



# *To Us, All Flowers Are Roses*

Lorna Goodison's sixth collection of poetry, *To Us, All Flowers Are Roses*, explores themes of motherhood, the history of slavery in Jamaica, and the magical healing powers of the organic splendors of the Caribbean experience. In the eyes, language, and feeling of African expression, Goodison infuses her Jamaican tongue within the everyday language of an island that has a multi-cultural history due to the raw politics of European colonization. By using both her experience as a woman of African heritage and her experience living in the New World, Goodison captures the personal and political struggles resulting from a history of forced cross-cultural interactions.

This collection of poetry touches upon the life of young mothers, the untold history of Afro-Caribbean men and women, and the gifts of nature that are abundant on the island of Jamaica. Goodison's diction ranges from the "food of slavery" to the celestial ponderings. The title of this collection of poetry is portrayed in two poems that describe how all flowers are called roses in the generic sense because there are no roses in the "paint-pan camber pot" gardens of Kingston. In the poem, "In City Gardens Grow No Roses as We Know Them," Goodison describes how no "delicate blooms" could survive in the city gardens which accounts for the naming of all flowers, roses (15).

In the second to last poem, "To Us, All Flowers Are Roses," Goodison proclaims her love of the names of Jamaica by intermingling the rich names of Jamaica's African inheritances with the European influential names, revealing the political act of speaking and naming in an atmosphere saturated in a gut-wrenching history. In this poem, Goodison describes the diverse meanings behind the act of speaking: "I love so the names of this place/ how they spring brilliant like "roses"/ (to us all flowers are roses), engage you/ in flirtation. What is their meaning? Pronunciation?" (69). Throughout the collection of these poems, Goodison uses the language of Jamaica in order to consistently envelop the personal in the political even when considering the naming of fruit, flowers, and bodies of water.

Goodison accomplishes capturing the politics of language and culture by using both lyrical and narrative styles of poetry. Some of the longer poems tend to take on a narrative that interweaves the historical background of women and men who have survived slavery. In "Annie Pengelly," she weaves the past with the present in order to acknowledge the struggles and triumphs of a woman whose history would remain invisible if it weren't for Goodison's writing this woman's experience into history. She describes Annie's life as a servant, which involved endless nights of comforting the "Missus" when December's cold breezes were unbearable. Through the telling of Annie's story, Goodison invokes the emotional landscape underlying her need to write these un-written stories into existence for all who were servants to a Missus or to a Massa.



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For example, in this poem Goodison uses the personal story of Annie to penetrate the entire political background of slavery: “The same need that made men/ leave one side of the world/ to journey in long, mawed ships,/ to drogue millions of souls/ to a world/ that they call the new one/ in competition with the original act/ the creation of the old one” (27). The narrative of this poem is accompanied by other poems in this collection that are more lyrical and more humorous.

The images that Goodison invokes almost dance right off the page and jump out at you with their vividness. This is portrayed in one of her more humorous poems titled, “Some Things You Do Not Know about Me.” She describes the overwhelming feeling of dancing that permeates her body when writing poetry at home by herself, “So I throw my hands up over my head/ thereby releasing the poem. / And then I push the chair away/ and for ten minutes or so I dance around the table” (57). After describing the whirlwind of physical and emotional activity that involve her writing process she humorously states, “And when you come home you always find me placid, calm, normal. / And these are only some of the things/ you do not know about me” (57). The visceral image of Goodison dancing lingers in the reader’s mind like a movie clip that leaves the audience tingling with goosebumps.

The focus on women’s lives in Jamaica is one of the more prevalent themes in this collection of work. The issues of motherhood are extremely intricate and complicated on an island whose economy was and is dependent on women’s work in the field and on the labor of their lives as mothers. In the poem titled, “Inna Calabash,” Goodison uses a style of short lines and short stanzas to portray the way in which motherhood is viewed in a slave society. At the beginning and in the middle of the poem she portrays the image of a woman in a cane field who is pregnant and has to continue to work in the fields instead of rest. The image is strong enough to evoke a physical reaction in the reader which is followed up by these lines, “Nothing Massa like/ like more slave pickney/ to grow into big slave/ to serve slavery” (36). In this short and concise stanza, Goodison comments on the value of mothers living under slavery. The complex issue of motherhood is delivered in one short stanza that has the potential to be a long and intricate novel on the role of motherhood in Jamaican history. Her style, in that she chooses to deliver this sentence in one stanza, has an effect on the reader that leaves them pondering every view of motherhood that has and still exists.



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Originally beginning her artistic career in painting, Lorna Goodison holds the power to portray images in her poetry that leave a reader amazed at the brushstrokes of history and the politics of color theory. Goodison is an internationally recognized poet who has a variety of collections of poetry that include: *Tamarind Season*, *I Am Becoming My Mother*, and *Turn Thanks: Poems*. She also has a few works of fiction including: “By Love Possessed,” “Della Makes Life,” and the collection, *Baby Mother and The King of Swords*. Goodison has been a visiting faculty member at the Universities of Toronto and Michigan and remains a central figure in poetry festivals and conferences.

Lorna Goodison’s *To Us, All Flowers Are Roses* is a profound reading for anyone interested in the untold histories of slavery, motherhood and the political and personal experiences of Jamaica. This collection of work oscillates between witty comments on women and men’s lives and the “unity of all things” creating philosophical thoughts on the salty seas surrounding everyone of us.

*Reviewed by Kara Olson*