



The Fat Black Woman's Poems

Grace Nichols

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Grace Nichols gives us images that stare us straight in the eye, images of joy, challenge, accusation. Her 'fat black woman' is brash; rejoices in herself; poses awkward questions to politicians, rulers, suitors, to a white world that still turns its back. Grace Nichols writes in a language that is wonderfully vivid yet economical of the pleasures and sadnesses of memory, of loving, of 'the power to be what I am, a woman, charting my own futures'.

The Fat Black Woman's Poems Details

Date : Published September 13th 1984 by Virago

ISBN : 9780860686354

Author : Grace Nichols

Format : Paperback 64 pages

Genre : Poetry, Classics

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Em says

I studied this book when i was finishing my a level english language and literature course at college. I loved it. She writes with pure honesty on how she views the world and vise versa. It made me laugh at some of the references she uses. Its one of the best poetry books i have ever read and what makes it brilliant is it written as though the words were being spoken. Must read.

Emmkay says

I enjoyed this collection by a British poet who emigrated from Guyana - loved the occasional humour and playfulness, the body-positivity, the way she dealt with themes of race, migration, and female labour.

Momtaza Mehri says

Nichols' has always wrote with so much heart and lyricalness. 'Beauty is a fat black woman walking the fields pressing a breezed hibiscus to her ear'. Such gems are dotted throughout.

Jonterri says

I felt hugged by this book. I loved the self-love, adoration, and pride in these poems as well as the honest eye on history and what that means/has meant to the black woman's body. These are short poems, like little jabs at perception. Mostly what I felt is love in these poems. Which was really nice. These poems have a Caribbean accent, which was also really nice.

Dannii Elle says

The recent booktube debates over the importance of diversity in literature led to me finally picking up this book, after having it on my tbr since forever and my bookshelves for almost a year. I use the term 'debate' lightly, as there should never be a question over the importance and impact that the representation of all persons of colour and expression of all sexualities can have on an individual. The only 'problem' I can see with diversity, is that there isn't enough of it! Thankfully the vast majority agree and the few hate-filled individuals concerned in the original argument were told in no uncertain terms where to go with their outdated and disgusting views! This debate has, however, heightened my awareness over my own need to diversify my reading and my bookshelves.

Now that is settled, let's get on with the actual review.

This is an anthology of short, autobiographical poems upon the primary subjects of skin colour and body

image. I found each one a strong and representative literary manifestation of the strong and independent woman who penned them. This collection, despite short, was beautiful and poignant and each individual poem managed to convey a vast amount in such few words.

I found this a wonderfully empowering collection that both heightened my awareness over the feelings expressed by someone of Caribbean origin whilst remaining relatable and approachable to all. This depicts feminist values that spurs the individual to reject categorical definitions of both themselves and others and to learn to love both the physical form and the soul of the person they are.

~ ?????? ~ says

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Mark says

When I first picked up Nichols' collection of poems for my second semester at university, I must admit I looked at it, chuckled a bit, threw it in the corner and then never looked back. It wasn't until I learned of Caribbean poetry as a whole with writers like Derek Walcott and Kamau Brathwaite that I began to truly appreciate Nichol's Fat Black Woman.

Of course, it is a humorous, slim collection of poems regarding the self, a fat black woman living in an horribly image conscious society. Feel-good poetry that spurs you to reject categorical definitions of yourself/others and what is 'right' and 'wrong', be happy with who you are, etc. However, like a lot of Caribbean poetry, there is the voice of a nation screaming out of the page. The rhythm, tone and word choice allow us into a world of foreign culture, Caribbean heritage. Utilizing Brathwaite's drum style rhythm and also writing in a distinct style and tone of a Caribbean accent it is easy to be overwhelmed by the highly personal world it creates.

I really enjoyed reading and re-reading these poems. Although they deal with the persona and booming voice of the Fat Black Woman, the poems are also brimming with the voice of a nation. All you have to do is look a little further.

Raquel Curvacheiro says

Tropical Death

The fat black woman want
a brilliant tropical death
not a cold sojourn
in some North Europe far/forlorn

The fat black woman want
some heat/hibiscos at her feet
blue sea dress
to wrap her neat

The fat black woman want
some bawl
no quiet jerk tear wiping
a polite hearse withdrawal

The fat black woman want
all her dead rights
first night
third night
nine night
all the sleepless droning
red-eyed wake nights

In the heart
of her mother's sweetbreast
In the shade
of the sun leaf's cool bless
In the bloom
of her people's bloodrest

the fat black woman want
a brilliant tropical death yes

Jessica says

This was amazing. Everything about this anthology is deeply personal, and immensely relateable. All women, especially woman of colour, should read this book. It evokes such powerful imagery of Caribbean culture and of the general, often overlooked struggles of a black woman in western society. Just incredible.

Paul says

I enjoyed this slim volume of poems by Grace Nichols, which I picked up after reading an anthology of poems on World War 1 in which her's stood out. There are some lovely sounds and images in these deceptively simple poems, and like poetry by Linton Kwesi Johnson or Robert Burns, it is poetry in which the accent of the author is an integral part.

Paul says

I do make periodic efforts to read more poetry and I'm already a fan of Grace Nichols, having read another collection of her poetry and a novel. Nichols is Guyanese and her poetry reflects Caribbean culture and rhythms. These poems have more playfulness and humour than some of Nichols other works. Nevertheless they make serious points:

“Shopping in London winter
is a real drag for the fat black woman
going from store to store
in search of accommodating clothes
and de weather so cold
Look at the frozen thin mannequins
fixing her with grin
and de pretty face salesgals
exchanging slimming glances
thinking she don't notice
Lord is aggravating
Nothing soft and bright and billowing
to flow like breezy sunlight
when she walking
The fat black woman curses in Swahili/Yoruba
and nation language under her breathing
all this journeying and journeying
The fat black woman could only conclude
that when it come to fashion
the choice is lean
Nothing much beyond size 14”

Nichols is obviously questioning the traditional aesthetic concerning female beauty and creating a non-conforming heroine. The title of the book immediately raises three social stereotypes; fat, black and female. Nichols also considers the role of female labour as the poems move between Britain and the Caribbean;

The daily going out
and coming in
always being hurried along
like like ... cattle
In the evenings
returning from the fields

she tried hard
to walk like a woman
(...)
O but look
there's a waterpot growing
from her head

These portrayals of women are not monolithic and there is a nuanced exploration of female identity, but all of the poems have a great vitality about them because of the way Nichols expresses herself. She describes her own purpose in writing this:

“Although The Fat Black Women's [sic] Poems came out of a sheer sense of fun of having a fat black woman doing exactly as she pleases, at the same time she brings into being a new image--one that questions the acceptance of the "thin" European model as the ideal figure of beauty. The Fat Black Woman is a universal figure, slipping from one situation to the other, taking a satirical, tongue-in-cheek look at the world”

And

“The fact that, I mean, all of our cultural "things" were denigrated and looked down upon while the European "things" were the ones celebrated in every way, even in terms of physical beauty. So there is always going to be that tension because some of these things still exist even today. So some of your writing will be a kind of reaction against that, impacting against it and at other times there is synthesis.”

The fat black woman
remembers her Mama
and them days of playing
the Jovial Jemima
tossing pancakes
to heaven
in smokes of happy hearty
murderous blue laughter
Starching and cleaning
O yes scolding and wheedling
pressing little white heads
against her big-aproned breasts
seeing down to the smallest fed/
feeding her own children on Satanic bread
But this fat black woman ain't no Jemima
Sure thing Honey/Yeah

Again here there is a warmth, but it is also satire as it reflects on a US advert for pancakes from the midcentury.

This is a good collection of poetry and Nichols makes her points with great grace and humour.

Phillip says

Grace Nichols is a marvelous poet, who uses humor to explore her own alienation as a Caribbean person

living in Britain and as a large woman in a European culture that valorizes thinness. Her poems are laced through with both vicious irony and good natured wit, drawing attention to how her skin tone, her Caribbean heritage, and her size make her an oddity in London, but also finding moments to identify with other immigrants also dreaming of home in the London cold. She writes lovingly of the tropical Caribbean, evoking the sea, various fruits, sugar cane, and the equatorial sun. But this longing for home is counterbalanced with poems evoking the colonial plantation heritage of the Afro-Caribbean--poems looking back to the days of slavery and plantation service when African slaves cut down sugar cane for transport back to Britain. All of these themes, all of these concerns, come together in a wonderful collection demonstrating the humor, sorrow, pride, and rage of the postcolonial experience.

Bee Byrd says

The title was enough to draw me and make me feel complete.

Zanna says

Thoughts drifting through the fat black woman's head while having a full bubble bath

Steatopygous sky
Steatopygous sea
Steatopygous waves
Steatopygous me

O how I long to place my foot
on the head of anthropology

to swig my breasts
in the face of history

to scrub my back
with the dogma of theology

to put my soap
in the slimming industry's
profitsome spoke

Steatopygous sky
Steatopygous sea
Steatopygous waves
Steatopygous me

mwpm says

Beauty
is a fat black woman

walking the fields
pressed a breeze
hibiscus
to her cheek
while the sun lights up
her feet

Beauty
is a fat black woman
riding the waves
drifting in happy oblivion
while the sea turns back
to hug her shape

- **Beauty**, pg. 7

* * *

In London
every now and then
I get this craving
for my mother's food
I leave art galleries
in search of plantains
saltfish/sweet potatoes

I need this link

I need this touch
of home
swinging my bag
like a beacon
against the cold

- **Like a Beacon**, pg. 27

* * *

Cut and contriving women
hauling fresh shrimps
up in their seines

standing waist deep
in the brown voluptuous
water of their own element

how I remember those women
sweeping in the childish rivers
of my eyes

and the fish slipping
like eels
through their laughing thighs

- **Those Women**, pg. 39
