

"GWINE FOREIGN": EMIGRATION, GENDER AND IDENTITY
IN SELECTED SHORT STORIES BY JAMAICAN WOMEN WRITERS

Emigration is a characteristic phenomenon of Jamaican (and, generally speaking, Caribbean) life, and as such it is one of the circumstances that have shaped the peculiar structure of family and society in the region. On the one hand, it is a key factor in explaining the strong presence and the economic relevance of women within the household as a consequence of the high percentage of males that have been emigrating since the middle of the nineteenth century; according to Olive Senior, one fifth of the men in reproductive age left Jamaica between 1881 and 1884, and Jamaica is, together with Barbados, the Caribbean territory that has lost a greater amount of population because of emigration (146,000 people between 1881 and 1921) (Senior 1991: 108). The opportunity of working abroad has generally been granted to males according to the traditional concept of males as *breadwinners* and to the hierarchical sexual division of labour, which favoured male over female labour force. Women were dissuaded from emigrating on the basis of their relevance within the family: their duty was to remain at home looking after their children while men sent money from abroad. This tendency, however, has been changing over time, and during the 1970s and 1980s more women than men have emigrated, especially highly qualified women and skilled labourers (108).

On the other hand, another important consequence of emigration is that Caribbean family ties are geographically very extensive (even though they may sometimes be superficial): in one of Makeda Silvera's stories, "The Funeral", for instance, the narrator evokes her grandad's funeral, when the whole family gathered together: "As the funeral day got closer, more relatives arrived from Canada, England and the United States. Most I was meeting for the first time." (Silvera 1991: 21).

Considering, therefore, the social relevance of this phenomenon, it is hardly surprising to find it as the central topic of an increasing number of works by contemporary authors, many of whom have themselves been immigrants at some point, some indeed still are. I would here like to focus on a corpus of short stories by Jamaican women writers in order to analyse the way in which the categories of gender and class interact to determine the female experience of emigration in Jamaica. Although these writers incorporate both male and female characters, the latter kind by far outnumbers the former, thus inscribing in Jamaican literature a point of view that has been quite neglected by male literary discourse until now. Even when male emigration is described, it is often presented from the perspective of the women left behind, underlining in this way the often forgotten daily ordeals of female single parents burdened with the overwhelming responsibility of home and child caring with little more than personal effort and sacrifice to rely on, as may be seen in stories such as Dianne Maguire's "That Last Day" and "The Sanitary Inspector" (1991), or Lorna Goodison's "The Big Shot" (1990), to mention but a few.

Within the realm of female emigration as it is depicted in the stories, a major division is immediately noticed, namely that between domestic and foreign emigration, each of which shows its own peculiarities as far as women are concerned. Since this is too wide a field that goes beyond the possibilities of a short analysis, my interest here will be focused on the emigration away from Jamaica and the way in which this experience affects the lives of Jamaican women.

All of the female characters who decide to emigrate to a foreign country are led by one and the same motivation, that of improving a set of personal circumstances which, for one reason or another, may appear to them as oppressive or reductive. However, there is a significant difference within this group which is determined by the social class to which each woman belongs. Women from the lower classes usually set their eyes and hopes on the United States, and "America" is invariably perceived as a dream, as the promised land where everything is possible. Thus, in "Foxy and di Macca Palace War" (Sistren 1987), the protagonist / narrator, a teenage single parent, bears her hard life in Kingston with just one hope: being sent for by her "baby faada" in America. Similarly, in "The Carrion Eaters" (Campbell 1978), Daphne, who has had to abandon her education on her mother's death, feels suffocated in her monotonous and scarcely promising job, and all her expectations are put in her imminent journey to the States, where she hopes she will be able to resume her studies.

In "A District Called Fellowship", also by Campbell, Stella is on the verge of meeting her mother in the United States, a circumstance that considerably highlights her position before the community, since, as Senior has pointed out, "The whole notion of going abroad is perceived as a means by which you can improve your status in life. If you've been abroad you are automatically enhanced in the eyes of the people who stayed behind." (Kenyon 1991: 105). In the case of Stella, moreover, leaving Jamaica also means breaking free from the fate of precocious motherhood and the consequent personal limitation and loss of opportunities that very often awaits Jamaican teenagers: "... she was going to America. That was the best thing. If she stayed in the district too long, the next thing, one of the worthless boys would start to breed her and that would be the end of her." (Campbell 1978: 37).

Nevertheless, more often than not, the American dream can easily become the American nightmare, since Jamaican immigrants in the United States or in Canada have to face the racist and neo-colonialist attitudes of an overwhelmingly white society (at least as far as power is concerned) which considers immigrants as second-class citizens. In Velma Pollard's "My Mother", the protagonist finds out, many years after her mother's death, the implications of the latter's experience as an immigrant in New York, when she recognizes her own mother in the faces of the Black immigrants she comes across on her visit to this American city:

Everybody was running and everybody looked frightened. But you could see that all this had become natural. This speed was now normal and because they couldn't see their own frightened faces, they couldn't recognise their fright. When you answer long enough to a name that for one reason or another is wrong, and when you live

long enough with a face that is always wrong, a frightened look grows on you and becomes an inseparable part of you. (Pollard 1989: 28)

The same pattern of alienation can be found in “Memory”, the last part of Silvera’s short story cycle *Remembering G*. In this piece the experience of emigration is presented in the form of a poem and from the point of view of the Jamaican immigrant in Canada who nostalgically evokes her home island. Canada is here defined mainly as the negation of all things Jamaican:

There are no balconies here.
The verandas are not as big and wide.
No wooden floor with fretwork designs.
No rain beating down on zinc roof.
No dogs running free. No cows on the loose.
Squirrels and racoons running free.
Dogs on leash. Cats on leash. (Silvera 1991: 101)

Words like “balconies”, “verandas” and “wooden floors” refer back to the domestic environment traditionally associated to women, and which for the character in this story clearly evokes the figure of her mother. Mother and land are closely linked here and, therefore, emigration deprives the narrator not only of the Jamaican land but of the mother / land in a much wider sense, since while her mother is pervasive in her childhood memories of Jamaica, she is utterly absent in her evocation of the Canadian experience. And again it is racism that lays down the patterns of everyday life in a white–male–dominated multicultural society in whose version of history women remain hidden:

History is about the English and the French.
History is about the “discovery” of North America by Christopher Columbus.
History is Canada’s Indians on reserves.
Hudson Bay Company.
School yard chants
Nigger
Darkie
Negro
Chocolate face
Nigger (102)

Among the middle classes emigration acquires a very different meaning. The reasons that lead the accommodated class to leave Jamaica are fundamentally economic, but, far beyond the level of survival, what they seek to ensure is a privileged economic status that is sometimes threatened by socio–political turbulence. In the words of one of Alecia McKenzie’s characters, “the three V’s had been in for some time – video, Volvo and visa to America. If you didn’t have all three, you weren’t saying a damn thing.” (McKenzie 1992: 88). The

favoured destination in these cases is not New York, redoubt of working-class Jamaicans fighting for survival, but Miami, the paradise of Jamaican middle classes. Miami is for these Jamaicans principally an ideological locus and provides an evasion from the threatening reality of life on the island. This attitude is clearly portrayed through the main character of "See Me in me Benz and T'ing", for whom Miami becomes a constant point of reference: from there come all the "indispensable" luxuries that are impossible to find in Jamaica, where there are only "Zinc fences hiding poverty and nastiness, hate and crime. (...) People living, no, not living, existing on top of each other." (Campbell 1978: 27).

Attending a foreign University appears as a recurrent reason for middle-class young women to emigrate, either to England or to North American countries. This experience, which sometimes has autobiographical implications since some of the authors (Senior, McKenzie and Pollard, among others) have themselves completed their studies abroad, frequently represents an inner voyage in search of one's own identity, in the sense that it forces the character to confront not only the difficulties of adjustment to an often hostile reality but also her own self-concept as a person, leading her to reflect on issues that were out of her concern while she was in Jamaica.

The character / narrator of Sistren's "Red Ibo", a nearly-white middle-class woman with progressive social ideals, chooses an English University hoping to find a space of freedom, since "Surely in those places they didn't ban information on Cuba or prohibit debate on Marxism." (Sistren 1987: 247); but it will not take her long to perceive the racism dominating the rigid British society, where the social and racial codes are very different from the Jamaican ones: "Here in Jamaica I had to defend myself for defending black rights, as I wasn't accepted as black. In England that was not a problem – I was black." (249).

A similar experience of racial conscience awakening is the one undergone by Marci in McKenzie's "The Grenada Defense League" during her life as an undergraduate in Georgia. On the one hand, she suffers extreme racism in the shape of verbal abuse and physical violence, and for the first time becomes conscious of herself as a "niggah" (McKenzie 1992: 129), something she was protected against in Jamaica by her social position. But, besides this, she has to face a more subtle form of racism: the nationalistic paternalism that people in the United States show towards "the islands", an umbrella term which for them unmistakably designates the Caribbean, but which Caribbean people find restrictive and humiliating.

The stories show how the process of integration in a hostile dominating culture often demands submerging and hiding one's own traces of the denigrated culture and adopting instead the supposedly superior values of the target culture. Michelle Cliff, a Jamaican-American herself, has explored and described this experience in her autobiographical text *Claiming an Identity They Taught Me to Despise*, where she uses the term "passing", which at once evokes the Middle Passage and establishes a parallelism between both experiences:

Passing demands a desire to become invisible. A ghost-life. An ignorance of connections. (...)

Passing demands quiet. And from that quiet – silence. (...)

Passing demands you keep that knowledge to yourself. (...)

Isolate yourself. If they find out about you it's all over. (Cliff 1980: 5–7)

One of the most obvious barriers hindering this *passing* is the one concerning language, also probably the most difficult trait to keep submerged. All the characters who “go foreign” experiment the crucial need for them to adapt to a new linguistic environment if they seek to achieve integration. The clear correlation between language and class in the Caribbean, where access to education implies the command of a greater number of registers within the linguistic continuum, is made evident by the fact that middle-class immigrants find less difficulty in code-switching to a more standard variety of English that helps them submerge their foreignness, whereas it is in those characters whose speech is closer to Jamaican Creole that we observe the greatest speech transformations towards standardization.

Thus, in “Bella Makes Life” we can trace the gradual Americanization of Bella’s speech through her letters to her husband in Jamaica: while her first letter shows Creole as her usual code (in expressions such as “What you saying?”, “I really sorry” or “I working two jobs” [Goodison 1990: 76]), in the last one she seems to have internalized a much more standardized grammar: “I know you’re mad because you didn’t want me to come back to the States, but darling I’m just trying ...” (80). Similarly, in “Pinkie”, a Jamaican hairdresser who has lived in England for some time, seems to have acquired a degree of Englishness in her accent that obviously bothers some of her Jamaican customers when she returns: ““Would you sit here, please?” she say, like she was born in England. Anybody hearing her wouldn’t know she only spend two years there.” (McKenzie 1992: 24–25).

But if integration is a hard and painful task, virtually impossible to carry out to its full extent, by no means is it easier to come back to Jamaica after having been an exile. All of the stories depicting women who decide to go back to their home island, either temporarily or for good, show how this decision involves, on the one hand, inner conflicts derived from the difficulty of becoming once more a part of Jamaican life, which cannot usually be reconciled with the idealised image imposed by absence, and, on the other hand, the problems of redefining the concept of *home*. “Dry Land Tourist”, by the Jamaican–Canadian author Dianne Maguire, illustrates this very clearly. The title itself, “dry-land tourist”, “that derogatory term for a Jamaican who plays at being a foreigner” (Maguire 1991: 9), sets the protagonist apart from the very beginning of the narration, by virtue of the inevitable linguistic traces that her long Canadian exile has left on her speech. Only once in the story does she code-switch to Jamaican Creole, and even then it remains unuttered, confined to the realm of her thoughts, as if suggesting some uneasiness.

Unlike her colleagues, who speak of *home* as the places where they settled as immigrants, Ellen has never thought of her British Columbia dwelling as home; rather, this concept is for her heavily associated to her grandmother’s old house, but again her visit can only render an image of abandonment and decadence, and the painful feeling of being an intruder. Her initial enthusiasm gives way to self-questioning and doubt, and eventually she ends up going back

to Canada. Likewise, in Michelle Cliff's "Columba", a twelve-year-old girl, Jamaican-born but raised in the United States, goes back to the island only to find herself rejected and ridiculed for her American accent and her ignorance of Jamaican ways, until she realises that "I was, after all, an American now, only here temporarily" (Cliff 1991: 21).

Goodison's "Bella Makes Life" again shows how the migration experience can radically alter the course of a woman's life to the extent that she cannot possibly go back again, in both a physical and a metaphorical sense. For Bella, emigrating to New York constitutes an ambivalent experience. On the one hand, it involves the awakening of her individuality as a woman and a new self-consciousness, which has a reflection not only in her new bold and self-assertive appearance, but also in the greater initiative she manifests in both her professional projects and her relationship with her husband, whom she has left behind to look after the children. However, on going back home, she finds him utterly reluctant to accept this new Bella, who has subverted the traditional patterns of man as breadwinner and woman as wife and child-carer. Thus, Bella is faced with a painful dilemma, and she eventually chooses to pursue her own individuality going back to New York on her own and leaving behind an old life, the limitations of which she is no longer prepared to submit to.

The fact that the narrative is here focalized by the male character has the ironical effect of underlining men's incapability of assuming the roles of father and mother that women are so often forced to adopt on the absence of a male partner. This re-definition of the traditionally female role as mother is recurrent in the stories depicting women who leave Jamaica, especially in the case of younger women, like Carmen in McKenzie's "Full Stop" (1992), for whom her professional career as a doctor is prioritised over motherhood much to the amazement of her traditional grandmother in Jamaica.

Obviously there is much more to emigration in the Jamaican context than can be explored here. Nevertheless, this analysis may serve as an illustration of the socio-cultural complexities deriving from an experience that is shared by the majority of Jamaicans in one way or another. The stories mentioned here are only a small sample of a much more extensive corpus including also novels and poems (as well as drama, in the case of *Sistren*, for instance), in which Jamaican women writers explore and inscribe this issue in the literary map from an entirely new (female) point of view, thus reflecting the social changes that are taking place in Jamaica, where emigration is no longer an exclusively male experience. Emigration involves a re-definition of the whole set of concepts that conform the female experience: issues of race, class, language, cultural identity and sexual role are brought into question and need to be articulated in a different way which will fit the new context. For better or for worse, this still appears to be a one-way path since no successful returning "home" is portrayed which may close the emigration circle satisfactorily.

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