

Pamela Mordecai, *subversive sonnets: poems*. Toronto: Tsar Publications, 2012. pp. 82.

subversive sonnets is a fifth volume of poetry from Pamela Mordecai, an author who started out as a teacher and university administrator in her Jamaican homeland, before producing poems, stories and drama as well as working in radio and television. Her poems were first printed in Caribbean journals before appearing as books: *Journey Poem* (1989); *de man: a performance poem* (1995); *Certifiable* (2001); *The True Blue of Islands* (2005). Her stories, meanwhile, were collected in *Pink Icing and Other Stories* (2006). In addition, Mordecai wrote five children's books and edited or co-edited several anthologies of West Indian writing. Now settled in Ontario, she collaborated with her husband Martin, also a writer, in the non-fiction *Culture and Customs of Jamaica* (2001). The variety of her subjects, genres and styles, together with her astonishing versatility in the sheer craft of writing, confirm her energy, industry and comprehensiveness of vision.

Several poems in *subversive sonnets* reflect on the persona's Jamaican (Caribbean) experience of social relations formed out of historic structures of slavery and their random, enforced mixing of ethnic groups with differences of skin colour and cultural inheritance. In "Old Diaries," for instance, the persona has a: "light-skinned grandfather" (4) who not only: "shot a man/ for stealing his newspaper" (4), but gave the order for British forces to fire on black workers who rebelled against British colonial oppression at Morant Bay, an historic incident, in Jamaica, in 1865. But the maiden name of the persona's grandmother - "Bogle"- indicates that she was possibly related to Paul Bogle, a black Baptist minister who led the workers, and suggests discord and division if her grandparents were on opposite sides of this tragic dispute. Nor does it help that the persona's grandmother: "was fair but Mother Africa/ had written otherwise all over her" (5). Such is the deep-seated and divisive legacy of Caribbean history bred in blood and bone over nearly four centuries of colonialism.

But the witty, slightly mocking, tongue-in-cheek description of the persona's grandmother in the last quotation illustrates the author's use of an ironic, half-humorous tone in reflecting on the horror of Caribbean colonial history. At one stage, thinking she might have gone too far in violating the tragic dignity of her subject, the author pulls her persona up short: "No use make joke and lose history's strands/ neither forget the heart of man in its/ desperate wickedness" (4). This is the essential challenge in Mordecai's poems: to employ wit, irony and humour, usually in the diction and rhythm of demotic Jamaican speech, to "subvert" the damage and dereliction of Caribbean history without trivialising their human cost.

Mordecai does not make any bones about her intention in *subversive sonnets*: “I wanted to sabotage and disrupt both the form and content of the sonnet... to bang the form about a bit... write in patwa...and mash up English and/or creole with other languages ...I also wanted to treat everyday subjects in a down-to-earth way – seriously but matter-of-factly. I think of the poems as having a low rather than high seriousness.” Thus her poems are replete with coarse, irreverent expressions, fresh, mischievous coinages, and colloquial Jamaican idioms, images and rhythms intended to rock the boat and shake hallowed or sterile conventions loose from moorings sanctioned by time, practice and prestige. In “Lacemakers” a Catholic nun, a teacher, drives a car: “rough as any crufty truck man” (8), and the persona, a female student who boldly complains to the Mother Superior for using corporal punishment, later observes: “You want see jawbone drop/ that day!” (9) The sheer informality, loose rhythm and conversational candour of these expressions undermine the formal structure of the traditional sonnet, whether Petrarchan with its fixed octet and sestet, or Shakespearean with three quatrains, rhyme scheme and couplet, in order to better capture looseness in some Caribbean social habits and cultural practices. But Mordecai’s language can also be eloquent and precise: “Backra break up our family. Sell us / all about” (67) is a marvel of potent concision.

After listing tangled traumas and tragedies from her own family history, the persona of *Family Story: Only Child’s Version* resolutely summons a note of defiance: “These mutants are / our lives, Gramps, Mama’s, mine, wraiths that we see. But I’m here. Careful then how you cross me” (12). Defiance does not merely deflate sentimental lament: it is neither empty rhetoric nor token retaliation, but grounded in the solid, lived reality of everyday, Caribbean experience, and its right, despite, trauma and tragedy, to an indisputable claim of universal humanity.

Mordecai ropes in wider examples of human oppression and degradation from the genocide of Mesoamericans in “Cozumel, Island of Swallows” to several poems about Atlantic slavery, and contemporary areas of abuse such as Darfur and Abu Ghraib, even the injustice of patriarchy in the church in “Introibo ad altare dei.” The church may be imperfect, but as she writes: “We are disposed / to murder, state approved or on the side, / contract free lance or in a hissy fit. / We kill our children with and for a grain of rice” (45). Yet if the petitions of saints fail to bring relief, they might claim: “Loves, we do our best. The trouble is with you [people]” (45).

Perhaps it is not as strange as it looks that despite her stern facing up to the grim reality of human oppression worldwide, Mordecai’s poems express an underlying religious sensibility similar to that found in the work of two other female Jamaican writers, Una Marson, (1905-1965) also noted for her activism and broadcasting, and Joyce Gladwell remembered mainly for

her autobiography *Brown Face Big Master* (1969). In technique, *subversive sonnets* is certainly subversive; but if we read between the lines, nothing could be more religiously affirmative; for, paradoxically, Mordecai's poems deliver precisely the right mixture of wit, irony and humour needed to lift a cloud of unknowing from our eyes and reveal, stark naked, the truth of universal human mortality and culpability.

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