

## Kingdom of Empty Bellies

Kei Miller: *Kingdom of Empty Bellies* Coventry: Heaventree Press 2005

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Tagged the 'first collection by the up-and-coming Jamaican poet and scholar,' Kei Miller's *Kingdom of Empty Bellies* is a poetic chronicle of an exploited people who may be described, in the words of Jean Paul Sartre, as witnesses of how 'yellow and black voices still spoke of our humanism...only to reproach us with our inhumanity' (*The Wretched* 7).

Divided into three parts that tend to demarcate its thematic searchlights, the first part aptly tagged 'Church Women' is mainly concerned with the religious fervour of religious converts who in membership and activity constitute mostly the world's ignorant and exploited womenfolk.

Poems such as 'Caught Up', 'Off-Key' 'Tongues,' 'Hallelujahs,' and 'Mourning' belong in the first part and together form a passage through the religious or rather superstitious fervour of those 'wretched of the earth' whether at rural nativity or aboard the modern westernised train.

The tornado of 'Tennessee' where even 'street lights (are caught up /in a cycle of worship' is cast in the manner of the fox (of three little pigs) which 'turned /and huffed at their motel door.' (17) Thus in those few lines the poet captures the natural survival instincts (the spiritual fervour) of island experience in the strange

milieu and where the poor folks have gone looking for something more than mere shelter.

With poetic insight and wry humour, the chronicle in this first part experience in exile is both physical and spiritual. The values of the western world seem off key to an immigrant world of deeply religious signification for even the mildest of occurrences. Thus the fellow convert of 'Off-key I' would not

believe a woman with squinted eyes could see  
Heaven and the Glory, much less reveal  
it to her. (24)

There is a mild sense of culture shock arising from ignorance of other different yet common life ways which is apparent in the innocent prejudice of the church member.

she did not like how  
the tiny woman, baton raised, would lead  
the choir to fold songs, crease them under  
then over, form them into peacocks  
or spiders. (24)

'Off-Key II' is also heavy with images of racial prejudice and discrimination whether on imperial British, French, American or an independent West Indian soil. The 'off-keys' of state persecution, police brutality and racial discrimination would cross distant borders to inflict scars upon our humanity.

The police never knocked or shouted  
*Open Up!* or flashed their warrants;  
(things don't work like that here)  
just boots and the door collapsing  
a confused woman holding her nightie... (27)

For the wretched of the earth, as Frantz Fanon puts it, religion had long become a mean so of escape, of reconciliation to one's impotence against state herding,

That night the woman learned  
how to put Heaven in her voice  
how to prophesy call down Armageddon,  
flood-water, twenty plagues on Babylon how  
to bawl down Jericho or sing *It Is Well* (27)

giving way to further enfeeblement, or to a re-interpretation of reality that cannot be faced on its terms.

even though the ground refuse to shake  
and the jail-walls don't turn to dust and the locks  
don't break even though  
her son not coming out. (27)

For the eclectic Caribbean society, modern religion remains a legacy of public gossips,

Beware of the church woman; her tongue  
sharp like serpent.  
...  
she will town-cry the soft secret rising  
in Martha's unmarried belly; (25)

of spiritual ignorance,

gong-mouthed, she will call down  
Heaven-healing  
  
for the lewd cancer dancing  
inside Billy. (25)

laced copiously with prejudicial mythologies.

Beelzebub salivates on her tongue,  
disguising himself as God. (25)

In the odd alchemy of fervent religiosity, Christian members 'combined /Jesus words with newspaper/ clippings' electrons of emotions 'bounced from filling /to filling, gathered in voltage,/ready to charge' mercilessly at the unrepentant victims of unbelief ('Hallelujahs')

Keth Miller is thus in agreement with Fanon that 'at whatever level we study it- relationships between individuals, ...at cocktail parties, in the police- is quite simply the replacing of certain species of men by another 'species' (28) We are thus not left in doubt about the sardonic purpose of Miller's first part of the poem appropriately tagged 'Church Women' for it is through the activities of these believers of ambiguous paradigms that the idea and message of true personal liberty is conveyed. This is made manifest by the magical possibilities of the succeeding part 'Dream Country.' Thus the poet seems to note the subtle triumph of culture over artificial and poorly syncretic values of the Caribbean society. In 'Mourning' the church woman will wait 'for two shots /of white rum', she would discard the 'high heels /or the heavy linen dress, not made for movement' and then she will

lift her elbows  
like scarecrow, knock her knees  
and dance and dance and oh lord

him gone! (29)

'In dream Country,' Miller's poetry of the second part, x-rays social existence of the downtrodden in the so-called dream country which the modern cities had come to represent for the majority of her

immigrants looking for greener pastures. It is a slow tortuous road to a 'nowhere' existence where purpose has been effectively denied in the squalor and neglect under which the people are made to scrounge their daily existence.

The poem 'Granna's Eyes' captures the meaningless existence in poetic ballad. The black community of Granna is a community of hunger and deprivation

where the cries of hungry pelicans  
echo inside our empty bellies. (38)

Blackness becomes equated with sadness bigger than the ocean, its wretched homelessness situation integrates with the bare living conditions under which women and children have lived out their lives without memory of anything better. The end of the sorrow in the destruction of the home ends in the wry humorous pathos of the poet treatment of religious fervours in part one. The ocean of hunger and privation has its end in the imagination of the faithful granna who would walk to meet the rising flood,

her feet planted on two waves  
like Jesus. (42)

The dream country is thus a city of atrophied dreams but one filled with self hallucinatory otherness. The poem 'In Dream Country' as a work of magic realism forecloses the fractured modernity, a vicious cycle of phases and losses without focus/ consistency. All the dream country may offer would just be the wearied longing for a positive change inured by visionless legacies.

Finally the final section Part Three entitled 'Rum Bar Stories' takes us through the sleazy night life, gossips and daily diversion of pub lovers and hard drinkers typical of western modernity after

which the Third world cities of Africa and the West Indies are unimaginatively patterned. Part of the props of this society are the usual 'yellow pub' where

...Heineken  
banners sigh

off the walls...('Gin Gin Mule' 77)

and service maids and of

Tuesday jazz  
singer who dug clean purple notes  
out of cancers ('Reggae Sunsplash' 76)

The world of Rum bar stories is a pleasant make-believe in night clubs that offer an escape from the harsh social realities of the outside world. Miller chronicles through the sharp, concise, and acute denotations of poetry a contemporary society in a tone of unabashed candour and with the cynicism that mocks the hollowness of modern civilisation. As a poetic eloquence or testimony of life itself, *Kingdom of Empty Bellies* would readily belong in the discourse of modern dramatic poesy.