

# Reclaiming the Narrative of Windrush Women through the Poetry of Una Marson and Grace Nichols

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## Abstract

From 1948 to the late 1970's, more than half a million people came to the UK from the Caribbean to become a part of the first wave of the Commonwealth Immigration. They were invited over by the British Government to work in public services and rebuild the country after the second World War. When the Empire Windrush arrived at the shores of Tilbury in 1948, Britain was a country direly in need of human resources to cover the loss faced over the war years. This Windrush Generation consisted of men, women and children who came to rebuild their 'Mother Country' with the hopes of a new beginning brimming with possibilities. Many studies have analysed the racism, alienation and discrimination among the other oppressive phases that the immigrants were forced to deal with. Most of the retellings and re-visits are male oriented, and completely leave the female perspective and the immigrant women's role in their revolution.

This paper attempts to focus on the female narrative of the Black immigrant's history. The brief study tries to subvert the common rendering of the Windrush generation by reading it through the filters of feminism, marginalisation and alienation, thereby emphasizing the themes that were not considered discussion-worthy in the patriarchal setting. The research question is to find if the counter narrative presented through the poems of women immigrants call for a different perspective in the present account of history. This paper is centred around the poetry and ideology of Una Marson (1905-1965) and Grace Nichols (1950-), two black women immigrants who played a pivotal role in the history of every immigrant woman and man.

**Keywords:** Windrush generation, Black women, Black Immigrant, Una Marson, Grace Nichols, Poetry, Counter-narration

## Introduction

I have crossed an ocean  
I have lost my tongue  
from the root of the old one  
a new one has sprung (Nichols, 1983, p.80)

The Windrush Generation and the Black Immigrant's history are now familiar because of the struggles and revolts of thousands of immigrants who stopped not until they were given equal rights. But the annals of Caribbean immigrants selectively fail to recognize a section of them. When the *Empire Windrush* anchored at Tilbury, there were 257 female passengers on board, 188 of whom were travelling alone. The commonly covered photographs and narratives of this generation were only and always about the men. The men who worked hard, the men who struggled to support the family, the men who faced racism, the men who were arrested and shot dead. The female narrative is often categorised from a victim's perspective and grouped along with the male immigrant's narrative. A narration featuring the collective experience of all genders during the Windrush was more of a dream than reality as women did seldom appear in the major narratives set by male writers.

Since there were thousands of women and their very diverse stories, this paper ventures to study the lives of two poets, pioneers in their field, who actively raised rebellions and stood for other black women. For a long time, their works and efforts went unnoticed despite their noticeable roles in history. Women artists found it necessary to assert their roles as palpable in the revolution, lest their struggles and efforts went undervalued. "It was in the struggle to find the link between black consciousness and woman's liberation

that some of the most significant contributions of Caribbean women to Caribbean culture and feminist practice have emerged.” (Ford-Smith, 1988)

Una Marson was an “Afro-Jamaican intellectual who in the 1930s became an internationally famous feminist, Pan-Africanist, poet, playwright, journalist and social activist.” (Umoren, 2013) Despite being famous in her times, historical narratives failed to bring her in the forefront along with other celebrated nationalists like Brathwaite or C.L.R James. Marson is the pioneer of many notable movements in her time, and she claims many firsts to her name.

In a sense she pioneered an approach that has become central to the organisational practice of many women’s groups in the Caribbean – an approach which expresses and articulates women’s issues through aesthetic forms which uses the processes associated with producing these forms to mobilise and organise women, and to analyse their reality. (Ford-Smith, 1988)

Una Marson was Jamaica’s first female editor-cum-publisher through *The Cosmopolitan: a monthly magazine for the business youth of Jamaica*. “In 1935 she was the first Jamaican invited to speak at the International Alliance of Women for Suffrage and Equal Citizenship Conference in Istanbul.” (Umoren, 2013) She used this opportunity to speak for black liberation and asked the white women to stand in solidarity with the black women who were suffering from racial and gender oppression. In her poetry collection, *Towards the Stars* (1945), she has penned a sonnet titled “To the I.A.W.S.E.C” addressing the women of England appreciating their commendable efforts in working “with courageous women of all lands, /for women’s rights.” Marson, thus never left an opportunity unturned to inspire and appreciate endeavours that sought to uplift the struggles of women. Later Marson freelanced with BBC, and was soon appointed as the programme assistant for BBC’s *Calling the West Indies*. Later she became the very first black producer at BBC, and her programme was the legendary *Caribbean Voices* which is considered as the origin of the Caribbean Arts Movement. Brathwaite has described *Caribbean Voices* as “the single most important literary catalyst for Caribbean creative and critical writing in English” (Brathwaite, 1984, p.87), and it was Una Marson’s vision that worked behind this “catalyst”.

Grace Nichols is a “trans-cultural” poet, a term she wants to be known by. Born in 1950 in Guyana, her works are indispensable in understanding the Caribbean-British cultural connection. Her works embody diverse references and cover different phases in the life of a Caribbean female immigrant in UK. The indigenous culture and traditions peculiar to their land always intrigued Nichols. Her unending interest/curiosity towards Guyanese folk tales, Amerindian myth and South American civilisation of Aztec and Inca make frequent appearances in her poem. She migrated with her partner, John Agard, the poet, to Britain in 1977. Her debut collection of poetry, *I is a long memoried woman* (1983) won the Commonwealth Prize and placed her among a few recognisable women names in the history.

Nichols writes in a mischievous and sarcastic tone, that challenges and rebels against oppressive standards of beauty, race and gender – the three levels of marginalisation that a woman of colour can’t avoid in UK. Her versatility with words is well reflected through different styles that she uses in her range of poetry spanning from *The Fat Black Woman’s Poems* collection to the Children’s collection. Nichols, along with John Agard, has written many poetry collections and rhymes for the children of Caribbean lands, as a counter narrative to a set of rhymes carried off from a nation and culture that the children are unable to relate with.

### **Misconstrued themes and Underrated visions**

The apathetic beauty standards were seen as issues sans any political relevance as the male supremacist failed to read the underlying problem of inclusiveness and racial discrimination. The Eurocentric beauty standards reflected the inability to find beauty or worth in the culture or the people of the “other”, which was the cumulative result of a long history of subjugation, slavery and conversion. In the Introduction to *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), Franz Fanon says that “There is but one destiny for the black man. And it is white.” (1952) The racial oppression and colonial history scars the blacks to think that to become white is their only plausible escape. Through endless tries in mastering their coloniser’s language, culture and beauty standards, they try to dilute their blackness, only to conclude that being white was never a possibility to begin with.

Building a national identity was another challenge that the immigrants faced. In the essay, “The West Indian Writer and his Quarrel with History” (1976), Prof. Bach notes that “Caribbean writers’ “quarrel with history” and the imaginative work of literature to reconstitute a Caribbean history against the charge of historylessness.” (Francis, 2013) Grace Nichols contributes her share by focusing on a grassroot transformation, where the identity is not mindfully consumed, but nurtured at an earlier stage. Nichols’ children’s collections are inspired largely by Guyanese folklores and Amerindian legends. These works prove as a literary effort taken in stance for the upcoming generation to grow up realizing the richness and diversity of their native land and to create in them the Caribbean identity, something that her own generation struggled to weave. Owning the narrative to their experiences and history, Nichols observed, was the only way to reclaim their lost identity in an alien land. Another solution that Nichols sought was to break free from the stereotypes that were nailed on Black women. The black woman in Nichols’s poems “uses her body, her voice, her song to maintain her sense of selfhood, to support others and to subvert the structures that oppress her.” (Griffin, 1993, p.28)

Nichols’s poetic work attempts the “redefinition and the construction of new female subjectivities that are able to resist (neo)colonial and patriarchal ideological structures marginalising black women.” (Bringas.L, 2003, p.8) She questions the negative stereotypes perpetuated by the racist and patriarchal cultures. Her poetry, like most Caribbean women poets, refuses to see them as a monolithic construction by being conscious of the difference in history, culture and voice. This is the reason why Nichols prefers being called as a “trans-cultural” poet, for she is not limited to her Caribbean sensibility, but is made up of her million experiences shaped and influenced by different immigrant groups in the Caribbean, including Indian, Chinese and Portuguese.

Nichols shows the variety and intermixture of heritages in existence in the contemporary Caribbean. Such a cultural mosaic makes the region and its cultural heritage very colourful. Lawson Welsh postulates that “the poem also suggests hybridity as a position in which change can be effected and new forms and modes of identities established.”<sup>63</sup> The picture of the manifold Caribbean resembles that of a tapestry which can be viewed from many different angles, with new angles of vision and new images being discovered each time. (Flajsarova, 2016, pp.88-89)

The identity of black woman if at all heard, is perceived as that of a victim's. A black woman is pitied upon as a misfit struggling and wailing to belong or desperate over what they are not. Nichols challenges and resists the stereotype of black woman as victims. Black women felt excluded even in the feminist spheres formed by white women. As Hazel Carby states in her essay “White Women Listen! Black Feminism and the Boundaries of Sisterhood” (1982.P.177),

...it is very important that white women in the women's movement examine the ways in which racism excludes many black women and prevents them from unconditionally aligning themselves with white women. Instead of taking black women as objects of their research, white feminist researchers should try to uncover the gender-specific mechanism of racism among white women.

Both Nichols and Marson voice the black woman as bold and rebellious, magnificently in love with themselves. Neither do they hate nor wish they were different from a personal level. While many black women resorted to bleaching and straightening of hair, these poets underline what forced them towards this act. It was not the hatred towards their own body, it was not the lack of confidence either, but sheer racism and lack of empathy and inclusiveness that pushed them to fit into a mould not made for them. Marson, in her poem “Cinema Eyes” writes, “Come, I will let you go /When black beauties /are chosen for the screen;” (1937, p.139) The poem is a monologue by a mother in response to her daughter's wish to watch a movie, where she iterates what the Eurocentric standards of beauty propagated through movies did to her. “No, they were black /And therefore had no virtue” (1937, p.139) reflects how the movies make the blacks feel inferior and worthless. The poem goes on to narrate how the mother rejected black men who came for her, but fell for a white man, who was furious when the child born to them was black. And so the mother says, “But I know that black folk /Fed on movie lore /Lose pride of race. /I would not have you so.” (1937, p.139) She wishes to protect the racial pride they inherently possess from Western influences, in this case, the cinema.

### Language as a Tool of the Voiceless

Language is the soul of an immigrant's life and their only medium of literary expression. Black artists had to face decades of exclusion to be finally recognized as creators of art. “A man who has a language consequently possesses the world expressed and implied by that language. What we are getting at becomes plain: Mastery of language affords remarkable power. Paul Valery knew this, for he called language “the god gone astray in the flesh.” (Fanon, 1986, p.18) Language remained as a major barrier when they chose it as their tool for defiance. The Jamaican creole or Patois commonly used amongst the Caribbean immigrants were now being used for their creative expression as well. Along with defiance, they realised that it is the necessity to find comfort in the medium of expression that helps in owning their narration. English, in its “standard form” was the language of their oppressor's and going by Edward Kamau Brathwaite's idea of Nation language, the colonised can never express his suppressed culture through a language used by their coloniser. He says that language has an important role to play in the Caribbean, “But it is an English which is not standard, imported, educated English, but that of the submerged, surrealist experience and sensibility, which has always been there and which is now increasingly coming to the surface and influencing the perception of contemporary Caribbean people. It is what I call, as I say, *nation language*” (Brathwaite, 1984, p.311)

Una Marson's poetry is a prime example that proves race weighed above the language while critiquing their works. Marson wrote her initial poetry in standard English and followed the Renaissance style of poetry, which wasn't a desperate attempt to fit in, but the result of her convent education and wide reading habits. Irrespective of her background and influences, criticism flowed in accusing her of mockery – Erika Smilowitz, comments that Marson's poetry was “. . . of uneven quality,” and that it “. . . barely rise above the level of greeting card doggerel and hardly belong in any serious discussion of serious poetry.”(Smilowitz, 1982, p.22)

In her first self-published collection of poetry *Tropic Reveries* (1930), Marson chooses the traditional Western style and technique inspired by the renaissance poets. Marson was yet to experience London and the multitude of immigrant experiences, but was familiar with language through the education she received and her affinity towards the classical poets in English. “In Vain” is one among the many poems in *Tropic Reveries* where Marson expresses the struggles of a woman in a patriarchal setting.

In vain I build me stately mansions fair,  
And set thee as my king upon the throne,  
And place a lowly stool beside thee there,  
Thus, as thy slave to come into my own. (Marson, 1930)

Her style and language bring in the essence of classical period, but the subject remains deeply rooted in her colonial heritage governed by slavery and patriarchy. The poem ends by saying “No more the king comes to his waiting slave” which shows the indifference from the lover's side and the speaker being the inferior slave, who is at the mercy of her “king”. The poem brings out the hierarchy in a relationship based on patriarchy, where the black woman is double marginalised and twice a slave because of her race and gender. Any critic who leaps forth in blatantly accusing Marson of her Western poetic tradition as an inspiration in language should have clearly failed in analysing the subject and theme in her poems. As Dr. Osborne accurately observes, “Drawn to the

transcendent pitch and depth of feeling represented by the Romantic poets, Marson's work challenges the dehumanising of Black people in colonial legacies" (Osborne, 2020)

Marson published the famous *The Moth and The Stars* (1937) after her return to Jamaica following a breakdown. She was immersed in decolonising politics, creating national identity and the rights of black women. Perhaps the title of the collection itself is her message prior to her re-entry to London in 1938. The moth and the stars is a fable of a moth who dreams of flying to the star. While the other moths laugh at him and ask him to pursue smaller dreams like flying to a candle, the determined moth still tries to reach the star. When all other moths burn down to ashes as they reach for the candle flame, the dreamy moth lives a happy life, still trying to reach his goal. Una Marson was made of dreams, and her thirst for rights kept her going. In 1938 she returned to London to become a broadcaster, journalist and poet who incessantly worked for anti-colonial movements and black women's rights. Marson became the full-time assistant on the radio programme *Calling the West Indies* aired in the BBC which she later transformed into the legendary *Caribbean Voices* that altered the history of black artists in UK. In the 1940's, a black woman being the host of a programme in BBC was more implausible than the moth's dream of a star, yet Marson made it.

Marson's later poetry brings in the voice of a Caribbean woman immigrant in London. Both Nichols and Marson chose their poetry as a mouthpiece for the many women of their lot, who were assumed before understood. In Una Marson's "Kinky Hair Blues", Marson chose her native creole for the easier self-expression of her Caribbean woman. The poem stands for all the black women who love their body and hair, but feels pressured to fit into the western beauty standards. After decades of spreading toxic beauty standards, women of the present age struggle to love their own body and feel insecure in their dwelling place. Body positivity movements and campaigns flood the world to tell its women how they don't have to fit in when they can be their own true self. But tracing the history, we have strong rebellious women in the 1940's, in the racist London, shouting against all the exclusivities on how they love their body, and how they wish they could keep it that way. "I jes gwine die on de shelf / If I don't mek a start." (Marson, 1937) The desperateness that overshadows these lines is more about the sense of belonging than changing their appearance. Their anxiety of being "shelved" pushes them to bleach and straighten, though she stresses how unwelcoming this new style is.

I hate dat ironed hair  
And dat bleaching skin.  
Hate dat ironed hair  
And dat bleaching skin.  
But I'll be all alone  
If I don't fall in. (Marson, 1937)

The poem "laments the rigors of Western beauty standards and the pervasive feeling that a black woman must participate if she ever wants to find love." (Edwards, 2016)

I like me black face  
And me kinky hair.  
I like me black face  
And me kinky hair.  
But nobody loves dem,  
I jes don't tink it's fair. (Marson, 1937)

Marson, through repetition establishes what the black women feel while trying to fit in. Subverting the assumptions of how they transform in awe of the established beauty standards, Marson answers that "I'll be all alone / If I don't fall in." and "But nobody loves dem,/ I jes don't tink it's fair." (1937) Later in the poem, she says, "And I don't envy gals / What got dose locks so fair." (1937) The transformation is not rooted in envy or insecurity, but alienation.

Grace Nichols has aced her share of poems through different styles as well. Her first collection *i is a long memoried woman* (1983) is her story of the Caribbean women's past. It gives voice to a history that was theirs to narrate, but was dubbed by onlookers. While Nichols chronologically traces the capture of women in Africa, their slavery and final emancipation, she writes it on par with her present situation of the Caribbean women in the New World, now, London. Uprooted, their tongues lost, alienated yet determined to achieve their dreams.

Her collections *The Fat Black Woman's Poems* (2000) and *Lazy Thoughts of a Lazy Woman* (1989) which are works of the later years follow a less serious tone, more sarcastic and hard-hitting to the racist gaze. Like Marson and many other black women poets, this collection reveals the different phases in the life of a black female immigrant. She challenges the western beauty standards and three social stereotypes that are oppressive to the immigrant. The title calls out these three layers of marginalisation that happens through size, race and gender.

In her poem, "Of Course When They Ask for Poems About the 'Realities' of Black Women" from *Lazy Thoughts of a Lazy Woman*, Nichols juxtaposes the portrayal of black woman as a victim and a feeble sidekick who accompanied their partner to a remote land. Nichols begins the poem saying,

What they really want  
at times  
is a specimen  
whose heart is in the dust

A mother-of-sufferer  
trampled, oppressed  
they want a little black blood  
undressed  
and validation  
for the abused stereotype  
already in their heads (Nichols, 1989)

She addresses the stereotype that she is about to dismantle in the beginning of the poem, where “they”, referring to not just the whites, but everyone other than the black women who squeeze them into pre-existing frames typecast in their heads attributing the black woman to be a “mother-of-sufferer / trampled, oppressed.” “They” expect the “Realities of Black Women” to be limited to these labels. In the later part of the poem, she breaks the categories that immigrant women are put into – “there ain’t no easy-belly category” (1989), Nichols lists out how diverse the women are, like a “contrasting sky /of rainbow spectrum.” She contrasts the existing stereotypes with strong and rebellious imagery of black women who remember their past and are ready to own their narrative, and Nichols writes, “Cradle a soft black woman /and burn fingers as you trace /revolution.” (1989) And if her poem despite being direct and obvious still fails to pass the message, clarifies in the concluding stanza, what exactly she wants to convey through the poem.

Maybe this poem is to say,  
that I like to see  
we black women  
full-of-we-selves walking

Crushing out  
with each dancing step  
the twisted self-negating  
history  
we've inherited

Crushing out  
with each dancing step (Nichols, 1989)

Nichols wishes to see black women “twist” and “crush” the “self-negating history” that they have inherited, while bringing in the image of dancing, a form of self-expression and celebration. She replaces every word and mood of the stereotypical narrative with expressions of confidence, rebellion and celebration.

## **Conclusion**

During the second wave feminism in the 1960’s, a slogan was being popularized, which later became a major game changer in feminism. The “personal is political”, though its origin still at debate, proves to be one of the concluding points here. Though Una Marson and Grace Nichols were known figures during their initial immigrant years, their stories, along with thousands of women’s went unheard through most of the years. Later in retellings of the past, their names are usually found scattered to fill in the space of women. The black women have made ample changes to their history to reach where they are at present, and this deserves not a few mentions, but a detailed study. In the case of Marson and Nichols, their works have been brought to light again in the recent years, especially Nichol’s as she is still staying strong in her arena. But like any other male nationalists or literary pioneers, they deserve to be the label of the generation that they lived in. Looking back at the socio-political conditions during the immigrant struggle, innumerable accounts can be noted where women left major parties as they felt their voices were unheard. Strong and noteworthy activists like Olive Morris and Elizabeth Obi are still known because of the names of male activists that are placed beside them. They were one of the earlier members of The Black Panther Movement and founded the Brixton Black Women’s Group in order to discuss the issues faced by women. These incidents again underline how powerful women were left unheard because their problems were considered trivial in comparison to the ‘major’ problems faced by the men. “The “personal is political” transformed consciousness by insisting on the need to understand the social, economic, cultural, and political oppression of women as the basis for all “personal” problems that afflicted individual women.” (Behrent, 2019)

The themes and subject dealt in the writings of black women were trivialised as being domestic or romantic, thereby underestimating their roles as a mother or a wife as well as their efforts towards organising revolts and movements. A woman who wrote domestic poem was categorised as frail and dependent, who is naïve enough that she doesn't recognise the major political issues burning between men. It is through different groups like Brixton, that women gave each other a space where their problems felt valid and they developed a collective consciousness. Their personal experiences were indeed a result of the marginalisation that they were exposed to. The classism and racism when coupled with sexism brought to surface the issues that began at their own homes. As Pratibha Parmar comments in her essay "Black Feminism: The Politics of Articulation" (1990, P.293),

What is evident in the cultural productions of black women's creativity is the active negotiation between these objective notions of ourselves (as female, black, lesbian or working-class) and the subjective experiences of displacement, alienation and 'otherness'. The marginal ceases to be the object of interpretation and illumination: in our own self-referencing narratives we expropriate those bodies of knowledge and theory which are ethnocentrically bound in a relation of dominance to us as postcolonial subjects.

Born 50 years apart, the poetry of Una Marson and Grace Nichols deals with the same issue of black women immigrant's identity. The slightly stronger and rebellious voice in Nichols's poetry can be interpreted as the strength that they gained from the incessant efforts of all the women before her generation who worked with the same vision. While Marson's poetry deals with the alienation, diaspora and the struggles of belonging culminating in the creation of the black women's identity, Nichols' poetry starts from there. She picks up the most relevant factor for any Caribbean woman, their heritage and legacy and the struggles of slavery and uprooting in her first collection. After acknowledging her ancestors' strength for survival, she storms forth with her powerful poetry collections like *The Fat Black Woman Poems*. This brief study answers the research question by proving that the accounts of women's experiences and their poetry shed light to a different side of the history, which remained unknown in the mainstream narration. It can also be noticed that, the addition of any oppression which adds to the existing one does not minimise the importance of the main problem, but adds layers to it, which helps in understanding the problem at a grassroots level.

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