditioned feminine self-sacrifice or cultural masochism. At the point of submission the slave should be owned; it is a moment which traditionally signifies the denial of subjectivity, not the acquisition of it. By calling the issue of ownership into question, Marson’s poem reveals how taking control of submission can be an act of transgression. Indeed, we might wish to extend this principle to a consideration of Marson’s poetics here and suggest that by consciously crafting a poem in which subordination is undermined any relationship of ‘In Vain’ to the European sonnet tradition is similarly subverted. Thus by rehearsing a position of servitude – to poetic convention as well as to the lover/master figure – this poem is able to articulate a space in which the subject can position itself even within the structure of slavery, which might be seen as a place of no resistance. By operating within convention, the poem explores but does not endorse the surrender of self, which might be seen as the traditional destiny of the female and colonial subject. It is this ambivalent representation of woman as slave within the poem which disturbs any easy reading of Marson’s gender politics; the ultimate undecidability as to the parodic or sincere nature of this genre of her poetry demands that we engage with the complexity of sexual and cultural identity.

If we pursue the possibility of subversion as textual allegory further, the title of this volume, Tropic Reveries, might be construed rather differently from the obvious romantic and climatic interpretation. Indeed, we might wish to consider this volume as a dreaming up of
alternative tropes for the Caribbean woman writer, as a series of poems which engage in irreverent reveries concerning dominant tropes. Certainly, the figure desiring mastery is not the only trope of woman to undergo revision in this volume. Indeed, it is in *Tropic Reveries*, the volume most densely populated by these seemingly self-sacrificial love poems, that we also find the most acerbic attacks on ‘matrimony’ – the expected epitome of heterosexual romance. In this volume Marson re-models two of the ‘sacred’ speeches of English Literature (Kipling’s ‘If’ and Hamlet’s soliloquy ‘To be or not to be ...’) playfully shifting the poetic axis from a discussion of ‘man’s condition’ to an exploration of woman’s.

Although much of the text in terms of language and form is directly taken from Kipling, the effect of the poem as a whole is far from mimetic. Reconstruction on the levels of diction and form serves to facilitate deconstruction on the level of ideas. It is clear that the Jamaican woman poet is not bidding to be a pale imitation of a brilliant predecessor, but is rather choosing models and forms best suited to elucidate her own ideas and express a state of consciousness and a social role which has been left uninterrogated by patriarchy and colonialism.

The parody of Kipling’s grand recipe for manhood has an interesting subtext with reference to him as colonial writer, but I want to concentrate here on gender politics. While Kipling’s poem inscribes the ethos of imperial masculinity par excellence, Marson’s parody appropriates this framework with daring and decorum in order to communicate the consciously anti-heroic role of a ‘wife worth-while’.

*If.*

If you can keep him true when all about you
The girls are making eyes and being kind,
If you can make him spend the evenings with you
When fifty Jims and Jacks are on his mind;
If you can wait and not be tired by waiting,
Or when he comes at one, be calm and sleep,
And do not oversleep, but early waking
Smile o’er the tea cups, and ne’er think to weep.

If you can love and not make love your master,
If you can serve yet do not be his slave,
If you can hear bright tales and quit them faster,
And, for your peace of mind, think him no knave;
If you can bear to hear the truth you tell him
Twisted around to make you seem a fool,
Or see the Capstan on your bureau burning
And move the noxious weed, and still keep cool.

If you can make one heap of all he gives you
And try to budget so that it’s enough,
And add, subtract and multiply the issue,
So that the Grocer will not cut up rough;
If you can force your dress, and hat, and stocking
To serve their turn long after they are worn,
And pass the ‘sales’, and do not think it shocking
To wear a garment that has once been torn:

If you can walk when he takes out the Ford
And teaches girls to drive before you learn,
And list to tales of tyres without a wry word,
And let him feel you’re glad for his return:
If you can fill the unforgiving minute
With sixty seconds work and prayer and smile,
Yours is the world and everything that’s in it,
And what is more you’ll be a wife worth while.

(With apologies to Kipling.)

The trials which mark a boy’s rite of passage into manhood are travestied by the domestic obstacle course which faces a prospective bride. In the poem, the initiation into matrimony is revealed to be an exercise requiring practical skills, dissimulation and self-delusion. Indeed, although Kipling writes of maturity and Marson of matrimony the ultimate subject of both poems is significantly the same, in terms of a discussion of masculine fulfilment, and yet crucially different. Marson’s poem effectively re-defines and re-aligns the status of this achievement, again raising a question mark over established notions of value. The references within the third stanza of the poem point to the very real problems of budgeting, but also suggest that to be contented and worthwhile a wife must learn to play with the concept of value. The manipulation of figures which the wife must learn standing figuratively for the creative accounting with her own happiness which she must perform in order for her marriage to balance emotionally.

In this poem, Marson acknowledges and ‘plays off’ the primary text with critical awareness, thus making the ideological inflections of the poem far more explicit. To undervalue parody as either a sign of the writer’s inability to escape received models (a potential post-colonial reading) or of a penchant for apolitical play (a potential postmodern reading) would be to miss the radical relationship which these poems establish between different models of experience and different participants within an established discourse. As Helen Tiffin has pointed out:

Pastiche and parody ... offer a key to the destabilisation and deconstruction of a repressive European archive. Far from endlessly deferring or denying meaning, these same tropes function as potential decolonizing strategies which invest (or reinvest) devalued ‘peripheries’ with meaning.

It is woman and domestic politics as periphery which Marson addresses in her parodies. As Linda Hutcheon points out, parody ‘establishes difference at the heart of similarity. No integration into a new context
can avoid altering meaning, and perhaps even value. Indeed, it is crucial that the transcontextual act becomes transvaluative as the issue of sexual difference is written into Marson's versions.

Rhonda Cobham-Sander has described Marson's parodies as "of slight literary merit ... probably written while Marson was still at school for the entertainment of school friends." Although this suggestion of commonplace schoolgirl activity is purely speculative it might be interesting to pursue this line of enquiry a little further. Rather than indicating the lesser value of these poems (Cobham Sander's comment implies that they are somehow inconsequential and aesthetically immature), this idea that the poems were produced as a direct response to and in the context of the colonial educational system serves to highlight their inherently subversive quality. The pedagogic imperative for repetition which was instilled by this system is here radically revised through parodies of high literary discourses. By choosing to travesty such well-established texts, Marson is able to demonstrate her knowledge of tradition, whilst asserting a counter-discourse via the substitution of woman's experience.

The apology to Kipling at the end of the parody does not signal the filial relationship with indifference. Marson deliberately foregrounds the 'original creator' and text and thus ironically references the consciously disobedient nature of this poem through a gesture of mock-humility. Although such explicit intertextuality may suggest that the meanings in operation here can only come into 'play' because of their textual (and colonial) antecedents, the counter-textuality of this poem illustrates that Marson's relationship to tradition is not passive or derivative in nature.

While Cobham-Sander seeks to give agency to the education system, with Marson simply in the role of reactor, my reading seeks to highlight how this poem actually reclaims agency from an institution founded on a belief in the hierarchy of discourses in order to communicate a consciously non- (if not anti) elitist perspective. Far from being any incidental act of verbal play, this parody presents ideological rivalry, offering Marson an opportunity to radically dislocate tradition from authority and to question the gender politics of such an authoritative text.

Indeed, far from reading this parody as insignificant experiment with poetry or as a 'miscellaneous' work unrelated to the volume as a whole, I wish to propose that Marson's parody be read as a paradigmatic text for an analysis of the tensions between imitation and creation within much of her work where intertextuality operates more subtly. Parody with its possibility for split signification works both within and against the colonial imperative to mimic, making a double demand on meaning which I would suggest is also operating in some of Marson's 'love poems' on a less explicit level.

With these links in mind, it is interesting to consider the element of self-parody to be found within *Tropic Reveries*. In 'To Wed Or Not To
Wed’ Marson ironizes women who ‘pine and sigh under a single life’, an agenda which a less generous critic may accuse her love poems earlier in the volume of fulfilling and in ‘If’ she seems to satirize ‘In Vain’ with the counsel to ‘serve yet do not be his slave’. Perhaps then, having arrived at the parodies, which are the penultimate poems of the volume, we can laugh at these earlier poems as unenlightened, if that is the parodies give us anything legitimate to laugh at? Perhaps we should laugh at the wonderful sense of contradiction which is embraced by Marson within one volume? Would this be an embarrassed laughter at the fact that Marson failed to spot her own discrepancies, or at the fact that no single version is more ‘true’ even though they may appear to be mutually exclusive?

If we laugh at these parodies, I think that it should be because they dare to confront paradox, embrace their constructed ‘other’ (the slave sonnets), and thereby tell the ‘whole truth’ which is necessarily partial. By communicating both versions of female destiny, Marson is able to disclose the multiplicity of identities, breaking free of the fiction of a ‘unified self’, to reveal the complex and contradictory constitution of a black woman’s subjectivity within a colonial and patriarchal society.

Read in this manner Una Marson’s poetry, testifies to the way in which a black woman poet was able to employ a language created by and imbued with a paternalistic and patriarchal ideology in order to write poetry which explored and exploded the mythologies constructed to support racism and sexism. However, it is her awareness of herself as a woman within a Jamaican society, where oppressive ideologies still operated, which provides the reader with a poetry which probes the dimensions of self beyond the nationalization of consciousness which has come to mark the literary achievement of this period.

NOTES

6. Ibid., p. xii.

10. Ibid., p. 32.


15. Ibid.

16. Erika Smilowitz, "'Weary of Life and All My Heart’s Dull Pain": The Poetry of Una Marson.', p. 22.

17. Ibid., p. 24.

18. Ibid., p. 25.

19. Ibid., p. 22.


