Jean Binta Breeze

Testament

tsing girl
sing
dere's more to you
dan skin

my fingers witlow
from years of cleaning corners
where brush an dustpan
couldn' reach
same han
use to plait yuh hair
wid pride
oil it thickness
wid hope an dreams
tie it up wid ribbons
of some rainbow future

mi apron was a canvas
all de greases
from rubbin down all yuh bodies
an cooking plenty greens
ah use to smell it
before ah roll it up
tek it to de laundry
smell de action a mi days
de sweat a mi action
mekking likkle time
fi yuh all
an yuh fadda
mekking time
fi a likkle formal prayer
to de heavens
fah dese days ah fine

every thought is a prayer
dat de pot won't bwooil over
while ah pull myself upstairs

to scrub de bath
dat de cooker
won't start play up
an de smell a gas
come leaking troo
dat someting teacha sey
would register
an yuh all could see a way
to stretch yuh brain
an move yuh han
pas idleness
to de honour a yuh work

ah can feel it
now yuh gettin older
steppin pas my likkle learning
dat yuh tink ah stupid
ah see how yuh fadda
embarrass yuh frens
wid im smell a oil
from de London trains
so yuh now stop bringing dem home

ah don't talk to yuh much no more
outside de house
ah never did have time
to soun de soun
a de madda tongue
or mek mi way wid ease
troo dem drawing room
but in yuh goings girl
don't mind we smell

we memories of back home
we regular Sunday church
in de back a de local hall
we is jus wat we is
watching you grow
into dis place
an ah want yuh to know
dis is yuh own
we done bled it
yuh born here
in de shadow a Big Ben
im strike one
as de waters break
an you come rushing troo
ah don't move far as yuh
is nat mi duty to
an de cole does bad tings
to mi knee
I is ole tree girl
rough outside
wid years of breaking bark
feeling de damp
yuh is seed
burstin new goun

so sing girl
sing
dere's more to you
dan skin

ah see yuh eye turn weh
anytime yuh see mi han
an at my age
ah really keen worry
who ah belch in front a
an if ah see someting good
in a skip
ah know it embarrass yuh
wen ah tek it out
but in dis place
dem trow weh nuff good tings
an waste is someting
drill out a me
from young
we had to save weself
from a shoestring

to a likkle left over
an yuh know
how ah keep all yuh tongue sweet
wen ah tun mi han
to mek something special
out a nutten

ah nat trying to mek yuh feel sorry
believe me
ah just want yuh to understan
dat we come as far as we can
an we try to arm yuh
wid all de tings
dat in fi we small way
we could see dat yuh might need
an nat telling yuh look roun
jus

sing girl sing
dere's more to you
dan skin

yuh granmadda
was Nana
mountain strong
fighting pon er piece a lan
she plant er corn
one one
two two
in likkle pool a dirt
between hard cockpit stone
reap big ears
er grata was sharp
use to talk dry corn
to flour
needed for de trail
de long hard journey
carving out somewhere
jus like we come here

we done pay de dues
but don't tink nobody
owe yuh nutten
jus stan yuh goun
is yuh born lan
yuh navel string cut yah
so sing girl sing
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(1992)
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Can a Dub Poet be a Woman?

In 1978, when I first moved from rural Jamaica into Kingston to study at the Jamaica School of Drama, I made closer contact with the dub poets, Mikey, Oku and Mutabaruka. I was already writing, but refused to read with them publicly at that time as I didn’t feel my work was ready. It wasn’t until 1981 that I first took to the stage with Muta in Montego Bay and he decided to record my work. This led to the acclaim of being, as one magazine termed it, ‘the first female dub poet in the male-dominated field’.

I hadn’t really taken on what the title meant as I had grown up as a young child performing the works of Louise Bennett on stages all over Jamaica in the annual festival. I had read and performed works from other women writers in Jamaica, but Miss Lou had not only drawn on the characters, experiences and languages of the people, she had also managed to give the people’s poetry back to them in a way that made the nation celebrate itself. No other women poet had taken on the popular stage, no other had broken so totally out of the literary and academic circles of recognition, indeed, had forced them to accept her and so opened the way for all of us who now work in our own language with ease.

I was therefore quite at home in the arena of dub poetry. It satisfied my personal political concerns about whom I was talking with and the voice became my instrument, not the page, although I do recognise the need for documentation. I enjoy the works of many writers but am always aware of what in the text is available to me because of my own educational background which is not yet, for economic and political reasons, the background of the majority of my people. And I hasten to say here that this does not mean producing a kind of work that patronises, but work so simple in its truth and in its details that it becomes as big as the universe. This is something quite natural to the peasantry I grew up within, as can quite easily be seen in our proverbs.

For this, I salute the coming of dub poetry. My criticism at this point in time is that there is not enough experimentation with the form and it is becoming as constraining in its rhythms as the iambic pentameter. My first voice in poetry, therefore, was largely poetical and I was not aware at the time of what difference it actually made being a woman in the field. However, there are three comments I remember as moments when I really had to stop and think.

The first of these was when Mutabaruka offered to re-record some of my work in his voice and many people thought they were lyrics much more suited to a male voice and someone even suggested that they had been written by a man. This was with particular reference to ‘Aid travels with a bomb’, my anti-IMF poem, and seemed to suggest that it was much more masculine to achieve such distance from the subjective or personal.

The second comment came after playing my first Reggae Sunsplash with a full band and dancing across the stage while performing. I was told by many people that a radical dub poet should not be ‘wearing up her waist’ on the stage as it presented a sexual image rather than a radical one. This led me into an era of wearing military khaki uniforms for performing, but I soon realised that even if I wore sackcloth it would not reduce the sexual energy I carry normally as an individual and which becomes a source of creative energy on the stage. I still do not wear a G-string, but I dress in a way in which the woman in me is totally at ease in motion so the body can also sing and I dare anyone to say that for a woman to be accepted as a radical voice she cannot celebrate her own sensuality.

Thirdly, when I had my first album turned down by the American company that had put out my previous work, on the grounds that my new work was becoming far too personal and there were too many pieces dealing with love. For me, the coming of ‘Riddym Raving’, the madwoman’s poem, broke form so completely that it was impossible to return to the shape of my earlier work. It was a time of self-searching, and I allowed my pen its freedom when I realised that my politics had never been learned through the study or acceptance of any ideology. I have never read Marx totally and came to C.L.R. James through my love of cricket. My politics were shaped by my personal experiences and those of the people round me in their day-to-day concerns. The closest concerns I shared were obviously those of women. I lost the need to teach or preach, especially to audiences already converted, and found the courage to tell, and I will not manipulate the voices that work through me or the truth they bring.

Now, I am told, my work has advanced beyond the confines of dub poetry, but that is not to say I am achieving as much as other women writers in conventional poetry, and to tell you the truth, I don’t much care. I like this space, there are no rules here.

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