

UWI LITERATURE CONFERENCE PAPER:

RE-IMAGING OURSELVES THROUGH THE EYES OF PA NEEZA

*RECOGNITION, REJECTION, REPOSITIONING*

'So, friend of my childhood years

One day we'll talk about

How the mirror broke

Who kissed us awake

Who let Anansi from his bag

For isn't it strange how

northern eyes

in the brighter world before us now

Pale?'

Olive Senior, Colonial Girls' School

So Olive Senior's Colonial Girls' School ends on a note of rejoice and possibility.

My question is: Was the mirror broken, or was it merely cracked?

It seems to me that we have mistaken the attainment of political independence for a peoples' independence. Our history books dedicate chapters to the prelude to independence and all that has happened after is installed in our memory by paragraph rather than by prominence. If Anansi had broken the mirror, then I would not have to ask: Where is calypso in our essay writing classes? Why have the speeches of Brain Honore not been taught side by side with Shakespeare? Where are the Mc Burnies and Francois' and Jeffers' and all our forerunners of women's liberation in our studies on feminism? Where are the Mahals and Pa Neezas and Siewdass Sadhus and all our forerunners of national identity in our studies on philosophy?

Anansi may have brought some colour to the white-washed halls of the colonial girls' school, but if we produce academically proficient students who do not know about our Honores, Mc Burnies and Pa Neezas, then what power does Anansi have?

Like the Black Power Revolution that argued that independence was merely a label and colonization simply had a new face, have

we simply renamed GCE, CXC and CAPE while education remains a colonial experience that leaves Anansi to battle a bullet-proof mirror?

As a C21st Caribbean writer, I have been particularly intrigued by Papa Neeza and the deeper I dug, the more I gained an understanding of that mirror that Anansi was up against. What had been known to me about Pa Neeza, as I'm sure to all of you, was that he was reputed as being the greatest obeah man that Trinidad and perhaps the Caribbean had ever seen; but it is what was not known to me prior to my research that is to me, the real power of Pa Neeza. I want to share these lesser known facts about how Pa Neeza saw himself with you and I want to suggest that if we could see ourselves through his eyes, we may gain a deeper insight of Anansi's inability to break the mirror.

Papa Neeza's reputation as a formidable obeah man has been immortalized in the Mighty Sparrow's Obeah Wedding when he

tells Melda that no amount of obeah she does will make him marry her, because “Papa Neeza is mih grandfather”.

Stories abound amongst the elders of Moruga on Papa Neeza’s ability to retrieve children from douens, to remove obeah from panties that had been tampered with, to mix potions that brought success and healing, and the fact that from politician to pauper came to see Papa Neeza, all believing that whatever problem they had would be wiped away by Papa Neeza’s magic, is testimony to a belief in some power Pa Neeza possessed.

We have assumed this power to be obeah.

But how do we define a man when we do not know the boundaries/meaning of the word by which he is defined?

My first point is this: we must recognize what we are seeing in the mirror if we are to challenge it.

For us to label Papa Neeza an obeah man means we must understand first what obeah means/represents. Without this, then we ourselves contribute to Papa Neeza as a myth as much as the

foreigners have perpetrated the myth of our ancestors as pagan cannibals. As a people we have not collectively accepted, rejected or understood obeah, yet we have allowed this label to remain on Pa Neeza. So what Papa Neeza could have lent to our colour, our understanding of self, is as foggy as the mirror Anansi tried to break.

If we do not first recognize what we are seeing, how do we make sense of it? If we do not make sense of the reflection then we leave it to others to recognize and interpret for us.

Since I have done no studies on obeah and its philosophy, I cannot recognize Papa Neeza as an obeah man, neither can I agree nor disagree with this interpretation. But this does not mean that I cannot recognize Papa Neeza the man and by extension, myself and my space. I have found that very often, things that we do not understand or agree on get lost in the mire of debate and while the debate rages on, the topic often gets overlooked, so instead of placing Papa Neeza in this cubicle of identity, I have decided to take him out.

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My concern is not to prove or disprove Pa Neeza as an obeah man, neither is it to attempt to analyze what obeah is, my concern is to bring an understanding of Pa Neeza in a context that is applicable to all, outside the limitations of the labels of obeah and Africanism.

My purpose in looking at Pa Neeza outside the label of obeah man is to break the barrier that may prevent us from going beyond, so that we can find the interpretation and information that are more valuable to us as a people than the argument of whether he was or was not an obeah man.

If we consider Anansi as the first barrier breaker, as illustrated by Olive Senior's poem, let us consider this: while we recognized in Sleeping Beauty romance and possibility, we recognized Anansi as a trickster. Here: we told our children, see yourself in this spider, notice what a trickster he is, he is not to be trusted, everything he achieves is obtained by guile and mischief. Our

children are not taught that Sleeping Beauty is lazy and Prince Charming is opportunistic, likewise, our children are not taught that Anansi is determined and fearless.

Consider this: what more could we have learnt from Anansi if we had recognized him as a strategist instead of as a trickster? If we were to recognize Anansi from a Caribbean perspective we would see one who understood the structure and environment in which he had to thrive and who used his imagination, wit, creativity and personality to negotiate his way; one who, in fact, symbolizes our own reality as Caribbean people.

Similarly, consider this: what more could we have learnt about Papa Neeza and by extension, our selves, had Papa Neeza been introduced to us as something other than an obeah man, something by which we could all identify without having to battle among ourselves on the theory and understanding of obeah and therefore having to battle with acceptance or rejection of Pa Neeza himself.

Recognizing the power of self-image as a tool of imprisonment, colonization warped our image of self from the moment Columbus interpreted our Amerindian ancestors as pagan cannibals and labeled us as 'Caribbean' people. Out of this image, we strive today for pride of place and identity, with identity defined by a warped image. So within the need for claiming a place, identifying a space, celebrating this place, there is, with identification, a misconception of who we are. If we start off on a footing that is rooted in a corrupt image, how do we forge out of that, a positive, collective, whole image that is true to who we really are? Have we considered that how we recognize ourselves is the first challenge to breaking the mirror, because we must first know what we are looking at if we are to challenge it?

From our beginning our voices have spoken and chanted and sung, in legend, book, calypso, rapso, dance, art- reminding a people of a self that is labeled and misunderstood and unrecognized. But like Anansi, we cannot expect that the mere lifting of a voice, or putting up of an image can break the chains of



a colonized self-perception if we do not first collectively recognize these voices as education, history, self.

Once we recognize what we are seeing, then we can choose to accept or reject the image. One important little-known fact about Pa Neeza is that he hated the label 'obeah man' and in fact rejected this definition of himself, referring to himself instead as a faith healer and bush medicine doctor who knew what he could and could not heal. His rule, I am told, was 'if you coming to do obeah, doh come by me'.

Let us consider what this tells us about Papa Neeza and what it can tell us about ourselves if we were to see ourselves through Pa Neeza's eyes.

Why did Papa Neeza reject the notion of himself as an obeah man?

My understanding is that this is because he recognized that when it came across to the New World, obeah was defined as something bad, negative, dark. In rejecting this notion, Papa

Neeza was saying that one cannot define what one does not know/understand. It is important to know that Papa Neeza learnt his craft under his grandmother, Ma Diamond, who came directly from Africa, one can therefore surmise that Papa Neeza's understanding of the work he did was different from the tainted European interpretation of it. In rejecting this label, Pa Neeza said first of all, you do not recognize me and secondly, I do not recognize myself in your image of me.

Understanding how Papa Neeza rejected this label makes me wonder, if Anansi could talk, would he reject this label of himself as trickster?

Imagine how a nation introduced to Papa Neeza aside from the labels of obeah, Africanism, black, could regain information that remains hidden under the polluted blanket of obeah; information valuable to a people aside from religion, ancestry, race. Imagine how this message: 'see yourself, not as others see you, but as you are' could translate our space and encourage a people to reach forward and wipe the fog off the mirror. Imagine how this

message would have allowed us to embrace Anansi, not merely as respite in the whitewashed walls of a colonial school, but as an entire syllabus teaching us about survival skills and self-image.

Yet we cannot stop at rejection of an image; without a repositioning of self a new image cannot be imagined. This to me is where we have collectively failed in reimagining ourselves. Out of colonization we sought independence but the question then and now remains: did we reposition or did we merely replace?

Had Papa Neeza not understood the importance of repositioning self, he would have done what other practitioners of so-called obeah did during his time and operated in secret. Yet the fact that he was a living legend and his name a household name here and throughout the Caribbean shows there was no secret about his abilities. Equally interesting is the fact that Papa Neeza was both London Baptist and Orisha. Even today, Orisha is feared and misunderstood. How was it possible then, for Pa Neeza, who operated at a time in our history when the mere ringing of a Baptist bell could send one to jail, to stand on the pulpit of the

Third Company Mt. Pleasant London Baptist Church one Sunday and hold an Orisha feast the next? With all the fear and persecution surrounding the practice of the Baptist religion, how did the reputed obeah man gain the confidence and respect of his village as a preacher of a legitimate church when all knew of his 'other' practice?

Is it simply in doing what he had come to do, how he had come to do it, in making no excuses or apologies for who or what he was that this was power enough for him to be accepted? It seems to me another awareness we could come to if we were to see ourselves through the eyes of Papa Neeza would be: 'accept yourself if you expect others to.'

Imagine how this message makes our voice, not only a Literature textbook or an Anansi story, but an understanding of our own necessity to recreate our own world. Had we embraced this message, would we be battling Americanization and erosion by foreign culture now?

While witches run the gamut of good and evil and vampires join the ranks of superhero, our obeah man still remains a terrifying imagining outside of any collective conscience that he is part of our mystique and our colour; our children's imaginations have been discouraged from roaming freely in our own magical backyard, stunted by ignorance, non-acceptance, debate and prejudice, while we encourage them to explore a Harry Potter world. While our writers, storytellers, dancers, poets, artists, seek to interpret and romanticize, to educate and appreciate, our collective conscience still sees through the mirror Anansi hoped to break, never allowing our voices to reposition us as a people, as we interpret our own with criticism, debate or temporary adoration, and continue to embrace and accept the voices of the outside world. While our artists create, produce, work, say, we continue to see art merely as entertainment rather than as ideology.

Our failure to reposition Anansi from amusement to awareness lessens the power of Anansi to break the mirror.

Our failure to reposition Papa Neeza from obeah man to Caribbean flag bearer lessens the power of Papa Neeza to show us our possibility.

As we failed to reposition Anansi not only in the context of strategist but in the context of a people's ideology, we failed to take Anansi from story to identity. Likewise, if we continue to know of Papa Neeza merely as the obeah man from Moruga, we fail to take him from legend to forerunner in the fight against prejudice and self-reclamation.

If we are to challenge colonization in a meaningful way we must first begin with re-imagining and re-imaging ourselves through our own eyes, in our own voices, by our own telling to break the shackles of colonial misinterpretation. Without the recognition that this is where and how we begin, we will continue to see Anansi only as story and Papa Neeza only as legend. Anansi's image alone could not have broken the mirror without the recognition of his worth, the rejection of his warped interpretation and the repositioning of his role from entertainer to philosopher. Anansi's

path, like Papa Neeza's and many others past and present, remains blocked until we recognize that this path leads us to the ground on which we must build our schools.

If we consider our future, we will recognize that in a multi-cultural country our strength is in celebrating our commonality rather than in perpetuating our differences. This is not to suggest that we should not recognize the roots and sources of our heritage, but to suggest that we should differentiate between our heritage and our identity. Like Anansi, Pa Neeza and many others, the differences of religion, ethnicity and cultural root may block us from hearing a national message for a peoples' redemption.

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October 2011

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