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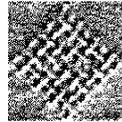
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REVIEW

Curfew Chronicles: A Fiction

Peepal Tree Press, 2017



SYLVIA ROSE-ANN WALKER

“It was Friday evening and curfew was coming. Beers and rum were passing. Cards and draughts were playing. Friday and lockdown was closing in” (131).

That a curfew was the reality when a state of emergency was declared by the Government of Trinidad and Tobago (TT) in 2011 is the historical fact which generates and permeates the novel *Curfew Chronicles: A Fiction* (2017) by Jennifer Rahim. Accordingly, fact and fiction are conflated in the text to depict a society where life is suffocating yet freely lived, where the smallness of the small man is really a grand quality, and where societal pretensions mask the ordinariness of human living. Such is the narrative tapestry wherein a day and night in the life of the text’s many characters is meticulously chronicled and humanized with language that bespeaks the existential depth and dignity of the people mirrored by the characters. In that light, the thirty-one (31) chronicles comprising the text illuminate not only the “private worlds and fortuitous encounters of a variety of Trinidadians” (6) but also the crises of living that their existence seems to demonstrate. Thus, the fictive strength and artistic power of the text betray a writer in dialogue with her society where the 2011 State of Emergency (SoE) exemplified “an effort to use state power, in an unprecedented way, to manipulate public opinion and sentiment about the exercise” (email interview, Rahim / Walker, May 16th 2017). However, as Rahim cautions in “A Note on Background” (6), that “is not the subject of this work of fiction, merely its background. *Curfew Chronicles* is an imaginative response to the undertones of those days” (6).

As an imaginative response, *Curfew Chronicles* utilizes the technique of montage to underscore how lives are connected both intrinsically and superficially. From the opening chronicle entitled “Saving Word” (9-12), with its nameless “Minister of All Things Legal” through “Lady, You Okay” (77-83) and “A Little Runaway” (89-97) which illuminate the crisis of his wife’s existence, to “Curfew Run” (113 - 117), “Charlo’s Day” (137-142), “Scholar’s March” (171-179), and “Mercy” (187-191), the frames blend speech, action, setting and allusion in a tour de force of literary application by which the fictional seems as real as the factual, whether or not the reader is an insider to the names, places, and situations that constitute the reality of the setting in each narrative:

Truth be told, the Minister was under plenty stress. Too many things were in play. Peeved policy holders were venting about the insurance fraud. The Police Commissioner imported from foreign seemed preoccupied with flying planes. The trade unions were not cooperating. Too many botched deliveries were being reported at the nation's hospitals. Gunmen were out of control. Drugs. Journalists and columnists were taking liberties with facts that implicated his esteemed office in wrongdoings.

Emailgate. Section 34.

The failure of the EMA. One of the country's brightest on a sixty-day hunger strike. The situation was volatile. The man was billed to die. And now the weed substance that was growing a mile a minute in the Gulf, and, if he understood correctly, had allegedly infiltrated the residence of the PM.

Overload. (120-121

Vivid descriptions of scenarios such as drug running in Port-of-Spain ("The Boy in the Superman T-Shirt" (49-54), and the assassination of a lawyer-lady ("A Killing" (124-130), further imbue *Curfew Chronicles* with an authenticity that is as scary as it is real, testimony to Rahim's fictive strength and prosaic authority. To quote her,

I began writing *Curfew Chronicles* as prose poems when the SoE was announced. I began following the human fall out and the farce. I felt something had to be said about those events ... The SoE (2011), I believe, will be revealed in time as a pivotal point in the maturation of Trinidad and Tobago politics ... National politics, I think, entered a new era – dangerous farce that attempted to recruit the media to "stage" an intention called "a war on crime." So what the nation experienced, regardless of political affiliation, was the vulnerability of the instruments of governance to the wilds of political manipulation

(Email Interview Rahim / Walker, 16th May, 2017)

Vulnerability is the quality that connects the various characters and events that appear throughout *Curfew Chronicles*: vulnerability to the SoE and vulnerability to life itself because of social standing and gender. According to Rahim, "the question many of the characters in the book are invited to confront are related to the effort or accident to discover and give their best selves, and that lies, I think, less in the realm of the law and politicians, and more in the evolution of a spirit of relations that has faith in our inherent interdependence" (email interview, Rahim / Walker, 16th May, 2017).

It is therefore not surprising that the back cover blurb of the text pinpoints the “depth of characterization Jennifer Rahim brings to multiple protagonists.” Whether it is Ragga, Keeper, or Terence whom the reader meets in “What They Want” (13-16), Scholar, whom most of the vendors “had grown accustomed to [on] his daily passing and acknowledged him with a friendly nod” (17), eight-year old Flash, the street runner, Sister Judith and Sumintra in “Dumb-Struck” (36-41), Amber in “Storm” (42-48), their human qualities and traits are convincing and engaging., their connection with the larger societal crisis being unmistakable:

There was one thing Sumintra had long ago accepted. Nobody had put a gun to her head and sent her that day to the offices of Housing and Settlement to beg – no to plead, play martyr, whore, whatever – so that somebody would agree to expedite her case for a house. Twenty years to wait for a set of keys was not right. Plenty people were in the same boat, waiting and waiting for a miracle that would push their names to the top of the list. All manner of pull-string and curry-favour was taking place with officials fixing things up for friends and family. Something had to be wrong with that. (38)

Altogether, the content of *Curfew Chronicles* boldly declares that something was politically and humanly amiss with the SoE 2011. It contextualizes the declaration through its stylistic features of characterization, setting, language/speech, action, allusion, and montage, the text employing omniscient narration to provide a penetrating commentary on one day and night of the SoE in the lives of a panoply of persons living in Port-of-Spain. So what should the implied reader take away after reading *Curfew Chronicles*?

If there is anything I want the reader to take away from *Curfew Chronicles*, it is that the “Independence” we are all called to labour for hinges on the “capacity” that is to say, the potential we together create for the deeper humanizing of each other in this place called home. (email interview, Rahim / Walker, 16th May 2017)