

The History and Shaping of Caribbean Literature

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The abrupt “beginning” of the history of the Caribbean, coupled with the brutal mode of occupation and violence among the colonizing forces has led many scholars to conclude that the area is “historyless” and unlikely to proceed further than its crude and violent beginnings. This paper examines this peculiar history and its attendant effect on the shaping and criticism of Caribbean literature. Since Caribbean literature is also, to some extent, a response to history, the paper also highlights the major individual Caribbean writers’ responses to the history of this place. Being mainly library-based, the research relies on such critical materials as articles, reviews, books and interviews published on the literature of this place. Works in the area of history also help to shed light on the historical realities of this place. In the end, it is found out that as a result of the debilitating history of this area, much of the criticism of the literature of this place is often “jaundiced”. However, it is believed that despite this stereotyped criticism and despite the assertion that history exerts a definitive influence on the creative imagination, the Caribbean man can live down the ravages of history and transcend his alien milieu.

Keywords: Caribbean literature, history, slavery, criticism

Introduction

The history of the founding and settling of the Caribbean has implications for the societies that have emerged. Following the accidental “discovery” of the place in 1492 by Christopher Columbus, the Caribbean environment has been a fertile ground for writers whose recreations and explorations of their locale as ways of examining the relations between the land, the people, the psychological dimensions of their situations prefigure their determined struggle to survive, and bond together as ways of defining their humanity and dignity. This paper examines this peculiar history of the Caribbean as well as its attendant effect on the criticism of the literature of that area. It also highlights the various literary responses of the individual writers of this region to these historical realities.

Methodology

Being a literary research, this work is mainly library-based. It relies on such critical sources as articles, reviews, books and interviews published on the literature of this area. Also, works in the area of history have helped to provide more information on the historical realities of this place. It is the hope that these materials will in turn lead to a thorough understanding of not only the literature and criticism of the literature of this area, but also of the Caribbean society.

The History of the Caribbean

The history of the Caribbean is peculiar. It does not evolve gradually and naturally out of a remote mythological and archaeological past, but begins abruptly with the “discovery” of the Bahamas in 1492 by Christopher Columbus. This abrupt beginning has led historians like Eric Williams (1970) and literary artists like V.S. Naipaul (1969) to assert that the Caribbean is merely a geographical expression which lacks a noteworthy history. Naipaul, in particular, claims that the West Indies is a sterile, static, manufactured society due to the accidental nature of its discovery and the brutal mode of occupation and violence among the colonizing forces. Many Caribbean scholars have also concluded that the area is “historyless” and unlikely to proceed further than its crude and violent beginnings. According to Naipaul, “history is built on creation and achievement and nothing was created in the West Indies”, (1969, p. 39).

This lack of creation refers to the dearth of monuments, libraries and other visible public amenities other than the remains of old plantation houses and memoirs of the slave experience. The European colonizers regarded the area as one whose economic potentials were to be fully exploited, but not a place to settle in permanently. This was why the plantation system was entrenched and thence, the proliferation of absentee landlords who enjoyed the fruits of their labour outside the West Indies. And so,

the problem with West Indian history does not lie solely in its mode of discovery as there was also the problem of jealousy and in-fighting among the colonizers who were single-minded in their quest for quick self-profit.

Initially, Columbus thought that the West Indies would open up a lucrative trade route for Spain. Also, because of the proliferation of gold body ornaments on the Bahamans he had met, Columbus concluded that there was an inexhaustible supply of gold to be obtained from the West Indies. Thus, his primary interest was the economic exploitation, and not the improvement of the area. Later on, it was discovered that the gold supply was finite and the colonizer's attention turned to the large-scale cultivation of sugar which was then a highly lucrative crop.

At all times, the European presence in the Caribbean was primarily motivated by selfish economic considerations. Because of this, they did not hesitate to undercut one another and eventually seek all inhumane means of obtaining a steady supply of easily replaceable labour for the effective cultivation of their plantations.

The West Indies can be referred to as an artificially created society because with the exception of the indigenous Indian population which was largely swiftly exterminated, the inhabitants of the Caribbean either migrated or were forcibly transported there. With this conglomeration of people of different races and religious beliefs and with different motives of being in the Caribbean, it was difficult to create a common Caribbean ethos, especially, given the fundamental inequalities created by the institution of slavery.

During Columbus's second trip to the Caribbean in 1493, he brought Spanish domestic cereals, vegetables, fruits and sugar cane to the West Indies. It is therefore; correct to regard the West Indians as an imported people in a largely imported environment. The early and later imperialists in the Caribbean had the sole motive of exploiting the natural, mineral and agricultural resources of the area both for personal benefits and for the good of their various mother countries.

The lure of gold, sugar and slaves thus precipitated imperialist forays into the area by Spain, Portugal, Britain, France and the Netherlands. Each of these imperialists fought to obtain a considerable share of the Caribbean wealth. And this gave rise naturally to piracy, double-crossing, brutality and lack of cohesion among the powers. Each group of Europeans had its own language, religion and political allegiances. They were also constantly engaged in the bid to protect or expand their territories and so had little opportunity or need to

exert a unified political and cultural control over the non-European population.

Furthermore, the Europeans' inability to impose a common creolised cultural ethos on the slaves who were also multi-cultural in origin was exacerbated by the imperialists' lack of interest in the continuous spiritual and physical welfare of the Islands and its inhabitants. As a result, the negro slaves were largely left to evolve their own cultural expressions and value systems based on vestiges of different African traditions, various European influences and communal responses to the new milieu.

Slavery in the Caribbean

The Spaniards who were the original imperialists in the Caribbean already had a system of slavery which made it easy for them to resort to this method of procuring labour for their mines and plantations. Several sources of labour, including aboriginal Indians, white slaves and convicts labour were sought before blacks were brought into the West Indies. Negro slavery was initiated by the king of Spain on September 3, 1501 and began with the transportation of numbers of Christian negro slaves from Spain to the West Indies. African slave trade began shortly afterwards.

The mining of gold and to a greater extent, the discovery of the great economic potential of sugar-cultivation in the world market precipitated the institutionalization of slavery in the West Indies. Plantation slavery began in the 16th century and from that time onwards, the fortunes of the Islands were greatly influenced by the price of sugar. Also, the requirements of the sugar industry determined the nature of the West Indian population.

The cultivation of cane was highly capital-and-labour-intensive. The more sophisticated and efficient machines for extracting sugar were expensive and the crop itself was highly perishable which meant that it had to be processed shortly after harvesting. Also, the planting and harvesting of cane required considerable labour and the manufacturing process was arduous. The production of sugar on an economic scale therefore, required a considerable initial financial outlay and a large cheap labour force. Negro slavery provided easily available and replaceable unskilled labour. It also led to a change in the racial composition and social structure of the Islands.

Under slavery, the humanity of the blacks was progressively eroded, especially with the arduous work hours, stringent penalties for absenteeism and the promulgation of slave codes which gave legal sanction to slavery. These codes deprived the slaves

of the freedom of movement and the simplest exercise of their freewill. For instance, they could not marry without their masters' permission, could not own property, were considered to be moveable property and could be punished even unto death by their masters.

This brutally indifferent method of slavery, coupled with the racial and cultural diversity found in the West Indies and the uprootment and dispossession experienced by the African slaves helped to rob the negroes of a sense of historical continuity and emphasized the lack of control over their lives. It also gave rise to such psychological traumas as alienation, rootlessness, inferiority complex and the creation of the colonial mentality. The cultivation of cane was thus, the basic reason for the institution of slavery and had important influences on the Caribbean psyche, such as the engendering of the isolationist outlook and an endemic and crippling sense of provincialism, all of which are difficult to eradicate from the 21st century Caribbean mentality.

Abolition

There were three basic reasons for the abolition of slavery: economic, political and humanitarian. By the 19th century, the cultivation of sugar in the British and French West Indian colonies was no longer economically viable because cheaper sugar was obtainable from India and Brazil. Sugar producers in the colonies discovered that they produced sugar at a greater cost than its selling price, thus making it difficult for the plantation owners to make profit after caring for the needs of the slaves.

Politically, the abolitionist move was part of the increasing global moves by the industrial bourgeoisie against the landed aristocracy, such as the French revolution of 1789 and the victory of the North over the South in the American civil war.

On humanitarian grounds, slavery was considered the height of man's inhumanity to man and so, such figures as William Wilberforce sought the legal end to the institution of slavery. Abolition Acts were passed in Denmark in 1803, Great Britain in 1807, France in 1817 and Holland in 1818, while slavery was legally abolished in the British colonies in 1833, French colonies in 1848, and Dutch colonies in 1863.

The Post-Emancipation Caribbean

The post-emancipation period did not usher in immediate fundamental changes in the lives of the slaves. Financially, they were ill-equipped for freedom, yet many preferred to survive through

subsistence farming or seasonal itinerant labour rather than work long hours for meagre wages in the plantations of their erstwhile masters. This created a vacuum in the labour force which was later filled by the migration of indentured Indian labourers to the West Indies. This wave of migration started in 1838 and ended in 1924 within which period approximately half a million Indians migrated to the Caribbean. This introduced new racial, linguistic and cultural complications into the already diversified West Indian society. The Caribbean thus, became a deterministic society where social status was predicated on skin pigmentation and people were divided into exclusive water-tight colour compartments. This situation intensified the psychosis nurtured by a sense of racial and cultural void or inferiority which began with the slavery.

Education in the early period of colonial rule was designed to impart the rudiments of reading, writing and moral instructions to the blacks. This, which was initially organized by the missionaries underscored the subordinate and acquiescent status of the negroes, vis-a-vis their white masters. Later on, the blacks were tutored in foreign history, literary and musical traditions and even the value system of the Metropolis was imposed wholesale on them.

The blacks responded in several ways, which included the total acceptance of foreign values which pre-supposed a negation of one's racial roots. There was also the rejection of Western values and a nostalgic attachment to vestiges of folk tradition, or, a judicious blend of the best of both cultures. This situation gave rise to the creation of a plural society.

The post-emancipation West Indies was thus, still strongly under foreign domination through colonialism. As a result, there exists in the Caribbean a complex situation created by the existence and interlocking of two different sets of cultural values. There is a foreign derived metropolitan culture which is mostly seen among the upper and middle classes and the black Creole culture which contains many African-derived elements and is practised mainly by the lower classes. Thus, the various social classes act and think differently and one class is elevated and aspired towards, to the detriment of the other. The upper and middle classes speak Standard English, contract legal marriages and practise the religion and culture of their former European masters. The lower classes on the other hand, generally speak the Creole dialect, engage in fetish practices such as the worship of gods like Shango, gold, and Ifa and usually do not contract legal marriages.

The Caribbean has, therefore, been described as a plural society made up of people displaying different modes of behaviour and who are held together by economic reasons, rather than by a sense

of belonging to a common culture. This divisive unity was the result of different responses and modes of adjustment to the void created by dispossession. The slave ancestors had been dispossessed of their motherlands and forced to live in an alien and hostile milieu in which they were made to feel racially and culturally inferior. This deep-seated sense of inferiority and lack of confidence became intensified by the focus of colonial education which encouraged further amnesia and shame about the African past and pushed the blacks towards accepting Europe as good. There have therefore, been various literary responses to the realities of the Caribbean historical experience. Some writers, especially, white West Indian writers are apologetic about this history. Some reject the West Indies and claim Africa as their spiritual home, while others reject the concept of Africa and take their cues from Europe. The various writers also hold different concepts about West Indian history. They generally act as spokespersons of their society. They analyze and interpret societal ills and consistently endeavour to make the people aware of their endemic shortcomings and seek positive and enduring responses to the milieu.

And so, there is in Caribbean literature the predominance of the alienation theme in various forms: homelessness, rootlessness and exile. It is a situation of being a part of what you could not become. So, the primary cultural commitment of Caribbean writers remains the search for identity and self-discovery. George Lamming describes this situation as paradoxical since it insists on roots and rootlessness; home and homelessness at the same time. The fragmented nature of the society gives the West Indian an acute sense of exile and because the literature of this area reflects and attempts to come to terms with the consequences of colonization, Edward Baugh describes it as "colonial literature", (1978, p.13). Caribbean literature then, was to celebrate a new ethos and identity. It established the West Indian identity as different from the European, and neither is it African, Chinese nor Indian but a strange and pleasurable mixture of all these. The writer in the New World then, is engaged in an attempt at articulating a trueness of being.

Implications on Criticism

Bearing the burden of this debilitating history and environment, the criticism of Caribbean literature has often been jaundiced. Primarily, the criticism encapsulates an attitude which sees the visions expressed by the writers as "pessimistic", especially with regard to Naipaul's works. As artistic mediators of their locale and historical experience, the argument

seems to have been that the unrelieved gloom of their circumstances, the apparent absence of any controlling moral centre, makes the only logical, possible, realistic portraiture absurd, depressing and hopeless. For instance, commenting on the burden of a depressing West Indian history, Rose Acholonu observes that "the dehumanizing influence of colonization... is as damaging as it is permanent" (1987, p.78). An important implication of this observation is the view that the Caribbean man cannot live down the problem of imposed acculturation. However, contrary to the above assertion, time and events have proved that the Caribbean man can evolve a new image in the modern world out of past and present experiences and thus, transcend his alien environment. The emergence in the first place of Caribbean literature as distinct from European, African, Chinese or Indian literature is a step in the positive direction and shows that the West Indian has a future. As Derek Walcott points out, history is not only that which is celebrated by "ruins of castles and forts but is also the chronicle of the past of the common man and his deeds — the fisherman with his mongrel walking on the beach" (Brodber, 1983, p.13). Creative history also accounts for the present and projects into the future. Walcott continues: "you who feel the pain of historylessness, look at the work patterns, the dances, the dreams, the songs and the memories of your forefathers, analyze these and you will be writing your history" (Brodber, 1983, p.3). Walcott also advises that it is the duty of the West Indian to possess his land, tame and cultivate it and finally produce something original, for the West Indian "behind all his roles and faces, possesses the possibility of a rich, complex and an integrated self which is his by virtue of his exile" (Hirsch, 1979, p.285). As Gerald Moore notes, "...even if the West Indians had created nothing else, they have certainly created a people" (Moore, 1969, p.8). Walcott insists that it would be abhorrent to him to say "I wish we were English again" or "I wish we were African again", that the reality is that, one has to build in the West Indies (Hirsch, 1979, p.285).

Walcott's position became vindicated when in 1992 he got the world's highest literary acclaim by winning the Nobel Prize for literature, a feat, which was repeated by Naipaul a few years later. This, apart from being a reward and recognition of individual excellence, is also a celebration of Caribbean literature, and since literature is a celebration of life, the Nobel Prize indirectly proclaims and recognizes Caribbean life as valid and authentic. And so, quite contrary to the claim that history exerts a definitive influence on the creative imagination, it is evident that the Caribbean man can live down the vagaries of history and transcend his alien milieu.

The terms "Caribbean" and "West Indian" are used interchangeably by many people in discussing the literature of this particular portion of the earth. However, "Caribbean" embraces the literature in all the languages of the area — English, French, Spanish and Dutch — but by "West Indian", it is meant only the writings of those Island and Mainland territories where English is the official language and the chief medium of literary composition. In this study, therefore, by "Caribbean" it is meant the literature of the English-speaking Caribbean, otherwise known as West Indian literature.

Major Writers from the Caribbean

While the major writers from the Caribbean are Derek Walcott, Edward Brathwaite, V.S. Naipaul, Samuel Selvon, George Lamming, Roger Mais and Michael Anthony, others include V.S. Reid, Orlando Patterson, Earl Lovelace, Jean Rhys, Martin Carter, Geoffrey Drayton, Edgar Mittleholzer, Merle Hodge, Zee Edgell, Alvin Bennett, Errol John, John Hearne, H.D. Delisser, Jacques Roumain, Ian McDonald, Joseph Zobel, Denis Williams, Simone Schwarz-Bart, and Glissant Garth St. Orner.

Since Caribbean literature is largely a response by the individual writers to the historical realities of the area, Derek Walcott believes that the West Indian must move towards refashioning the present. The West Indian, Walcott believes, must overcome the sense of inferiority and lack of cohesion which is the heritage of dispossession and alienation. Walcott also tackles the issue of the West Indian loyalty to at least two cultures: one, indigenous, and the other, foreign. He maintains that for true nationalism to exist and for the authentic Caribbean personality to emerge, one cannot adopt one culture to the neglect of the other. Walcott consistently blends elements of the two cultures in his works and even attempts to re-evaluate certain aspects of colonial history.

He is also of the belief that servitude to the muse of history can only result in a literature that is sociological, self-pitying and full of revenge. To him, history is fiction which is subject to the vagaries of memory and thus, open to mis-interpretations or re-interpretations. He, therefore, ignores the claim that history exerts a definitive influence on the creative imagination and rather conceives of the New World negro as an "Adam" who has suffered amnesia of the past and is therefore, free to move forward in time and have a new life for himself in his New World. Poet, dramatist and Nobel laureate for literature, Walcott's publications include: *T-Jean and his brothers* (1970), *Dream on Monkey Mountain* (1970), *The Sea at Dolphin* (1970) and several volumes of poetry.

Edward Brathwaite, another writer from the Caribbean however, sees the task of the Caribbean writer as being the rehabilitation of the colonial mind through making the West Indian accept folk ways, music and orature and more importantly, shape these things into a tangible literary tradition from which other writers can draw inspiration. Brathwaite believes that the black man who rejects his racial memory is doomed to endless migrations and rootlessness because he can neither define himself in terms of an attachment to Africa, nor in terms of Europe which exploits and manipulates his life. He therefore, suggests very strongly a recapitulation of the past, but since this, according to him might not be easy and will involve the excavation of painful memories, Brathwaite does not hold out any ready or easy solutions for the dispossessed New World black. The *arrivants* (1973) which is a trilogy is one of his major publications.

Often referred to as the prophet of doom, (Richards, 1991, p.32), V.S. Naipaul sees the history of the Caribbean as a recurrent void which is characterized by brutality, sterility and lack of visible achievements. According to Naipaul, "history is built on creation and achievement and nothing was created in the West Indies" (1969, p.43).

A dominant feature of Naipaul's writing is the presentation and exploration of characters who are either failures because of their inability to express and realize their full potentials, or characters who are charlatans and mediocre but who, nevertheless, are precipitated into success by the sheer mediocrity and formlessness of the society. To Naipaul, the Caribbean is a place which deliberately denies itself his heroes and is incapable of recognizing and nurturing artistic potentials. Also, the diverse groups of people who inhabit the Islands in Naipaul's view, are not bound by any sense of belonging to one culture. As a result, there is the creation of the formless, casual society with haphazard standards and the emergence of the confused, unaccommodated man who is helpless and cast in a sterile and unfriendly landscape. His works include: *A Bend in the river* (1979), *A flag on the island* (1969), *An area of darkness* (1968), *Guerillas* (1975), *In a free state* (1971), *Miguel street* (1974), *Mr. Stone and the knight's companion* (1963), *The mimic men* (1967), *The suffrage of Elvira* (1969), *The middle passage* (1969), *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1969) and *The Mystic masseur* (1971). Clearly, Naipaul is the most prolific Caribbean writer.

The direct opposite of Naipaul's vision is Samuel Selvon's. As a writer, Selvon's historical sense is informed by his optimistic vision of man's ability to transcend the drawbacks of a debilitating past, hence, his being referred to as the "optimistic visionary" *par*

excellence" (Acholonu, 1987, p.87). Selvon's fictional world centres around the life, customs, beliefs and speech patterns of the peasant West Indian. He reveals the strengths and weaknesses of this world and projects a possible blend of the best of both West Indian and Western ways as the ideal way of coping with a changing contemporary world. Selvon consistently shows that without a fundamental attachment to the beneficial aspects of folkways, the West Indian, whether in Trinidad or abroad is liable to become adrift. He also shows that an inherited sense of racial prejudice is detrimental to progress in the modern world and projects a future in which West Indians will be able to ignore racial differentiations and work for the general good. This vision is conveyed mostly through his fiction which includes: *An island is a world* (1955), *Moses ascending* (1984), *Moses migrating* (1983), *The lonely Londoners* (1989), *Ways of sunlight* (1979), *A brighter sun* (1979), and *Turn again Tiger* (1979).

George Lamming's vision is similar to Brathwaite's. Like the latter, Lamming believes that history is continuous and holds salient lessons for the contemporary society and that without a positive recapitulation of the past, the contemporary Caribbean will be unable to respond positively to his milieu. And so, an intimate contact with the past is necessary in order to chart the path of future progress. This vision is conveyed through his *In the castle of my skin* (1953).

Roger Mais is another renowned writer from the Caribbean. Mais's fictional world is specifically that of the urban dispossessed in Kingston, Jamaica, but his observations about human life are universal. Accordingly, Mais sets his novels like *The hills were joyful together* (1953) and *Brother man* (1974) in urban slums in Kingston, and exposes the lives of the yard-dwellers in all their stark, squalid, deprived and dehumanized horror: they are rootless, hopeless, brutalized, poor, and have broken homes. They also engage in all forms of moral laxity. At the same time, Mais shows the possibility of the existence of positive emotions and intentions in this world. And so, his fictional world is one of paradoxes in which defeat and success, sloth and industry, piety and lawlessness, caring and hatred exist simultaneously. Mais projects that man is trapped in a tragic world of continuous sufferings and reversals. Man's actions, Mais maintains are without apparent reasons and his fortunes are at the mercy of an abstract, indifferent and often merciless universal force called "fate". But directly contrary to this is the author's conviction that man holds the key to his salvation and that the very existence of the paradoxes of experience testifies to the possibility of man improving himself in the face of tremendous odds. Fundamentally, therefore, Mais's

vision is that in their confrontation with an implacable and unpredictable fate, the urban dispossessed of the West Indies need to rely on themselves and seek redemption either from within themselves or within their group.

Another popular writer from the Caribbean is Michael Anthony although his works generally avoid the exploration of contemporary socio-political issues and also rarely reflect a well-defined sense of commitment to the future of the West Indies. In the stories in *Cricket in the road* (1965) and *The year in San Fernando* (1973), the author highlights different facets of traditional life in such a way as would imply that he advocates the upholding of the values of this world while grudgingly acknowledging the inevitability of the incursion of Western values. He projects a vision of a traditional and practically untouched West Indies which West Indians must be encouraged to appreciate. Anthony appears to consider the writer's responsibility as being predicated on his obligation to make West Indians aware of the inner beauty and integrity of the traditional milieu. Consequently, his presentation of this world is simplistic, idealistic and precludes any intense critical analysis of the merits or otherwise of traditional life so that while being aware of the inevitability of change, Mais does not appear to be actively engaged in preparing West Indians for the positive and negative repercussions of this change. Ultimately, Anthony's vision centres on the assumption that the attachment to traditional roots, irrespective of their drawbacks is the most viable means of confronting incipient change. He also suggests that the destruction of this traditional way of life or abdication from it would be tantamount to metaphorical death. His other titles include: *Green days by the river* (1973), *The games were coming* (1977) and *All that glitters* (1983).

Conclusion

This paper has thus, examined the peculiar history of the Caribbean as well as its attendant effect on its literature and criticism since Caribbean literature is also to some extent, a response by the individual writers to the historical realities of the area. The paper concludes that quite contrary to the assertion that history exerts a definitive influence on the creative imagination (as it is argued by some scholars), the Caribbean man can live down the ravages of history and transcend his alien milieu.

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