

Book Review

Star Apple Blue and Avocado Green
By Paulette A. Ramsay

Warrick Lattibeaudaire • University of Technology

Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers, 2016. 102 pages. \$10.95, paperback. ISBN: 978-9-76637-918-6.

Ramsay's collection of poems she names *Star Apple Blue and Avocado Green* adds to her extensive and decorated literary treasure grove. This well-cultivated orchard forms a canopy with branches into poetry, prose and literary criticism. She again, with this, one of her latest sprouts, embarks in her comfort zone and area of farming expertise: poetry. Her garden flourishes in metaphor, wordplay and allusions to cultivate the readers' interest and delight their fancy. With these mulches, Ramsay fertilises larger issues of self, interaction with other, and the Caribbean global context and, for readers close to her work, the undying concerns of women. The collection comprises 62 poems with four headings organic to a Caribbean, particularly Jamaican, setting and the interplay among these: the local and global, and the possibilities for a 'glocal' space, a hybridity that acknowledges the Caribbean not just for being Caribbean but for being a product of global Western, Asian and African processes of syncretisation. This 'glocal' space further highlights the power of the local that goes on to now affect the global.

Ramsay, both a feminist and one who relies heavily on Postcolonial discourse in teasing out issues of identity and belonging, reinforces much of the narrative contrived in the works of contemporary Caribbean female writers in her collection. These writers, under the larger Postcolonial agenda seek to proffer Caribbean women's struggles as different to the focus of Euro-American feminist movements largely defined around gender. Ramsay examines the unique and complex status of women born in a region out of the colonial process. Understandably, she probes not only gender inequality but issues of race, sexuality and imperialism. She strongly focuses on the social and historical context of the region and, specifically, the land of birth and, in the spirit on writing women in the Caribbean, highlights womanhood to encompass a multitude of experiences that define women. Further, her reliance on things Caribbean buttresses the belief that feminist ideals do sprout and blossom locally from regional knowledge and the unique Flora of the region. Of equal import is the Caribbean

female writer's objective to dispel the notion that storytelling and the relay of oral tradition is a function of males.

The title of the collection grabs the reader's attention and signals the author's intention to name her collection off two Caribbean and familiarly local fruits, avocado and star apple, one blue, the other green. As she tells us in her first poem, using metaphor: "she smiles wistfully at the foaming purple blue and avocado green waves, *her colours of laughter and life*." The poet, through this, signals that there is more to the issues she sets out to raise than meets the eye. What is certain: her choice of fruits prepares the reader for a mouth-watering and adventurous read, redolent of one climbing a star apple tree known for its great height and for delectable fruits that never fall to the ground, and eaten by themselves. Though not as succulent as star apples, avocados, otherwise called pears, are rarely eaten singly, and, therefore, better known for bringing out the taste in a whole range of accompanying foods. These fruits, like apples to oranges, differently constituted, coexist and grow in the same Caribbean space, and now on the same leaves of Ramsay's collection. Hers, though, are talking trees, those that "tell stories of two different generations in a family that celebrates our tropical trees with great spirit.

Her collection opens with "Closing Doors," poignant at the individual level, being first poem, but also at the level of subheading which bears 17 poems. But as these doors are closed, many more open. In this section, the poet reconciles and puts closure to many issues raised on the individual level. Where one sees a major character, invariably it is a woman, as the cover picture reveals, and even when she evokes a man, it is to treat with the experiences of women which, in the spirit of contemporary Caribbean women writers, are very diverse. Ramsay feels an acute need to represent the cause of women, as her other works, such as *October Afternoon and Aunt Jen*, demonstrate, especially given, what is commonly referred to as the doubly colonised female status, which articulate women's concerns through racial and gendered lens. The feminine theme reverberates both in the title of these poems, but more so in the body of them. "Potiphar's Wife", "An Angry Woman", "The Way She Was", "I Learned to Dance", "Un(like) Lot's Wife", "I Have Loved and Lost", her legendary reflections

on the “Dirty Dishes in the Sink” she dedicates to a female Heather Bowie, “Beijing Salutes a Black Woman in China”, “Remaking Self”, “Naissance of Sexism”, and “The Girl with the Big Heart”, are but a sampling of the poems that treat with and allude to female concerns cleverly woven around “I”, the self, the woman and arguably Ramsay’s autobiographical concerns. In more ways than one, she heralds the female struggle, making feminist ideals front and centre of this section that sets the tone, or opens to the remaining three quarters of the collection: Speaking in Halves, Mama’s Handbag, and Caribbean Global.

Like many prodigious works of fiction, her poetry brims with intertextuality and pastiche, which shine even brighter as they are couched in metaphor and other figures of speech. It is truly difficult to separate Ramsay from her Christian heritage, which is a part of a larger historical context of colonisation upon the Antillean psyche. The Bible, so revered in the region, is a centrepiece work whose stories Ramsay has not only alluded to, but reworked in a relatable and appealing manner insofar as she addresses local and regional concerns. Much of this kind of doublespeak occurs in the section, Speaking in Halves, though it runs throughout the whole collection. She takes from the canon, citing “Jordan Crossing”, “Old Men Dream Dreams”, “On the Edge of Hell”, and “Caleb’s First Day in Heaven”, and plays with these issues, then moves between the fairy tale world of mermaids to the real world. These and her preoccupation with the great Colombian writer, Gabriel García Márquez, presents a way to read her complex reality, a creolised space that draws on different discourses and meta narratives. Yet, it produces a unique Caribbean space that tells its own stories singly through star apples and doubly through pears, and “the old star apple tree is happy to find friendly support in the strong trunk” of the avocado tree. Ramsay thus shows how religion helps to deeply contextualise women’s experiences in the Caribbean.

Ramsay again solidifies her preoccupation with women, with specific focus on the mother figure who, for all intents and purposes, is hers. She dedicates this entire section, privileging the mother figure, which stands out even more in the absence of a father or male figure in her entire collection. The section, Mama’s Handbag, evokes Vassanji’s Postcolonial work, *The Gunnysack*. Like the contents therein that tell a story, the mother figure is indispensable to Caribbean reality, and challenges any discourse that seeks to silence women or deny their integral role in storytelling. Mothers make magic, as the eponymous title of the first poem in this section highlights. Her individual treatment of mothers can be seen as an invocation of the Motherland to whom the Caribbean owes much of its identity, and not to be overlooked this section passes as a panegyric on her mother, all mothers, grandmothers who interact with their daughters now turned mothers to prolong a female tradition and discourse.

She continues her Postcolonial and global discourse in the final section, Caribbean Global, where she now moves from the level of individual to global and back, creating a unique ‘glocal’ Caribbean space. From this local space arise women who she not just defines locally as Jamaicans but as both Caribbean and

international. “Beijing Salutes a Black Woman in China” and “Encounter with a Canadian Border Security Guard” gave an earlier allusion to how the local Caribbean Jamaican woman is constituted internationally. Within this ‘glocal’ space lies womanhood and its privileging of an awareness of the multitude of global experiences that define women. “The Middle Passage” and “Caribbean Global” with its appeal to Walter Rodney that to be colonised is to be removed from history, set her on a path to decolonisation, while rehashing international historical marks that make the local a global reality. She further mixes the local dialect with standard English in poems to capture the diglossia that speaks to the language reality in the Caribbean. A key aspect of this idea of a ‘glocal’ space is the far reaching influence of Jamaica and the Caribbean on the world, as she highlights in ‘Caribbean Global’ “the cool Jamaican bass artist strumming his favourite reggae song on a stage in Johannesburg” and a “migration from Kingston, Georgetown, Bridgetown to London, New York, Amsterdam, Brussels,” as well as, a “the gifted Grenadian student at the library of an Ivy League University..., writing new identities.”

Ramsay’s seeds germinate with satiric and feminist fingers, individual hands that celebrate a national then pan Caribbean culture, one that interacts with global reality. She narrates her stories, stories with stories, stories based on stories, stories stored in trees, trees that communicate with each other, trees that talk with the voice of great ancestral spirits, to bind past up with present, the old and the young, the mother and grandmothers. Amidst realities hard to negotiate, her colours green and blue signal laughter and life, a signal of hope she finds in the language of poetry, one that lies, in Bakhtinian terms, on the borderline between oneself and the other, and whose word is always half someone else’s.

Warrick Lattibeaudaire
University of Technology