

# Motifs in gardening in the tropics



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“ I want my writing to present Caribbean people as real people, with dreams and hopes and fears and courage...” -Olive Senior. In the first section of her poetry collection, Olive Senior explores issues of migration and diaspora in an attempt to paint the Caribbean in a new light to the world. She thematically details the effects colonialism and post-colonialism has on the Caribbean in all of her poems in this section, and she unites them through one shared motif. The motif in ‘ Traveller’s Tales’, therefore, is traveling, and this is seen in three of her poems: ‘ Meditation on Yellow’, ‘ Caribbean Basin Initiative’ and ‘ Stowaway’.

In the first poem, ‘ Meditation on Yellow’, the persona expresses the frustration and hardships she and her ancestors experience because of the traveling of foreigners. In the first part of the poem, she details the arrival of the European colonists, “ At three in the afternoon/ you landed here at El Dorado...” With their arrival, they brought slavery and injustice to the Indigenous people, and the persona expresses how they felt, “ Had I known I would have/ brewed you up some yellow fever-grass/ and arsenic...” The persona then goes on to explain, in the second part, the present day Caribbean, where nothing has seemed to have changed. In a Jamaican hotel, she explains that tourists travel to the Caribbean, where the locals have to serve them, just as their ancestors served foreigners, “...you can take tea/ at three in the afternoon/ served by me.” There are many phrases from the first part repeating in the second part, just as this phrase “ three in the afternoon”. This repetition links the past injustices with the present-day slavery. She recalls that not only have colonists been traveling to the Caribbean, but so have slaves, “...but I’ve been traveling long/ cross the sea

in the sun-hot...”, alluding to the Africans and Indians traveling by sea to become slaves in the Caribbean. She finalizes that the Caribbean people just wants a break from the slavery and the foreigners, “ I want to feel mellow/ in that three o’clock yellow.” The traveling motif is therefore used in “ Meditation on Yellow” to highlight the fact that the Caribbean people have always been oppressed and treated like slaves by foreigners traveling to the Caribbean. She describes slavery in colonial times and slavery in post-colonial times and notes the similarities to the readers, in order for them to understand and empathize with the Caribbean people.

In “ Caribbean Basin Initiative”, the persona describes the rough journey Haitians often experienced when traveling by water to reach the United States. The poem is a play on words, as the Caribbean Basin Initiative was initiated by Ronald Reagan in 1982 as a way of stimulating the economy of the entire Caribbean, especially through increased trade with the USA. Haitians often traveled on rafts and boats in an attempt to migrate to the United States, and the persona recounts the dangerous route, “ So many passengers/ we listed; so much/ drifted our numbers/ kept shrinking...” He explains how many of the travelers died in the waters, and those who didn’t die were found by the marines, “ We were/ seeking the Gulf Stream:/ it is we who/ are found/ Reclaimed”. After they are captured by the marines, they are then sent to Guantanamo Bay and are forced to travel by sea again to Haiti, “ They’re shipping me home”. In the end, he says that they will try to reach the United States again by traveling by boat on the water, “ Like limpets we’ll cling/ on craft that ply/ in these waters/ where our dreams lie.” The traveling motif is dominant in this essay, as the Haitians would try over

and over again to reach the United States. They would brave the perilous journey in an attempt to migrate to another country, where they thought their dreams would be fulfilled. Olive Senior attempted to highlight the effects of neo-colonialism in this poem; the Haitians would rather go on dangerous journeys to reach the United States than stay in the Caribbean. This makes readers reflect on their thoughts on neo-colonialism and their views on the western world.

Similarly, “ Stowaway” details the experience of an immigrant who boards a ship without paying in order to go to the United States. Stowaways normally face dangerous situations; as they are not legally on board, they go days without water and food and are constantly fearful of being caught. In the first line, the stowaway says, “ There’s this much space between me and/ discovery”, stating that he is close to being caught by the crew mate on the ship. This highlights the dangers immigrants go through just to reach “ the promised land” of the United States, and it also emphasizes the colonialist mindset and the effects of neo-colonialism in a post-colonialist world. “ Till then, I let my thoughts go. Dangerously – / I dive deeper into this/ fault, this/ undeclared passage.” This line in particular describes the torture the stowaway immigrants experience. They go insane, “ I let my thoughts go”. Metaphorically, their thoughts are like divers of the sea; it spirals downwards and goes deep and the immigrants eventually lose themselves. The motif is used again to create empathy and to highlight the effects colonialism has on the Caribbean people presently; they brave perilous and deadly journeys en-route to what they perceive to be a better life in a foreign country.

Traveling is a motif in the poems of “ Traveller’s Tales” that is used to explore the effects of colonialism, post-colonialism and neo-colonialism. Particularly in “ Meditation on Yellow”, “ Caribbean Basin Initiative” and “ Stowaway”, Senior uses different personas to create empathy and to make readers understand the effects of colonialism on the Caribbean people better. According to Jordan Stroke, Senior effectively “...negotiates the complex exchanges between colonial, post-colonial and global and describes the contradictory impulses within current theory toward identities grounded in regional and historical particularities and toward identities that are forever deferred by movements of trans-national exchange.”