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Book Review: Multiverses¹

Ajit Kumar²

Celia Lisset Alvarez's powerful, memorable, devastating debut collection, *Multiverses*, depicts two miscarriages, the death of her grand uncle, and then the loss of her baby boy and father. The experience of trying to continue with her life after losing one of her twins is almost unbearable for her. She imagines other universes, alternate worlds (the "multiverses" of the title) where she did not lose this little boy. This is a world where both of her twins survived, where her family is intact, and things are in a happier place. This is not the only loss explored in the book. Alvarez questions her role as mother after a five-week miscarriage that occurs three years before her son Arturo's death. She wanders the streets of Miami pondering whether he had a soul and if that soul was within her as she walked through Miami with her family looking at murals. Perhaps, she muses, her salvation, her recreation of these irrevocable losses, this picture of what might have been, Arturo growing up and becoming a man in another world, this recreation of a new order through the power of art, might succeed in memorializing the child for all time. This is her act of redemption, of healing, of eternal change. Here, in these lines of devastating verse, she takes her lost infant and breathes life into him:

Somehow I have trouble imagining
what Arturo will finally be.
He drops out of college to paint,
then meets a girl he follows to Morocco.
When he comes back he's unshaven
and skinny as a string, heartbroken.
He shuffles around in his sweatpants,
watching tennis on TV (pp. 19-26).

It's hard to over-praise these poems. They are completely honest, raw, so real you can feel the poet holding her children, though we know one of them is no longer with us. These poems show the extent of the poet's talent, but also allow the readers a perspective into one woman's personal tragedy, a tragedy that inspired this book of poems. *Multiverses* is a family chronicle of 37 poems with different "versions," mainly a mother's memory of her past in relation to her son and other family members. It is a tribute to the tragic loss of her child of 27 weeks, and to her multigenerational Miami Cuban family. It is this, but it is more. One is given a profound understanding of the bonds between mother and child and the experience of motherhood. *Multiverses* is interspersed with raw experiences of the death of a child, carefully and unsentimentally drawn, along with a series of memories of family life, as well as re-imaginings of how family life might have been had Arturo lived. Through the collection, Celia Lisset Alvarez underlines how having her daughters has given her a stance of hope and a bright future:

On Thanksgiving we are a crowd—
almost a full dozen. The kids stayed
vegan. The Tofurky takes center

¹ Alvarez, C. L. (2021). *Multiverses*. Georgetown, KY: Finishing Line Press.

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stage, and then we all pass around
the plates. Lucy's hair darkened
to a soft brown, and Sara and Arturo's
more a dirty blond. (pp. 37-43)

The various expressions and narration of hope, womanhood, grief, family, and motherhood are unquestionably deeply affecting without devolving into sentimentality. In the acknowledgements, Alvarez writes about her daughters, Lucy and Sara. Her state of movement from despair to hope, pain to relief, present to future, and weak to strong is supportive and empowering to others who also have endured such tragedies. The plot construction of this book, its steady development, each poem building towards the next, draws the reader ever onwards towards a final catharsis of a kind of acceptance and hope in the midst of such pain and emptiness. Moreover, the inclusion of Spanish vocabulary and Biblical verses in the book adds to its aesthetic beauty and gives it a sense of originality.

Celia Lisset Alvarez certainly found relief from her feelings of sorrow and despair by writing this collection. The present book becomes more relevant and significant because Alvarez gives full vent not only to her emotions but also becomes a spokesperson for millions of women who stifle and struggle with different emotions regarding their motherhood. For example, she juxtaposes a poem about a friend making an insensitive comment ("Version 1.40") with a poem that goes back in time to when her mother is mugged, her face destroyed by a construction hammer. In a morphine-induced haze, her mother has trouble understanding the purpose of a nurse's simple question about her medical history. Rather than feeling sympathy, the speaker is bewildered at her mother's wandering mind, ironically not knowing, at the time, that she would experience similar losses in the future. In writing about these events, Alvarez draws attention to the need to acknowledge a sort of collective consciousness of motherhood and the sense of sacrifice allied to it. Alvarez chronicles the grieving parent's challenges and sacrifices of contemporary womanhood.

There is no touch of artificiality in these poems; Alvarez has penned her real emotions in these lyrics without the interference of any synthetic element. The heartfelt sensual imagery and truly accessible verses enable the poet to go towards the better form of this universe. After this emotional sojourn through her poems, the reader finds an artistic touch throughout the collection.

Thus, Alvarez's debut collection does not only expose the heights of her talent, but also allows the readers and audience to identify with the depth of theme chosen to get a better understanding of the poetic world of womanhood. The themes of *Multiverses* are nostalgic about the sensual emotions of motherhood. The nostalgia Alvarez feels for her son is sure to wring drops of tears from readers' eyes. The various expressions and narration of hope, womanhood, grief, family, and motherhood in the past, present, and future will definitely touch the innermost chords of the receptive reader's heart through her deep personal narratives. The collection may be a therapeutic read for mothers that seek a source of inspiration after losing their children. However, it is likely to be appreciated by lovers of free verse poetry as well.