

Marlene Nourbese Philip's Revision of Ovid's Greco-Roman Mythology in *She Tries Her Tongue; Her Silence Softly Breaks**

Li Wu

University of Jinan
Ji'nan, China

Chenyan Liu

University of Jinan
Ji'nan, China

Abstract—By revising Ovid's Greco-Roman mythology in *Metamorphoses*, Marlene Nourbese Philip effectively explores the themes of culture, belongingness, identity, displacement, marginalization, alienation, aphasia, language, voice, gender and urban entropy in her best-known collection of poems, *She Tries Her Tongue; Her Silence Softly Breaks*. This essay focuses on Philip's revision of the myths of Ceres and the Gorgon in two cycles collected in *She Tries Her Tongue*, "And Over Every Land and Sea" and "Testimony Stoops to Mother Tongue", and attempts to interpret Philip's authorial intentions to resist the racial discrimination and the Western cultural hegemony, her ideological aspiration to break the silence of the marginalized diasporic ethnic groups, her political appeals for creating a new feminist myth and a genealogy of resistance for the black women, and for reconstructing the cultural identity for the Afro-Canadians and Caribbean-Canadians.

Keywords—Marlene Nourbese Philip; *She Tries Her Tongue; Her Silence Softly Breaks*; revision; Greco-Roman mythology

I. INTRODUCTION

Marlene Nourbese Philip (1947-), born in Tobago, is a high-profile contemporary African-Caribbean-Canadian writer who has authored many collections of poems, novels, essays, dramas and short stories, including *Thorns* (1980), *Salmon Courage* (1983), "Burn Sugar" (1987), *Harriet's Daughter* (1988), *She Tries Her Tongue; Her Silence Softly Breaks* (1989,1993), "Bad Words"(1990), *Looking For Livingstone* (1991), *Frontiers: Essays and Writings on Racism and Culture* (1992), *The Redemption of Al Bumen* (1993), "Stop Frame" (1993), *Showing Grit: Showboating North of the 44th Parallel* (1993), *Coups and Calypsos* (1996), *CARIBANA: African roots and continuities-Race Space and the Poetics of Moving* (1996), *Genealogy of Resistance and Other Essays* (1997) and *Zong!* (2008). Philip is the recipient of such prestigious prizes and fellowships in literature as the Casa de las Américas Prize in 1988, the Canadian Library Association Prize in 1989, the Max and Greta Abel Award for Multicultural Literature, Toronto Arts Council award in 1989, YWCA Woman of Distinction Award in 2001, Guggenheim Fellowship,

McDowell Fellowship, and Chalmers Fellowship in Poetry.

Philip's best-known collection of poems *She Tries Her Tongue; Her Silence Softly Breaks* (hereafter *She Tries Her Tongue*) made her "the first anglophone woman, and the second Canadian, to win the (Casa de las Americas) prize" (<http://www.nourbese.com/poetry/she-tries-her-tongue/>, retrieved on 2018-7-31) and established her position as a frequently anthologized poet. *She Tries Her Tongue*, "an allegory, elaborated on many levels, about the search for Caribbean identity" according to the award certificate of the Casa de las Américas prize" (Savory, 1996:300), has also been the subject of many reviews and academic essays, which explore from different perspectives such themes as language, exile, colonialism, racial and gender discrimination, black feminism, cultural identification, and resistance against the Western cultural hegemony, etc.

This essay focuses on Philip's revision of two myths in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, namely the myths of Ceres and Gorgon, in two cycles collected in *She Tries Her Tongue*, namely "And Over Every Land and Sea" and "Testimony Stoops to Mother Tongue", and attempts to interpret Philip's authorial intentions, ideological aspiration and political appeals.

II. REVISION OF THE MYTH OF CERES IN "AND OVER EVERY LAND AND SEA"

In "And Over Every Land and Sea", Philip revises the myth of Ceres not only by opening each poem in the cycle with a quotation from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (transl. Mary M. Innes) such as "Meanwhile Proserpine's mother Ceres, with panic in her heart vainly sought her daughter over all lands and over all the sea" (Philip, 1993:2), but also by entitling the whole cycle as "And Over Every Land and Sea", a rewording of the original diction "over all lands and over all the sea", and by remolding the myth in three ways.

To begin with, she changes the place where Ceres searches her daughter Proserpine from "the whole world" (Philip, 1993:4), a general geographical notion, first to "way down the island's way/ I gone — south" (2), then to "up where north marry cold I could find she —" (3). Although Philip never explicitly specifies the searching location in "south", taking Philip's personal Caribbean ancestry and

*Fund: This essay is one of the achievements of "Shandong Higher Education Research Projects in Humanities and Social Sciences" (Project No.: J18RA247).

cultural background into consideration, readers have very good reasons to interpret the connotation of the “south” as the tropic Caribbean islands which feature such unique sceneries as “down by the just-down-the-way sea/ she friending fish and crab with alone,/ in the bay-blue morning she does wake/ with kiskeedee and crow-cock—/ skin green like lime, hair indigo-blue,/ eyes hot like sunshine-time” (4). Thus, Ceres’ search for her lost daughter in the south has a new implication, that is, Philip’s search for her lost culture and belongingness as well.

As for the “north”, Philip firstly defines it as general countries like “Stateside, England and Canada”, then specifies it as such civic locations as “Bathurst above Bloor, /Oakwood and Eglinton — even the suburbs them”, and “Ontario place/ or even the reggae shops”. To us, Philip’s change of Ceres’ searching place from the legendary Sicily in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* to America, England and Canada, or to be more precise, to the civic locations in Toronto, is another effective revision of the Greco-Roman myth of Ceres, which implies the frustration, marginalization, alienation and loss of belongingness that Philip herself and other people of color feel in the whitey society of Canada, a country where cultural tolerance is far from being sufficient for the immigrants, as Philip put it to the effect in her *A Genealogy of Resistance and Other Essays*. Her dedication in *Frontiers: Essays and Writings on Racism and Culture*, “For Canada, in the effort of becoming a space of true be/long.” (1992) is another implication of her somewhat disappointment in Canada, and in Toronto, her present dwelling place in particular. Such civic locations as “Bathurst above Bloor”, “Oakwood”, “Eglinton”, “Ontario place” and “the reggae shops” are all set in the cosmopolis of Toronto. The Afro-Canadians may go to Bathurst above Bloor, Oakwood and Eglinton, and enjoy “the Black Bottom”, a kind of popular black dance whose origin is said to “came from Sumaria”, or “the Mississippi Negroes trying to dance in the sticky mud”, to be “introduced by blues singer Alberta Hunter” and “originally from New Orleans, later worked its way to Georgia and finally New York” (<http://www.streetswing.com/histmain/z3blkbm.htm>, retrieved on 2019-4-3). Ontario Place is an iconic waterfront park in Toronto where people can enjoy a large variety of waterfront events and activities, and the reggae shops sell the records and instruments of reggae music which is originated in the Caribbean area. Nevertheless, from the perspective of Philip, those Caribbean-Canadians who wish to “look for indigo hair and/ skin of lime” (Philip, 1993:4) which symbolizes their indigenous culture “at Ontario place/ or even the reggae shops” may feel no less frustrated than Ceres, the hopeless and desperate mother. One possible interpretation is that neither the Ontario Place which is no more than a mimic Caribbean beach, nor the reggae shops which have been assimilated into the white culture and adjusted to the whitey taste, can satisfy the Caribbean-Canadians’ thirst for their intact and original and genuine indigenous African and Caribbean cultures. The futile search for original cultures and cultural identity can be further interpreted as plight of Philip and her fellow marginalized Caribbean-Canadians as a result of the “urban entropy” of Toronto, a cosmopolis that fails to provide every resident

from different cultural backgrounds with equal opportunities, the colored immigrants in particular. Philip’s revision of the Greco-Roman myth also “insinuates the vulnerability and uncertainties of the city”, and reveals her “deep concern for the existential predicaments of marginalized subjects in the city” (Shen, 2018:140).

Jayne Cortez claimed “Philip asserts herself at the intersection where South meets North, rupturing words and concepts...in search of a new path to redirect and rearrange the logic of her literary tongue” (1989). For those diasporic Caribbean-Canadians searching for their lost belongingness and cultural identification, the “Adoption Bureau” in Philip’s revised myth, that the mother visited twice and where the lost daughter was found, can also be interpreted, in a certain sense, both as the intersection where South meets North, and as a “sacred ground” where “the oozing wound / would only be healed” (Philip, 1993:10).

Secondly, Philip transfigures Proserpine, a virgin goddess in the land of Sicily to be a lost girl with “skin green like lime, hair indigo-blue / eyes hot like sunshine-time” (Philip, 1993:2). Although Ovid described with minute details the place where Proserpine played before she was ravished by Death as “Hard by the town of Henna was a lake, / Pergus its name; nor even Cayster’s waters / Held in their echoes sweeter songs of swans, / A forest crowned the hills on every side / Where even at sunstruck noonday the cool shores / Were green beneath a canopy of leaves, / The lawns, the purling grasses bright with flowers, / And spring the only season of the year” (Ovid, Transl. Horace Gregory, 2009:129), he didn’t provide the readers with details of Proserpine’s appearance, such as her skin, hair and eyes. Nevertheless, the blurred image of this Caucasian virgin goddess “in her childish, / Pure simplicity” (130) is transfigured into a conspicuous and clear image of a Caribbean girl with lime-like green skin, indigo-blue hair and hot eyes, which features tropical overtones and exotic beauty. Thus, the lost daughter in the Greco-Roman myth is effectively changed into the Caribbean expatriates, and adds to Ceres’ agony for losing her daughter such new symbolic meanings as the agony of displaced Caribbean diasporic groups for losing their belongingness.

Thirdly, Ceres’ solo search for Proserpine is changed into the mother’s and the daughter’s mutual effort to find each other. The lost daughter seeks her mother, claiming “the smell-like of I and she / the perhaps blood lost — / She whom they call mother, I seek” (Philip, 1993:3), in the same way as the diasporic and displaced Caribbean expatriates seek their lost motherland, their lost native language and culture, and their lost identity, while their motherland is simultaneously searching for her lost children who has the same blood and smell as her, and asking them to return.

III. REVISION OF THE MYTH OF THE GORGON IN “TESTIMONY STOOPS TO MOTHER TONGUE”

In the cycle of “Testimony Stoops to Mother Tongue” which borrows the idea of Robert Browning’s *The Ring and the Book*, Philip revises Ovid’s Greco-Roman myth of

Gorgon by reshaping it into a myth of aphasia, silence-breaking voice and the genealogy of black women.

In *Metamorphoses*, “All creatures who had seen Medusa’s face” turned into stone (Ovid, Transl. Horace Gregory, 2009:112), while, in “Testimony Stoops to Mother Tongue”, the Gorgon “turn my tongue to stone” (Philip, 1993:54). Tongue, the central image in the whole collection of *She Tries Her Tongue*, signifies both Philip’s mother tongue (the African language and the Caribbean demotic of English) and her father tongue (the Standard English). Philip’s tongue-to-stone myth signifies the anguish of aphasia suffered by the displaced Afro-Canadians and Caribbean-Canadians. And Athena, who cursed Medusa, “deprived her of her charms, changed her beautiful ringlets into hissing serpents” (Ma, 2017:102) and turned her into a “beast similar to her sisters” (103), i.e. the “wild snake-haired” (Ovid, Transl. Horace Gregory, 2009:106) Stheno and Euryale, might be interpreted as the dominating and manipulating white culture, which deprives the voice of the Afro-Canadians and Caribbean-Canadians, or the western cultural hegemony which inflicts the eternal anguish upon the diasporic ethnic groups.

However, Philip who always bears “an all-inclusive verbal awareness” (Ford, 1995) will not remain silenced. Neither will the speaker in “Testimony Stoops to Mother Tongue”. So, Philip changes Perseus’ beheading of Medusa, the only mortal sister of the Gorgon, into a different story. Instead of the killer who chops the snakes that grow on the Gorgon’s head, Perseus is transfigured into a first person female narrator with black breasts who wishes to tame and breed these snakes as the quoted lines manifest “Oh, but shall I? / I shall / tame them— / these snakes/ feed them / milk / from black breasts (Philip, 1993:54). And the snakes are transfigured not only into “the slithered silk of tongues... wisdomed / with the evil/ of words”, from which “words ride again / across / mared nights”, but also into “—a new breed / —a race/ —a warrior race /of words / —a nest-egg / that waits/ to hatch the ever/ in wait” (54).

Philip opens “Testimony Stoops to Mother Tongue” with two lines in Robert Browning’s *The Ring and the Book*, which read “’Tis a figure, a symbol, say; / A thing’s sign: now for the thing signified” (52). This quotation explicitly explains Philip’s authorial intention to revise the well-known myth of Perseus’ killing of the Gorgon. In Philip’s new myth, the Gorgon also becomes a figure and a symbol to signify Philip’s pursuit of lost mother tongue and her ambition to breed a new breed, a race, even a warrior race that will and can challenge the hegemony of the imperial language and the dominant white culture. And the transfiguration of Perseus from a Caucasian male into a black female who feeds the snakes with the milk from black breasts successfully creates a new myth where the black female is “no longer the marginalized margin, or the other’s other, or the passive object” (Wu, 2017:169) in the patriarchal society or the subordinate existence silenced by the white hegemony, but rather “a bisexual and androgynous figure..., an idealistic unity of phallic power of creation and libido power of reproduction, of masculinity and femininity” (Wu & Ji, 2018:514).

In her monumental essay “The Laugh of the Medusa”, Hélène Cixous eulogized the beauty and laughter of Medusa as “You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she’s not deadly, she’s beautiful and she’s laughing” (Cixous, 1976:885). Yes, Medusa, or the Gorgon in Philip’s new myth to be precise, the victim of Jove’s hierarchy, Poseidon’s lust and Athena’s envy, will live forever, and her beautiful laughter will perpetuate itself in “—a new breed / —a race/ —a warrior race /of words / —a nest-egg / that waits/ to hatch the ever/ in wait” (Philip, 1993:54), and her “nest-egg” will hatch and create a new feminist myth and a genealogy of resistance for the black women, who will

like Philomela...sing

continue

over

into

... pure utterance. (Philip, 1993:72)

IV. CONCLUSION

Over the past 20 centuries, Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* has been inspiring numerous literary giants such as Geoffrey Chaucer, William Shakespeare, John Milton, Stendhal, Marcel Proust, Gorge Bernard Shaw, William Faulkner, Franz Kafka, James Joyce, just to name a few, “with its spectacularly entertaining but often disquieting tales of transformation” as Sara Myers, a noted poet, scholar and critic, put it in the Introduction to Horace Gregory’s 2009 version (vii).

Marlene Nourbese Philip continues those giants’ tradition, and attempts to make “an active revision of history and mythology to parallel and counter the myths of Black inferiority” (Guttman, 1996: 53) in her own effectual way. By revising Ovid’s Greco-Roman mythology in *She Tries Her Tongue*, Philip effectively explores the themes of culture, belongingness, identity, displacement, marginalization, alienation, aphasia, language, voice, and gender and urban entropy, and, at the same time, expresses her authorial intentions to resist the racial discrimination and the Western cultural hegemony, her ideological aspiration to break the silence of the marginalized diasporic ethnic groups, and her political appeals for creating a new feminist myth and a genealogy of resistance for the black women, and for reconstructing the cultural identity for the Afro-Canadians and Caribbean-Canadians.

REFERENCES

- [1] Chait, Sandra. “Mythology, magic realism, and white writing after apartheid.” *Research in African Literatures*. Summer 2000, Vol. 31 Issue 2:17-28.
- [2] Cixous, Hélène. “The Laugh of Medusa.” Transl. Keith Cohen, Paula Cohen. *Signs*, 1976(4): 875-893.
- [3] Cortez, Jayne. “Review of *She Tries Her Tongue; Her Silence Softly Breaks*.” *Books in Canada*, 1989-1-18.
- [4] Ford, Mark. “Review of *She Tries Her Tongue; Her Silence Softly Breaks*.” *The Guardian*, 1995-6-16.

- [5] Guttman, Naomi. Dream of the mother language: myth and history in *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks* [J]. MELUS, 1996, (2): 53-68.
- [6] <http://www.nourbese.com/poetry/she-tries-her-tongue/>, retrieved on 2018-7-31.
- [7] <http://www.streetswing.com/histmain/z3blkbtm.htm>, retrieved on 2019-4-3.
- [8] Ma Jianjun. *A Course Book on Greco-roman Mythology*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Researching Press, 2017.
- [9] Ovid. *The Metamorphoses*, Trans. Horace Gregory. New York: Signet Classics, 2009.
- [10] Philip, Marlene Nourbese. *Frontiers: Essays and Writings in Racism and Culture*. Stratford: The Mercury Press, 1992.
- [11] Philip, Marlene Nourbese. *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks*. London: The Women's Press Ltd., 1993.
- [12] Philip, Marlene Nourbese. *A Genealogy of Resistance and Other Essays*. Toronto: The Mercury Press, 1997.
- [13] Savory, Elaine. "Marlene Nourbese Philip." *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Vol. 157, *Twentieth-Century Caribbean and Black African Writers*. 3rd ser. Eds. Bernth Lindorfs and Reinhard Sander. Detroit: Gale Research Inc., 1996: 296-306.
- [14] Shen Yuan. "On Urban Entropy in Ian McEwan's 'Butterflies'." *Journal of Shanghai University (Social Sciences)*, May 2018 Vol. 35, No. 3:134-140.
- [15] Wu Li. *A Postcolonial-feminist Interpretation of Marlene Nourbese Philip's Poetry*. Jinan: Shandong University Press, 2017.
- [16] Wu Li & Ji Xianmei. "A Feminist Interpretation of Marlene Nourbese Philip's *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks*." *Proceedings of the International conference on Contemporary Education, Social Sciences and Ecological Studies (CESSSES 2018)*, Volume 283:512-515.