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'I ain't a Belle': Vitiating the Fallacy of (Un)usual Black Female Body through the Poetry of Grace Nichols

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Abstract:

Un(usual) is a fundamental aspect of being black in a white-dominated society, especially for a woman. Due to this, black women have experienced a sense of rejection and invisibility. They weren't given the attention they deserved or provided for. The rejection and misrepresentation proceed further in the realm of body as mentioned in the title. The physical body has through the ages been a place - a recurrent space for violence and resistance simultaneously - especially for African and Caribbean women. This paper encapsulates this notion with a special reference to the poetry of Grace Nichols coupled with Black Feminism. The initiative centres on Black women's experiences and challenges with overlapping racial and gender identities, as well as with intersecting sexism and racist oppressions.

Keywords: Black, Woman, Body, Grace Nichols, Race, Gender.

Look at me! Look at my arm!

I have ploughed and planted

and gathered into barns, and

no man could head me!

And ain't I a woman? (Truth 253).

Quite frequently, the terms "black" and "women" were used interchangeably to refer to black men and white women, respectively. Because of this, black women experienced a sense

of rejection and invisibility. They weren't given the attention they deserved or provided for. The rejection and misrepresentation proceed further in the realm of body as mentioned in the title. Since the black African (Male) body was subjected to trauma and torture during the colonial and enslavement periods, it is a highly historicized arena. But hegemonic and patriarchal structures have further exploited, objectified, and fractured the black female body, a racialized and gendered territory. The black female body is frequently portrayed as a source of tension and a multifaceted creature fighting to be acknowledged outside of historical contexts of oppression and mutilation in diasporic Caribbean women's literature. For this body to regenerate and heal, traumatic memories need to migrate beyond it (Moise 1). The physical body has been through ages a place, a recurrent space for violence and resistance simultaneously especially for African and Caribbean women. Smrity Sonal and Rajni Singh in "Black Female Bodies and Resistance in Gayl Jones Corregidora and Eva's Man" emphasise this exact notion surrounding the black female body: "The black female body stands for "the intersection of race and sex" (Nelson 97). Its unpleasant representations in art, literature, sports, media, or elsewhere can be viewed as what Lisa Collins (2002) calls "product of history, particularly the history of conquest, enslavement, lynching and rape" (99). Moreover, the unpleasant representations of the black female body carry "sensual immediacy" (Brown 3). Often viewed as "a cipher, remote, alien, distorted and obscured" (3), the black women are read in clusters and projected in derogatory ways." But further along, these bodies become a centre of healing and rewriting a new narrative. The body plays a central role in the healing process if it serves as a text for cultural inscriptions and a site of social control. According to Camille Passalacqua, black female bodies that experience racial and sexist crimes go through a healing process. The suffering centre of a family's history founded in slavery is originally placed on female bodies, but what is more crucial is that these narratives explore how these same bodies become something new. Passalacqua draws attention to the magical quality of the stories that serve as the healing balm on the bodies of those women. These accounts or tales aid in illustrating and creating something new by recreating the corpses. Such a reconciliation promotes the characters' "internal psychological fight" with themselves, which results in their "rearrangement with the outside world." Memories are frequently used to probe one's identity. The "integration of the traumatic past with the current self" is possible on this platform. As a result, "recuperation and healing after trauma" occurs when the body transitions from being the dwelling place of suffering and a deformed identity to a condition of reunion with the mind (206-207).

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As described above, there has been a long and sustaining legacy of African and Caribbean women writers inscribing the healing touch on the black female body. For black women writers, the body transforms into a powerful medium for conveying untold stories about them and rejecting the stereotypes of black womanhood. By moulding and recasting these victimised bodies into something new—more desirable and beautiful—black women writers have attempted to re-correct the representation of black female bodies. These initiatives are referred to as "textual healing" by Farah J. Griffin (1996). If specifically, the poetry is taken into consideration poets like Una Marson, Phyllis Shand Allfrey, Dionne Brand, and Marlene Nourbese Philip are some of the most significant names who have made exemplary contributions in this field. Grace Nichols stands tall and firm among them with her wide range of themes and perspectives when representing the black female body is concerned. The present paper attempts to decode the dynamics of the same with a special reference to the theoretical foreground of the Black Feminist approach.

One of the most well-known Caribbean woman poets of the late 20th century is Grace Nichols. Her career as a poet began in England with the publication of *i is a Long memoried Woman* in 1983, which also happened to be the same year it won the Commonwealth Poetry Prize. She was born in 1950. In addition to being exposed to the effects of gender inequality, marginalisation, and silence, Nichols comes from a region that saw British colonisation. These two oppressive forces interact within the framework of the poet's identity and are seen in her work. Her poetry predominantly emphasises the strength of the black female body by integrating it with broadly applicable stories about colonialism, the diaspora, and female emancipation. Through her art, Nichols celebrates the tenacity, beauty, and cultural relevance of the black female body while confronting and reclaiming it from past and modern oppressions. This is evident in her past books, *Sunrise* (1996), *The Lazy Thoughts of a Lazy Woman* (1989), and *The Fat Black Woman's Poems* (1984). Here, multiple voices are being used as a form of resistance. This method is a reflection of the different textures of Nichols' individuality as well as of the unusual richness of her locality. The use of numerous voices illustrates the importance of using one's voice to oppose oppressive and dominant forces. The method responds to the call for new, freeing ways to express identity and exemplifies the post-modernist notion of the decentred subject. The distinct subjectivities of the women from the area and their relationships to diverse "others" are also expressed in these voices.

The black female body is highlighted in Grace Nichols' poetry as a source of both individual and collective strength. She employs poetry to reclaim the black female body as a

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source of strength and pride, despite the fact that her work displays a profound understanding of how the black female body has traditionally been objectified and devalued. With a multifaceted approach, Nichols celebrates the black female figure by incorporating personal, cultural, and mythological themes. For this present paper, poems from the collection *The Fat Black Woman's Poems* will be considered. Mara Scanlon in her article "The Divine Body in Grace Nichols's "The Fat Black Woman's Poems" rightfully observes that, while choosing the heroine of the collection envisions

> a woman who revises the aesthetic of female beauty, challenges oppressive societal forces, and emerges as a powerful queen, founder, or goddess. Like many Afra-Caribbean writers, Nichols infuses her poetry with the spiritual energy of the tradition of women before her, a tradition that has little written record. For although the strength of foremothers who were cultural protectors, social leaders, and family heads has recently been more widely examined (for example, by studies such as the 1995 Engendering History: Caribbean Women in Historical Perspective), it is a strength that has often been strategically hidden by women them-selves or obscured by others who fear it (59).

The verses collected in *The Fat Black Woman's Poems* adopt a more modern framework and exhibit a certain playfulness in their remythologizing, which Nichols characterises as "a sheer sense of fun, having the fat black woman doing exactly as she pleases... taking a satirical, tongue-in-cheek look at the world." It is a book in which the racialized and "weighed" body is of utmost importance, as the title indicates. The collection's poems embrace the physicality of the black female body and defy social pressure to adhere to limited standards of beauty. The collection's title independently is a strong proclamation. The emphasis of Nichols' poetry is on the black female body as a container of identity, strength, and cultural memory in addition to being a physical form. As Bryan Turner notes, "The body is an important surface on which the marks of social status, family position, tribal affiliation, age, gender, and religious condition can easily and publicly display. It also signals the recovery of identity" (4).

At the end of this sequence, Nichols redefines the standards of beauty that exclude fat black women and, perhaps most radical of all, suggests that the fat black woman is a kind of coloniser, the founding mother of a new civilization, a new Eve, and even a creator-goddess (Scanlon 60). Being large, black, and a woman are three social prejudices that are evoked by the title of Grace Nichols' poetry collection, *The Fat Black Woman's Poems.* Such

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classifications are still debatable, though, in that her poems explicitly aim to refute stereotypes of black women held by white males and to redefine black female identities in novel and surprising ways. The belief that the body can be an empowering tool for expressing one's subjectivity and wishes is crucial to Nichols' ability to develop alternate venues where the black female experience can have a transforming effect. This new body appears as an active medium that is endlessly developing itself through numerous acts and heterogeneous meanings as opposed to being signified by fixed and stable cultural inscriptions. The female body becomes a focus of semiotic conflict in such a display between the forces of capitalism and subordination, patriarchal authority and female resistance, and desiring objects and desiring subjects.

Historically, black women's bodies have been viewed as hideous, animalistic, and unnatural. As mentioned in “Black/Female/Body Hypervisibility and Invisibility: A Black Feminist Augmentation of Feminist Leisure Research” by Rasul A. Mowatt et al. there are four different kinds of stereotypes when it comes to the black female body and they are the Jezebel, the Mammy, the Angry Black Woman/ Sapphire and the Matriarch/ Superwoman (650). These images have been normalised in literary and cultural representations and dangerously fixating impressions on black women. Grace Nichols collects these images in her poetry reverts them and uniquely celebrates them. Maite Escudero justifiably observes that the female body serves as a vehicle for Nichols to reclaim an inquiry and celebration of various facets of feminine identity and sexuality. The phrase ‘fat black woman's body’ used by Nichols can be interpreted as a cultural metaphor that aims to allow for the inclusion of new female bodies and voices inside predominately held ideological contexts. Her act of self-affirmation inherently creates a contradiction between a collective body and an individual one for this reason, among others. Such a situation is rooted in gender and racial politics that aims to represent the diversity and wide range of black experiences and identities. This implies a certain univocity and homogeneity of the category of "woman," thus the augmentation of her body is not only focused on the presentation of a feminine essence and distinctiveness.

The poems in Nichols' *The Fat Black Woman's Poems* are the pinnacle of her tenacity, vigour, and spiritual fortitude, according to the overall impression one gets from reading them. She adopts a transparent rejection of passivity and estrangement as a black woman. Though she primarily uses her body in the first section of the text, the rest of her poems also reflect a variety of bodily acts, embodied by a keen awareness of rhythm, expansion, and movement. It suffices to say that Nichols's black, chubby figure transcends physical characteristics and can

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be extended to the diverse and hybrid subject matter of her work. Furthermore, because of the way she uses language and presents herself, it is always possible for female subjectivity to change (13-15).

The poem "Beauty," which contains just two brief stanzas and begins each with the phrase "Beauty / is a fat black woman," serves as the book's opening poem. Even though Nichols claims that her title character "is beautiful," her goal is to redefine the definition of "beauty," and the fat black woman is the literal embodiment of this new definition. As Nourbese Philip puts it, "When we hear certain words and phrases, such as 'thick lips' or 'kinky hair,' the accompanying images are predominantly negative." Nichols first reclaims the standards of beauty from this point (17). She is therefore physically attractive while being "heavy as a whale" and having a "body ringed in folds," challenging the "slimming glances" (Nichols 3). Instead of just declaring that her title character "is beautiful," Nichols is determined to redefine the phrase and idea of "beauty" in general. According to this new definition, a fat black woman is an example of beauty, effectively shattering many preconceived notions about what is attractive in a black woman. Pavlína Flajšarová in her "Grace Nichols Universal and Diverse: Ethnicity in the Poetry and Fiction of Grace Nichols" meticulously brings out various remarks by critics who further necessitate the unique approach of Nichols in this pithy poem on dismantling the notion of "beauty". She quotes Melissa Johnson, who maintains that, along with being fat and black, beauty in this poem is active, dependent on inner fulfilment, and connected to nature rather than passive or dependent on other people's approval or desire. Obliviousness to the constrictive and psychologically damaging constructs of beauty imposed by European culture and society is the definition of beauty. The continuous praise of the big black woman's beauty ushers in the second stanza. She transitions from the land to the sea in another stock image of the Caribbean. The speaker "ride[s] the waves/drift [s] in happy oblivion" to be hugged by the sea, which "turns back / to hug her shape."

A kind of synergy develops between the sea and the obese black woman. In an interview, Nichols discussed her efforts to present a nuanced picture of many cultures, stating that "all of our cultural "things" were disparaged and looked down upon, but the European "things" were the ones that were lauded in every manner, including physical attractiveness. So long as some of these issues persist, there will always be conflict. In the very next poem 'The Assertion', which continues the legacy of the subversion of the beauty standard, she bases a portion of her influence and power on her unquestionable physical stature. "The white-robed

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chiefs are resigned / in their posture of resignation" in her presence (4). She takes pleasure in her regal status and function because she feels that "this is [her] birthright (48-49).

By displaying her 'bodily difference' in terms of gender, race, age and/or size, Nichols openly exposes the gendered oppression and abuse of black fat women in a critical way, to make the reader aware of the unfairness of the situation. In "Looking at Miss World", the fat black woman refuses to have her fat body stereotyped and censored by challenging the notion that only slim white women can be beauty contestants. This poem, in which "the fat black woman awaits in vain while slim after slim aspirant appears" (20), attacks the notion that only thin white women should be considered beautiful and concludes with a mischievous hint that society does not know what is missing (Escudero 17-18):

> Tonight the fat black woman
>
> is all agaze
>
> will some Miss (plump at least
>
> if not fat and black) uphold her name
>
> (...)
>
> And as the beauties yearn
>
> and the beauties yearn
>
> the fat black woman wonders
>
> when will the beauties
>
> ever really burn
>
> (...)
>
> The fat black woman gets up
>
> and pours some gin
>
> toasting herself as likely win (Nichols 21).

The 'Everyman' in The Fat Black Woman's world is typically a skinny, white, male, and has a European ancestry. This untrustworthy hero has since made his way from literature to Hollywood and continues to serve as the face of 'the universal story' in

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modern culture. But the antithesis of Everyman is Grace Nichols' co-author and character, who is fat, black, and a woman. She is a unique individual whose stories will only ever be 'black' or 'woman' stories, and which are always unique to her. The more extensive representational powers that The Fat Black Woman occasionally yearns for are often denied to her. The poem's ability to retain the two opposing emotions of hope and despair side by side makes it particularly powerful. They emphasise one another rather than nullify one another. The Fat Black Woman is not so naive as to believe that will ever happen, but she cannot help but wish she could live in a world—in an England—that accommodates her. The Fat Black Woman comes into contact with an aesthetic world that cannot find beauty in her own body while watching the Miss World Pageant. 'The Embodiment of Disobedience: Fat Black Women's Unruly Political Bodies,' by Andrea Shaw, states:

> Both being fat and being black have grown to have an incredibly complicated relationship with the female body, one that requires some degree of erasure to make women acceptable objects of Western Aesthetics. This erasure is attested to by beauty pageants, where a contestant's chances of winning are increased the more her body corresponds to the societal ideal of slenderness and the more, she is able to 'act' whiteness both physiologically and behaviourally.

In "The Fat Black Woman Goes Shopping" the idea that other women should strive for thin beauty is contested by Western and white women. By solely specialising in women up to size 14, the fashion industry is accused of planning to force thinness on the female anatomy. The accent of the overweight black woman and a scattered identity between the "brightness and billowing sunlight" of the Caribbean and "the weather so cold" of England are further ways that her "difference" and diasporan identity are portrayed. The big black woman persistently battles a society that isn't ready to accept her as a sexual being, an authority figure, or a credible mythological emblem throughout the poetry sequence. She wanders around contemporary London in a manner reminiscent of Nichols' own as an outsider on a physical, societal, and national level. The overweight black woman experiences "de pretty face salesgals" casting "slimming glances," stares that both insult the heavy black woman's physical robustness and, maybe, regard her as less than what she rightfully is, as she shops in the bitterly cold London winter. The British clothing is also inappropriate, with "nothing soft and bright and billowing / to

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flow like breezy sunlight / when she walking" and, worst of all, "nothing much beyond size 14" (Nichols 8). The salesgirls stand in for the typical slenderness of mainstream Western culture, which denigrates, disparages, or even resents the self-esteem and sense of humour of the obese black woman. According to Susan Bordo, the fat is viewed as not playing by the rules at all, especially those who profess to be happy while being overweight. They must be put in their place, humiliated, and defeated because, while the rest of us try to be accepted and 'normal,' they must not be allowed to get away with it. The chubby black woman specifically refuses to do this (Scanlon 62).

At this point, Nichols' thoughts can very well be put parallelly with the Black Feminist theory. Broadly speaking, Black Feminism as a theoretical space nurtures a panoramic detailed view of the lives of Black women filtering through different looking glasses of race, gender, and sexuality, geopolitical locations in various art forms, literature, and cultures. To extend this further few lines from the introduction of Reconstructing "Womanhood, Reconstructing Feminism: Writings on Black Women" (1996) can be put forward, where the editor Delia Jarret-Macauley says: "Black feminism provides a method of working which enables... new answers to old questions and even new subjects for enquiry, and to make the experiences of Black women distinct from those of their 'white' female and/or Black male counterparts.... exploring how effacement, exclusion and denial have shaped Black women's lives both historically and today" (3). The big black woman played by Nichols can insert a variety of imagery using both her body and voice. She does not flip the binary relationship between white and black, male and woman, or beauty and ugly. By creating performative acts and gestures that ask for the extension of differences, Nichols breaks down the rigidity of such oppositions. Nichols promotes diversity, but one that enables her to transcend hegemonic ideologies or "difference itself." Her destructive behaviour calls into question the potential duality of similarity and difference, respectively. Furthermore, through her poems, Grace Nichols powerfully conveys the idea that the black female body is a source of incredible strength, beauty, and cultural diversity rather than a place of oppression or shame. She presents a counternarrative that praises the strength and individuality of black women, challenging the social narratives that have historically devalued their bodies. Themes of resistance, cultural pride, and self-love reverberate in Nichols' art. Her poetry reminds us that everyone should celebrate the black female body in all of its varieties. She exhorts black women to view their bodies

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via the prism of their own cultural heritage and individual experiences rather than the prism of outside norms.

It is wise enough to mention that celebrating and normalising the essence of the female body especially coupled with the theme of race and gender further opens up a whole new vista of possibility in this field. Finally, to conclude this can be said that the panoramic description of the lived experiences of the Black women under the theoretical praxis certainly opens further avenues of research especially much needed in the poetry. Certainly, the use of the theme of bodily resistance is supremely pertinent:

> "The body is the kernel that germinates into freedom. In other words, female Caribbean poetesses write about self-making through the centrality of the body as a means to freedom. Thus, the body is a core element and a tool crucial for women's healing and emancipation, insomuch as bodily experiences have the power to challenge the traditional meaning of freedom and the meaning of the female body" (Surin 3).

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