

May 2004

Navigating the Web of Place: Trapped Identities in Donna Hemans' *River Woman*

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Recommended Citation

Down, Lorna (2004) "Navigating the Web of Place: Trapped Identities in Donna Hemans' *River Woman*," *Anthurium: A Caribbean Studies Journal*: Vol. 2 : Iss. 1 , Article 3.

Available at: <http://scholarlyrepository.miami.edu/anthurium/vol2/iss1/3>

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Still, we belong here.

—Derek Walcott, 'Lampfall,' *The Castaways and Other Poems*

Sometimes she simply dreamt of leaving Standfast on a bus, standing on the top where people loaded bags and boxes, and looking back on the town, waving good-bye forever.

— Donna Hemans, *River Woman*

That was another life. Westwood High. My one escape from Standfast. My mother is one of the few women in Standfast who left home.

—Donna Hemans, *River Woman*

An image of Standfast as a place from which one should escape emerges gradually in *River Woman*. The text, however, does not begin with the conventional description of place or setting to contextualize events and/or to create atmosphere. Instead, Donna Hemans' novel opens with Kelithe's account of the drowning of her son Timothy. Written in a semi-confessional mode, Kelithe's narrative is the gradual weave of a drowning, one mother accused of watching her son drown, and another mother refusing to hear her daughter's story because Standfast is a place where such "crimes" may need to be committed in order for its women to be free of it. Thus the narrative registers the impact of place on individuals. My reading of Hemans' novel is a reflection on place and on identities that are constructed by place, and the extent to which such identities remain fixed in place. Underlying this reflection is Eric Miller's theory that place informs identities.¹

Errol Miller posits place as status in society, that is, the relative position of individuals of society to each other and the relative position of society to other societies (26). Specifically, place is the location of individuals, groups or societies relative to others with respect to power, resources, status, belief system and culture (26). Miller, moreover, elaborates that place is not simply the product of these five dimensions, but it is the overall integration of them into a singular site (26). Individuals or societies are positioned substantially, that is, in their own right, as proxy to those positioned as such or in relationship to the substantial holders of place (27). In any society, then, substantial holders of place would seem to decide the status of others in that society. It follows that societies considered central or substantial holders of place would also determine the position of other societies relative to them. Miller's theory would appear to suggest that movement from either central to marginal position is foreclosed, so that individuals, termed marginals, are permanently trapped in that position. He, however, clearly states that positions of centre and margin are never permanent, that the elements used to determine place are often subverted in a number of ways (Miller, "Personal Interview"). Specifically relevant to my study of Hemans' novel is his insistence that internal movement within societies is the key factor in individuals' external movement to other societies (Miller, "Personal Interview"). Miller

argues that the limitations to an individual's movement within her/his society, whether political or economical, will determine the individual's movement to other societies ("Personal Interview").

The story of Hemans' river women is the story of women whose marginal position in society, whose restricted movement in their society, impels them to look beyond the enclosure of their island space and seize any opportunity for leaving. It is the story of Sonya who leaves her young daughter for the United States in pursuit of a better life, of improved status, and it is also the story of Kelithe, Sonya's daughter, whose yearning for her mother threatens to destroy her. The story's crisis point is the drowning of Kelithe's son close to her departure for New York and how that drowning is interpreted.

But as Miller makes clear, the movement of marginals in a marginal society to a marginal place in a central society is one of the many place shifts that occur in societies in general. So Sonya, who fears being trapped in a marginal space, flees to a "developed" society but remains very much a marginal in that society. Hemans' novel, however, even as it describes such movements, is more concerned with examining the structures that give rise to them. The novel, in fact, contests the notion of marginality itself by examining the factors that determine it, that is, the structures and systems that impel the movement of Caribbean people from the islands.

The movement of Caribbean people from island to metropolis is not only the subject of Hemans' novel but the subject of many other Caribbean texts where the issue of place has been thematized. Classic West Indian texts such as Aimé Césaire's *Return to My Native Land*, George Lamming's *The Pleasures of Exile*, and Samuel Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* have explored the theme of place primarily in the context of exile and migration. So too have many contemporary Caribbean writers like Joan Riley in *The Unbelonging* and Jamaica Kincaid in *At the Bottom of the River* and *Annie John*.

Lamming's cryptic title, *The Pleasures of Exile*, reflects the notion of the exilic condition as one of pain/displacement as well as a space for "pleasure." The exilic condition thus conceptualized reflects the loss of "home" but also the space created for subject positions that may have been denied at home. It is the absence of subject positions at home that produces the exilic condition in the pre-migration state of many Caribbean people. Lamming, like other Caribbean writers, including Myriam Chancy in *Searching for Safe Spaces*, calls attention to this exilic condition at home. In *The Pleasures of Exile*, he states emphatically that to "be colonial is to be in a state of exile" (229). Here the historical context of forced separation from Africa and colonial relations is foregrounded. The feelings of fragmentation and of powerlessness which follow produce the exile at home: "We are made to feel a sense of exile by our inadequacy and our irrelevance of function in a society whose past we can't alter, and whose future is always beyond us" (24).

Being exiled while at home is also the state of Kincaid's female characters. Imposed colonial values, traditions, and behaviour threaten their selfhood. As Lauren Niesen de Abruna, in her examination of Kincaid's novels, points out, Annie's rebellion (in *Annie John*) against her mother's lessons is in response to the violation of self that such lessons impose. The enforced piano lessons and the practicing of curtsies symbolize enforced British traditions that threaten to obliterate Annie. "Home" thus depicted is not the site from which a clear identity emerges. Nor is it a place of belonging where one's roots are planted. Such a site does not offer the nurturance that Lamming's representation of home suggests (23). Instead, it is a "complex web of intricately connected levels of alienation," to cite Chancy's definition of exile (166). Such readings firmly establish that the displacement of the self comes as a consequence of colonial relations and that to leave "home" is to free self from the strictures of a colonial past.

Hemans' novel is, however, organized on a different basis. The colonial masters are simply part of the background. Only traces of their presence remain in the foreground, as in the high school Kelithe attends. The poverty of the rural town may in some way be connected to postcolonial relations—discriminatory trading agreements, loan policies of international lending agencies that give rise to the mounting debt burdens of "undeveloped" countries. But Standfast, like Kincaid's "a small place," is represented as largely the product of "small-minded/colonized" (52) mentalities. Standfast is a forgotten rural town, unimportant to local politicians. It is, therefore, the poverty and lack of opportunity in the town that are the immediate reasons for migration, for the displacement of Hemans' river women.

As Isabel Hoving explains, displacement is an ambivalent concept: "It is a sign of loss, but also a potential for personal transformation, and thus an opportunity to choose new subject positions" (14). Her analysis concurs with Lamming's. The state of exile provides the space for creating "home" or "new subject positions" so that the exile can "belong" wherever s/he is. It is a position that Myriam Chancy in her exploration of Afro-Caribbean women in exile also holds: "The state of exile . . . is one in which exiled persons have the privilege of looking both forward and backward—forward to a state of equilibrium wherein alienation from the self and the past will be brought to an end and backward to an understanding of where we have come from" (214).

This needs, however, to be qualified. The exile is located after all in the metropole, the very center that has been responsible for disabling the migrant at home. Caribbean writers' positioning of exile abroad as space for subjectivity has, therefore, to be balanced against the unromanticized place of exile, against the harshness of the city of the lonely Londoners as in Selvon's novel. Hoving, in fact, acknowledges this as she locates Riley's novels, with their description of the horrors of life in exile, as countering the tendency to romanticize the migrant's experience (62). The trope of "home" is thus configured in many different ways in Caribbean writing.

Inherent in the term exile is the notion of home, of possessing/not possessing a home, of being away from home. The trajectory of exile includes not only departure but also return.

“Home” as return to point of origin, however it is configured, is a significant trope in much of the literature on exile and migration. Return is often represented as an acceptance of self, of reconnection with one’s roots (as in Erna Brodber’s *Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home* and Kamau Brathwaite’s *The Arrivants*). Anthea Morrison in her examination of exile and homecoming in Maryse Condé’s *La vie scelerate* writes of Coco, one of the central characters, as experiencing a true homecoming when she “re-possesses” the island and claims it as home. And Elizabeth Wilson in her exploration of French Caribbean women’s writing makes the point that their homecoming is achieved through writing. Homecoming here means a symbolic reunion with the self, with other women and with the mother, the land from which they have been exiled. Coming home has also meant coming to terms with “the repulsive maternal body” (Hoving 62), and then a rediscovery of self through the discovery of one’s roots as in Césaire’s *Return to my Native Land*. Or, as in Riley’s *Unbelonging*, there is no homecoming; there is no movement beyond the image of the defiled mother as Hoving’s reading implies.

Hemans also equates “home” with a clear sense of identity, of coherent self, and of being rooted. Her novel, however, extends the boundaries of these readings as she examines what constitutes “home,” what it means to be rooted, and whether or not the exile can indeed return home. To be in exile is to be uprooted; it is to have unearthed the buried navel string.² Hemans does not position her characters as being in exile at home, nor is marginalization equated with exile. The condition of home may force separation but her characters experience varying levels of connectedness to their home space.

The focus of *River Woman*, then, is on what has been left behind or abandoned in pursuit of that other place. The novel interrogates what is presented as the high cost of leaving. Sonya’s child, abandoned in the pursuit of the American dream, forms part of that group termed the “barrel children” (Crawford-Brown and Rattray 7). “Barrel children” is a term coined by social workers in Jamaica in the 1980s to describe the phenomenon of children left behind, with a promise of reunion with the parent or parents who migrate at some later stage; these children receive barrels of food and clothing from their parents, but not the love and emotional nurturance that they need (Crawford-Brown and Rattray 7). This is the situation with Kelithe, who comments ironically on her mother’s love: “[her] love came in boxes, packaged as food and clothes and toys. Christmases and birthdays, and sometimes in between. Edible, wearable, seasonal love” (91).

Sonya’s abandoned child can also be read as symbolically representing the heart of home, the roots of home. Exile in these terms suggests an irrecoverable loss. Locating Hemans’ novel in this way, moreover, forces a redefinition of place and identity as the novel exposes the relation between the construct of place and the construct of identity. Michel Foucault’s notion of place as site of authority also indicates the importance of place in shaping identities and is useful in reading Heman’s novel. Foucault’s theory that the constitution of the human subject is not the result of “active, conscious decisions, but of subliminal socialization” (Hoy 15), that social institutions constitute or condition reality so that the human subject is produced historically from

its social world, helps to clarify Hemans' representation of the relation between Standfast's marginality and that of its citizens.

In my reading of Hemans' novel, however, I argue that place is as much constructed by individuals as they are by place. In effect, the relation that exists between place and individual is a dialogic one. The dialogue, however, is self-perpetuating so that individuals can become trapped in the many strands of a web that does not readily permit escape. Using Miller's elements to determine place, Standfast is easily identified as unprogressive, unimportant—a marginal place. The novel emphasizes this image as Hemans employs the first person narratives that reflect personal responses to the town, namely Kelithe's and Sonya's. Additionally, the attitude of the women, men and children to the town is filtered through these first person narratives. What is conveyed as a result is intimate and seemingly accurate knowledge of Standfast. Balanced against this is the third person omniscient narrative voice whose authority and seeming objectivity further support the negative image of this quiet, forgotten and rural town—where nothing happens. Its resources are few: there are no paved roads, no new buildings, no major commercial activity, no electricity, and no high school. An old bridge spanning an unpaved road and a shop appear to be the major landmarks of the town.

Standfast is, moreover, represented in relation to other places. And more important, the people of the town perceive Standfast as an unprogressive, failed town. The failure of its one major project—the Rio Minho bridge/road project—and its consequent isolation are etched in the people's minds. The narrative further sketches its history of marginality. Related in myth-like fashion, the sad yet humorous tale of the origins of the town's name metonymically represents Standfast's defeated status. Tragically, as the narrative makes clear, the town's inscription as an undeveloped and defeated town also becomes the people's. "Bred to accept defeat as Standfast's lot" (37), they are trapped by this particular definition of themselves.

This focus on Standfast's status brings into sharp focus how insignificant/undeveloped/developing/third world spaces are constructed and how such constructs shape the identities of the people who inhabit them, more so, how they in turn reinforce that construct of place. The novel explores the drive/the push to escape such a small place—an undeveloped third world space—and shows ultimately that the relation between the construct of place and identity is so strong that identities once shaped by place are often trapped by such constructs.

Standfast is configured in binary terms: Standfast/elsewhere, underdeveloped/developed, defeated/progressive. Standfast as the unprivileged term underlines that escape from Standfast means progress, liberation, and development. Sonya's migration is thus read by the other women of the town as freedom from the trap of poverty and lack of opportunity, and evokes mainly envy despite her abandonment of Kelithe. The desire to escape Standfast is shared by most of its citizens. Education and migration are presented as roads leading away from Standfast and to progress. Yet opportunities for escape are limited. Sonya "is one of the few women in Standfast who left home" (29).

Within this context, the women in Standfast reluctantly accept the conventional representation of women's bodies—pregnancy, childbirth, and child rearing, as keeping a woman in “place.” Kelithe's pregnancy is “entrapment” in Standfast; forced by pregnancy to abandon high school, she has to abandon her dreams of leaving Standfast. The river women are shown to view this loss of her dreams with a certain pleasure as she is perceived as being “brought . . . back to their level” (40), compelled to remain in place, bring up her child, and so bear the common identity of Standfast's women who remain in Standfast, that of failure. Kelithe's situation, however, makes even plainer the extent of their desire to avoid being “woman in place,” even as they accept that their bodies have been configured by their society to do just that. So Sonya's departure from Standfast, despite the abandonment of her then five-year-old daughter, is read as progress. But progress so narrowly defined pits motherhood against *the self that is more than mother*. Consequently, as Kelithe's narrative exposes, the women occupy a conflictual space produced by ambivalently configured identities. That is, place pushes them towards independence even as it ties them “biologically” to it. A feminist reading, therefore, that argues for women's development beyond that of motherhood is subverted by the text's revelation of the morality underlying such development.

Kelithe's narrative of the drowning of her son is thus understandably marked by a strange ambiguity. Even as she declares her innocence of the crime the river women charge her with, the language she uses subverts any definitive reading. The tone of the narrative pleads for the reader's sympathy, understanding, and belief. Yet the undercurrents in Kelithe's insistence on what she did not see or hear points to the *possibility* of her seeing and hearing what happens to her son:

... but I know I didn't see my boy's head bob back up to the top of the water, or hear the gurgle deep in his throat when he tried to say “Mama” and swallowed water instead. I didn't see his arms ... Nor did I see the water push his body....(3)

What emerges clearly is a Kelithe who is shaped by the definition of Standfast, but who has also experienced the tragic displacement that migration of a mother causes. The privileging of migration, with its imagined benefits for self-development, is thus subverted by her knowledge of mother-absence and mother-love that comes “packaged as food and clothes and toys. Christmases and birthdays, and sometimes in between. Edible, wearable, seasonal love” (91).

This is further elaborated on by the juxtaposition of Kelithe's narrative with that of her mother's—which recalls Sonya's “escape” from Standfast, her fifteen year abandonment of her then five-year-old daughter, left only with a promise, “Maybe in a year or two I'll send for you... Soon, soon” (49). This is contextualized by the women's talk of Kelithe letting her baby drown so that she could finally leave Standfast. Tales circulate that she can only join her mother in North America if she leaves her son behind. Details accumulate of a grandmother too old to look after another child, of a grandmother who refuses to look after Timothy. Migration is thus problematized. Hemans' novel draws our attention not only to the place that exiles its children

but also to the “barrel children” that migration produces. Furthermore, the narrative’s disclosure of the “barrel children” and an alleged “infanticide” also calls into question a feminist movement that encourages the ideological space that pits women’s development against that of their children. After all, the “liberated” Sonya begins a chain of events that leads to the death of both her grandson and her daughter. Standfast is thus the site of unresolved ideological conflicts engendered by a feminist ideology, market forces, and traditional rural values. Kelithe’s narrative, ostensibly addressed to her mother—“if only she had asked” (4)—is more so Kelithe’s self-reflection, her working through the ideological conflicts of the space she occupies, as a contemporary woman in a third world space.

The gradual resolution of these conflicts is reflected in Kelithe’s seeming acceptance of motherhood as “staying in place.” Uncovering the yearning and loss left by mother absence, Kelithe defines mother-love not as “what we do for each other, how much we spend or sacrifice,” but as “I love Timothy. I stayed” (92). Reconstructing the memory of her son means reconstructing the memory of her mother—one memory is superimposed on another, so that in revealing one, the other is uncovered. Thus the many layered, the many-textured picture of motherhood is shown. Kelithe defines her place through a different definition of motherhood—one in direct contrast to her mother’s. Her mother’s forgotten kiss, metonymically pointing to the loss of emotional ties is contrasted with Timothy’s covering Kelithe’s face with kisses, that is, his deep emotional connection with her. His loss of song and sad eyes when she leaves him briefly for a job in Kingston parallels her story closely and confirms Kelithe’s decision not to leave him behind.

“I . . . knew I couldn’t plan on leaving him behind” (164) is not, however, the equivalent of “I stayed” (92). Used interchangeably, the phrases do not immediately convey the ambiguity of Kelithe’s position, an ambiguity that subverts any definitive reading of Kelithe’s reconstruction of place, and of self as woman and as mother. Additionally, Kelithe acknowledges the “weight” of motherhood that Standfast’s definition produces as she, too, is forced to admit abandoned dreams—as in her dream of becoming a journalist—and to recognize the choices a place like Standfast authorizes for women. In voicing the limiting identities that Standfast constructs for its women, Kelithe makes clear the river woman’s predicament. Significantly, Kelithe’s resolution remains shrouded in ambiguity, as her final reflection on it intimates a plan to leave Timothy behind even as she allows for the pain of the separation: “And I thought how hard it would be to leave him even for a few months . . . I was sad. But still I was happy because the future held promise. My third escape from Standfast. Third and final. Permanent. An opportunity to start afresh without a history” (228).

Kelithe’s telling of the “River Mumma” story is instructive; it is a story that she feels aptly summarizes her situation. Hemans offers several versions of this folk tale, with various aspects of the tale included and expanded on in different sections of the novel. In essence, the tale speaks to the possibility of happy endings, of riches, of success and the sacrifice demanded for these. In this story, two sisters carrying ackees attempt to cross the river and the River

Mumma demands an ackee from them. Significantly, it is the unnamed sister who gives up an ackee. Nora refuses and the river rises and sweeps her away. Both sisters symbolize different aspects of Kelithe. As Nora—the woman with a clear identity—she refuses to give up her son. But when threatened by the rising river of loss of identity, of potential, and of dreams, she yields to the River Mumma. This yielding is, nonetheless, ambiguous. The narrative is deliberately vague as to whether or not Kelithe did “give up her son” and later herself to the river. The focus remains then on identities trapped in a “small” place.

What Hemans’ novel ultimately questions is the cost that constructs of place impose on individuals, specifically women who are poor. Sonya’s repression of mother/daughter ties is a consequence of her attempts to free self from a third world space that doubly entraps women. But the price of that freedom is the tragic sacrifice of Kelithe. She has been offered to the River Mumma so that her mother can find her “riches.” Another river story clarifies this—“River Mumma and the golden comb.” In this story the River Mumma’s comb is taken and then returned for the river’s gold. The goal is to acquire riches and to surrender what is necessary to do so. But the narrative makes clear that such “riches” are dubious because place is more imaginary than “real.” New York is as much a construct as Standfast. Sonya, Kelithe and the other women see New York as uncontested developed space, possessing the significance that Standfast lacks and therefore space for self-determination. Such notions are deconstructed, however, as Hemans uncovers Sonya’s unease in that setting. Much like Philo’s in Earl Lovelace’s *The Dragon Can’t Dance*, Sonya’s possessions acquired in New York have not “freed” her. As a black woman from the islands, she remains very much a marginal figure in New York looking after other people’s children. And, ironically, she looks to Standfast to find a sense of belonging to some place. Timothy and Kelithe’s deaths, however, foreclose any return. The loss of the children symbolizes the loss of her connection to home. The movement of home–exile–home is disrupted. The exile having abandoned her “navel string” cannot find her way back home.

Place is moreover shown as political. Representation is a political act, that is, a way of exercising power. The narrative exposes that representation of place is based not only on what the place possesses or on the authority that it wields, but also on how it constructs itself. So New York’s status, like other “developed” spaces is revealed as a narrative that has been produced. The drowning then can be read as an exposé of how importance is produced and, by extension, how Standfast’s lack of importance has been constructed. The figure of the Member of Parliament in the “background” at historic moments in Standfast, seemingly an unobtrusive detail, indicates that the question of power and politics is central in the construct of space.

The river women’s re-presentation of the drowning of Timothy can therefore be read as a political act, as a way of inscribing the desired self in place. The drowning—an event unnoticed by others in the surrounding towns and one that could have been as easily forgotten by Standfast itself—becomes scripted instead by the women in the town as an event of major importance. Kelithe leaves her son sleeping under a tree some distance away from the river where she and

other women are washing, but unnoticed by any of them, Timothy wakes, walks into the river and drowns. Kelithe only becomes aware of this when she sees the women pulling the boy's body out of the water. The significance of this event grows in proportion as the women, organizing themselves as the local media, build a narrative of Kelithe watching her baby drown so that she can leave Standfast. And even though the women can imagine "how the force of the water could have pulled at weak three year-old legs" (37), they choose tales of "infanticide." Engaging the power of the official bodies—the Church, the police, and eventually, the state—the women authorize these narratives. Their *word* provides a groundswell that effects a change in the status of Standfast. In effect, they have constructed Standfast as a place of significance and therefore the self as possessing significance. The old representation is contested through their offering of Kelithe to the "river mumma," that is, their sacrificing of Kelithe.

Hemans' novel also provides an alternative way of visioning self and place to that of Kelithe and the river women. The alternate vision is that of Grams. Dispensing with others' construct of place and producing her own, Grams suggests alternatives to positioning self in place. An almost silent presence, her narrative submerged in Kelithe's, Grams represents possibility for peace with place. She is at once a stereotypical figure and an individualized rural woman, representing traditional values that take into account contemporary "feminist" ones. Hemans' employment of the diminutive Grams suggests not only the special relationship between grandmother and granddaughter but also her extended role in the community of Standfast—that of the voice of tradition and authority. As such she engages our attention by providing a context beyond the immediate one of Kelithe, Sonya, and the other river women.

Portrayed as "woman in her place," she, unlike the others, shows no yearning for possibilities beyond motherhood, beyond Standfast. The absence of such dreams may be read as gaps in the text that allude to a repressed narrative of dreams or a narrative of dreams otherwise fulfilled. Kelithe's description of her as a woman delivering other people's children and caring for her, Timothy, and six children reveals a woman fully occupied with child-rearing. And even though Grams insists that mothering is "a duty from God" (120), the novel suggests that she finds fulfilment in motherhood in details such as Grams "brushing [Kelithe's] hair, parting, and rubbing [her] scalp with oil," a ritual previously practiced with her daughter (109). For her to be responsible for a child is obviously not "weight" and is not diametrically opposed to self-fulfilment.

Furthermore, Grams is shown as making peace with the limitations of life in Standfast. The description of her working her land, feeding the chickens, bringing in the goats in the evenings, pulling the peas out of the earth—clearly no easy life for an aging grandmother—suggest a full and fulfilling life. And despite her daughter achieving some material success in New York, Grams is represented as eschewing any markers of the benefits of Sonya's life. Sonya's offer of a water tank that would permit indoor plumbing, for example, is refused because of Grams' sensitivity to the poverty of those around her. Her clothes, with the buttons missing, the buttonholes closed with safety pins and the faded floral housedress, emphasize an

acceptance of a simple “ordinary” life. But qualifying this idyllic picture is Grams’ response to the new dress that Sonya brings her for Timothy’s funeral service. With it on she is transformed, “her back suddenly seems straighter, and she smiles at her image in the mirror” (88). Suddenly and briefly revealed is a Grams with dreams of a self untied to motherhood.

The image of the independent Grams is perhaps the most challenging to the image of the Standfast woman who is almost always poised to flee Standfast. Her independence effectively contests the notion that remaining in an “undeveloped” space produces “failed” women. The text emphasizes her separateness from the other women to indicate a conceptualization of life, in many ways, fundamentally different from theirs. Grams is, therefore, able to support Kelithe openly in the face of their united “attack” on her. She too, unlike Sonya, does not crave their approval, is not embarrassed because of their accusation, and can therefore challenge their interpretation of the drowning. She, in effect, represents women who cannot be made less by place. Secure in knowledge of self, they successfully negotiate their way through webs that threaten to tangle and stifle. Her love story is instructive. Unlike Sonya and Kelithe, love comes to her and remains, because she is centered and without the yearning to be elsewhere and somebody else. The image of her, with the heavy basket on her head, “walking upright, swinging her hands by her side” (100), captures a sense of peace with self and place, a coming to terms with their limitations. It is a concept of life that she fails to pass on to Kelithe. The sudden disappearance of Sonya’s photograph over which Kelithe would mope illustrates this. It marks Kelithe’s constant disquiet emerging from a refusal to accept the mother/daughter limitation and a decision to live in a state of yearning for what she does not possess, and also Grams’ attempt to change this. Perhaps Grams is an idealized figure; perhaps her longings are not voiced, but submerged in Kelithe’s narrative. Nonetheless, she suggests possibilities for women living in marginalized places.

What Hemans’ novel offers is an interrogation of constructs of place as the novel uncovers the relation between place and identity. Specifically, the novel exposes how constructs of space—third world, first world, developed, undeveloped—are narratives of the self and authorized in various ways. Attempts to escape from a marginalized space are often futile attempts to escape from self-narratives bred in such places. Escape from “trapped” identities becomes possible only when such narratives are confronted and deconstructed. From such beginnings emerge legitimate and powerful narratives of self that defy the construct of place in which they may be situated.

Notes

¹Errol Miller's theory of place emerges from his study of Jamaican society and high schooling, *Jamaican Society and High Schooling* (1990).

²The Jamaican saying 'me navel string bury deh' is an indication of strong ties to a place, of being rooted there. It comes from a traditional practice of burying the umbilical cord of the newborn.

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