

Foreign Soil by Maxine Beneba Clarke- A Critical Book Review

Maxine Beneba Clarke's distinguished short story collection, "Foreign Soil," is an enthralling piece of literature that explores into the intricacies of human experience, addressing societal issues such as racism, identity, stereotypes and privilege. Beneba breaks boundaries by exploring the inner workings of her characters' lives with poignancy and compassion, addressing issues along the way which are classically swept under the rug. "Foreign Soil" is a captivating read for many audiences, expanding Australian literature. In Beneba's book 'Foreign Soil,' she uses storytelling as a vehicle to entice the audience's empathy, allowing readers to engage deeply with societal issues. Beneba dismantles societal barriers and challenges what is considered "different," becoming a literary force, pushing against racists and literary traditions. 'Foreign soil' acts as a mirror to her readers to self reflect on their own racism, and stereotypes by writing first person narratives, urging readers to question preconceived notions on what it is to be different and the negative connotations placed behind it.

By providing a platform for diverse voices and experiences, "Foreign Soil" encourages readers to confront uncomfortable truths, encouraging a greater understanding of the intricate and unified nature of societal challenges. In 1990, Australia witnessed a huge growth in diversity; Over 100,000 immigrants settled in Australia. Despite the ongoing prevalence of racism today, the 90's ruffled many feathers and brought forward a massive amount of racism and bigotry. Demonstrating that as an Australian society, we needed Beneba's literature desperately to counteract the growing racism to squash preconceived stereotypes and hatred for other cultures. The collective stories explore into themes of cultural identity, displacement, and racism. Beneba aims to highlight the struggles and hardships that individuals face because of the ongoing racism in Australia and how individuals have to navigate their way around assimilation. The influence of Beneba's literature lies within her gift to capture the diverse voices all over the world, exposing her audience to different cultures, languages and the mistreatment of individuals for just being different. Each story holds a unique cadence, offering a rich perspective of different countries and how we all share the same human experience of social inequality, lack of identity and isolation.

"Foreign Soil" employs short stories as a mean to capture brief emotionally connecting stories to entice the audience as well as hold their attention. Beneba uses first-person narratives to

share an intimate glance into each of the characters' internal conflicts, placing you into their shoes for every story, throwing you back and forth into different foreign soil; As a mean to introduce different cultures to the reader but as well as enhancing the connection to each story. The short story "Shi Yu" explores the challenging experiences and hardships of the protagonist, 'Ava', who struggles with bullying from her classmates due to cultural differences. Despite Ava's goodness and individuality, she becomes a victim to torment just from being 'different.' Beneba wrote "Shi Yu" in first person to demonstrate the inner conflict Ava faces when she experiences another classmate being subjected to the same torment as herself. Ava succumbs to racism and exclusion to deflect the negativity aimed at herself. "Shu Yi's eyes locked with mine. A thin trickle travelled out the bottom of her tunic and down the inside of her legs, soaking slowly into her frilly white socks."(Beneba, 2014, pg 89.)

This story resonates with the audience because we have all experienced the need to fit in, even if it is at the expense of another individual. "Shi Yu" reflects the pervasive societal pressures that coerce individuals to erase their own identities, cultures, and interests in order conform and avoid being labelled as "other". Maxine Beneba demonstrates the emotional toll on those who had to reshape themselves to fit into the small, racist mould that society has created over time. • "Wondrous as she seemed, Shu Yi wasn't a problem I wanted to take on. Besides, with her arrival my own life had become easier: Melinda and the others hadn't come looking for me in months. At home, my thankful mother had finally taken the plastic undersheet off my bed" (Beneba, 2014, pg 82) As proven "Foreign Soil" is a powerful vehicle for Clarke to advocate for the acceptance of all cultures, demonstrating the importance of taking a stand against mistreatment, urging readers speak out against discrimination. "Shi Yu" acts as representation of the current racism in Australia, demonstrating the need of for societal growth. "I'm definitely inspired in my work to tell 'outsider stories,' but I feel as if these stories of unbelonging are also stories about how similar we all are, despite our differences. I grew up in a black migrant family in a very Anglo Saxon white picket fence area of Australia, and I didn't have access to literature which reflected my own world. So the story "Shu Yi", in particular, was about making space for a story about someone very similar to me." (Beneba, 2018.)

When reading 'Foreign Soil,' it becomes clear that Beneba is changing the conventional "western canon" that is dominated by white, wealthy voices. As a black migrant writer, she's a powerful advocate for minorities, reshaping the Australian short story tradition and promoting cultural awareness. Maxine Beneba mentioned in her TED talk that she "defies the witch,

climbs hopeful beanstalks, and steals from gold-laying hens." This symbolism demonstrates her defiance against the odds she faces as being minority in the literary world, stopping at nothing to capture Australia's attention; To be a voice and light of hope for everyone labelled as "other" in Australia. Through these literary techniques Beneba is not only challenging the existing literary traditions and conventions but also contributing to the growth of literature and expanding her audience. Maxine Beneba not only challenged the western canon through her writing but by expanding the Australian Curriculum to include more diverse authors. Her work is now taught in not only her home state but all over Australia, making us step into foreign soil. Expanding our library from Shakespeare and Jane Austen to now to have 8 of her books published, growing our library and the variety of authors we will now read. Her writing defies tradition, demonstrating an abundance of different cultures from all over the world giving the underdog and overlooked a story, perspective and voice to our multicultural country. *Foreign Soil* has a distinct place in Australian literature for Beneba amplifies voices for minorities who are underrepresented. Beneba challenges the literary traditions of storytelling, allowing for a more inclusive literary world, showcasing a multitude of cultures which is perfect for a multicultural country. (Hachette, 2015.)

In conclusion, "*Foreign Soil*" resonates deeply within Australia- socially, politically, and culturally. Maxine Beneba-Clarke confronts societal injustices towards minorities and brings forward issues of racism, identity and privilege that are present today instead of sweeping them under the rug in hopes to improve a racist country. Beneba breaks the Australian literary tradition through her writing and ability to defeat the western canon, bringing forward diverse authors for a diverse country. Furthermore, Beneba's work extends beyond storytelling but also serves as a catalyst for growth and change in Australia by representing the difficulties of cultural diversity and the struggles faced by individuals who are culturally different. Maxine Beneba has encouraged readers to delve into different cultures to be more understanding and to embrace difference whether that is within yourself or with others. The authenticity of "*Foreign Soil*" challenges readers to expand their library or their openness towards others, now fostering a deeper understanding of how beautiful difference is in our multicultural country.

References

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