UNIT 3 CARIBBEAN LITERATURE – THE AESTHETIC OF DIASPORA

Structure

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3.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit we shall firstly map the emergence of Anglophone Caribbean aesthetics – we shall locate the moments when Caribbean writers and critics debated and discussed issues pertaining to Caribbean writing and criticism. This brief survey would focus approximately on a 50 year period from 1930 to 1980 when Caribbean writers and critics undertook the project of cultural decolonisation and resistance against colonial power to forge national consciousness. We all know that literary productions are entangled in historical moments, they are also a result of specific social and material conditions. In this survey, I shall also try to contextualize the Caribbean aesthetic within its specific historical and material conditions. Any study of writing in and from the Caribbean has to acknowledge and contend with the basic sense of its diasporic nature – (What do we mean by diaspora? Literally it means dispersion and comes from the Bible which describes the scattering of the Jews in various countries outside Palestine. Today diaspora refers to those people who have gone out of their original homelands and live in other countries. eg. People of Indian origin living in the Caribbean are called the Indian diaspora. In the introduction, I will outline the historical context of the emergence of the diaspora.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

“Mr. Biswas found it easy to imagine the other race of Indians moving about this road before the world grew dark for them”

(A House for Mr. Biswas, Naipaul, 397)

Writing in An Area of Darkness, Naipaul remembers reading about the disappearance of the indigenous population –

“... the aboriginal inhabitants of the West Indies ‘sickened and died’ when the spaniards came ...”

(An Area of Darkness, Naipaul, 209)

These two quotations from V.S. Naipaul foreground the troubled history of colonialism in the Caribbean. The colonial encounter between the immigrants and the original inhabitants had a great impact on the culture, society and history of the region. Any engagement with Caribbean literary production would be incomplete without an engagement with the colonial encounter and its impact. I shall briefly describe this process.
The ‘discovery’ of the Caribbean islands by Christopher Columbus in 1492 led to a brutal period of colonial domination that continued till the 1960’s when most of the Caribbean nations gained independence. The Spaniards established the first European settlement in eastern Hispaniola in 1502, and by the middle of sixteenth century they had fanned out into other islands. The Dutch, Portuguese, English and French colonisers followed the Spanish and by the eighteenth century the entire Caribbean region was under colonial rule which by now was predominantly English. The territorial and economic ambitions of the colonial enterprise led to the extermination and often brutal decimation of the indigenous Amerindian population. The aboriginal inhabitants were victims of expansionist colonial policy, social dislocation and new epidemic diseases like measles and small pox. Those who survived had their social, political and cultural lives reorganized in the name of Christianity and its ‘civilizing missions’. Their lives were regimented by slavery and demands of a profit oriented commercial policy in mining and pearl fishing followed by the European powers. The Europeans who invaded and conquered the Caribbean destroyed the world of the native people and realigned their world with larger Eurocentric events where their histories collided with other histories in Africa, Asia and Europe to produce a mongrel and hybrid Caribbean experience.

Introduced by the Dutch in 1640, the sugar plantation system provided the necessary attraction to potential colonisers. The island economies based on small farms producing cash crops of cotton and tobacco were changed into large plantations requiring vast expanse of land and large labour force. The Amerindian population had all but disappeared and this shortage resulted in the forced migration of African slaves. Between 1518 and 1870, the transatlantic slave trade supplied the greatest proportion of the Caribbean population. This trade was so lucrative that even the English royal family invested in the company of Royal Adventurers Chartered in 1663! Commenting on the African diaspora, Cuban born Jamaican writer Sylvia Wynter says –

“Our conditions is one of uprootedness. Our uprootedness is the original model of total twentieth century disruption of man ... We anticipated by centuries that exile which is our own century Is now common to all ...” (307)

The abolition of slavery by the British Parliament in 1834 and the end of apprenticeship system in 1838 marked the next watershed in Caribbean history. The abolition of slavery and ban on slave trade necessitated the import of indentured labourers to work on plantations. (Who are indentured labourers? They were labourers who had entered into written agreement with their masters.) They arrived mainly from India and China. Between 1838 and 1917 when the indentured system was abolished, nearly 500,000 East Indians from U.P. and Bihar immigrated to the Caribbean. Apart from the fact that these indentured people had a legally defined term of service and were guaranteed a set wage, these Asian indentured labourers were treated like African slaves whom they had partially replaced in the fields and factories. These new immigrants added to the different nationalities that made up the ruralistic Caribbean Society.

An important fallout of the abolition of slavery and subsequently indentured system was the emergence of an educated middle class and working class population. Supported by various British trade union groups, these were the precursors of the rise of nationalism in the Caribbean. Post – Independence Caribbean society witnessed the emergence of nationalist sentiments. Between 1880 and 1920, Anglophone Caribbean nations saw nation wide agitations for better wages and working conditions. The social unrest within the Caribbean was an obvious fall out of a long history of colonial rule and neglect which had resulted in poor social conditions and low wages. Demands for self government and political representation gained popular support. The Caribbean people adopted the mode of general strikes and riot as a potent weapon of protest against the colonial authorities. The canefield riots in
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Trinidad, the sugar worker strike in Trinidad in 1934, and oil workers' strike in 1937 led to a general strike and the dock workers went on strike in 1938 in Jamaica. Disturbances rapidly spread with a wave of riots and strikes across Barbados, British Guayana and Jamaica & Trinidad & Tobago. Another important event that had far reaching implication was the establishment of the Rastafarian movement in Jamaica in 1930 by Marcus Garvey. Rastafarianism soon became a political and cultural movement that helped to consolidate the black power movement in the Caribbean. As a political and cultural ideology it had an immense contribution in forging a sense of national consciousness and identity for the blacks, and helped it to emerge as the dominant social group in the Caribbean. One of the 'solutions' to tackle the growing social discontent and contain the nationalist sentiments was the granting of the universal adult suffrage by the British to the islands.

The British government also pushed for a modified self government and created the West Indian Federation in 1958. Complete independence was achieved in the following decades, with Trinidad and Tobago achieving independence in 1962, Barbados in 1966, Bahamas in 1973, Grenada in 1974, Dominica in 1978, St. Lucia and St. Vincent and the Grenadines in 1979, Antigua and Barbados in 1981 and St. Kitts and Nevis in 1983.

This brief and selective historical mapping foregrounds the most significant aspects of Caribbean society - the impact of European colonization almost wiped out the Amerindian population (they survive in few reserves in Guayana & Dominica) and the Africans, East Indians and other ethnic minorities were forced into their diaspora. Consequently the Caribbean experience has become synonomous with diaspora and exile, it has become a land of ethnically diverse people with diverse histories, who were forced into living together. The result has been a curious mongrel and hybrid Caribbean identity where pre conquest Amerindian, post conquest European and African and post emancipation Indian and Chinese identities and histories jostle for space and accommodation.

The emergence of a Caribbean literary aesthetic has to be viewed within this historical condition of uprootedness. As Naipaul says "Living in a borrowed culture, the West-Indian, more than most needs writers to tell him who he is, where he stands" (The Middle Passage, pp. 73). Commenting on this condition of dislocation and displacement, Braithwaite says. "The most significant feature of West Indian life and imagination since Emancipation has been its sense of rootlessness, of not belonging to the landscape .... The problem of and for West Indian artists and intellectuals is that having been born and educated within this fragmented culture, they start out in the world without a sense of wholeness .......... " (Timeheri, 344)

In this 'borrowed culture', the writer is not only trying to reclaim his / her own history, he also needs to do so for other lost histories. The emergence of a Caribbean literary tradition is thus an attempt at decolonising the culture and people from the literal and literary colonization of the Britishers. It is also an enterprise to reclaim and forge alter / native cultural traditions for a people who were forced into their diasporas.

3.2 THE 1930'S

The emergence of a re-visionist agenda for Caribbean literature can be located in the turbulent decades of the 1930's and 1940's. We have already seen that the Anglophone Caribbean was moving towards a new national consciousness, at least in its collective opposition to colonial rule. In this period of flux generated by the popular social unrest, the cultural identities were extremely mobile and hybrid. Concurrent with the rise of political nationalism, Caribbean writers and intellectuals were also trying to forge their cultural identities. Hence cultural decolonisation became a major preoccupation of the poets. Certain writers were articulating and
writing about their separate national identities and moving away from an anglocentric aesthetic tradition and a Leavisite 'moral vision'. (This refers to F.R. Leavis's book *The Great Tradition* in which he identifies the "great" writers on the basis of their "moral vision"). The Caribbean little magazines particularly *The Beacon* in Trinidad and *Public Opinion* in Jamaica made significant contribution in realigning public opinion against the colonial literary models and ideologies. Writers associated with these magazines functioned as cultural agitators, Albert Gomes calls them "angry young men of the thirties", who highlighted the importance of the local and specific regional identities. They advocated a breaking away from the bonds of cultural allegiances to colonialism. The central issue for most of these writers was to have cultural reorientation that would avoid pseudo-Britishness. A quote from Albert Gomes' article 'A West Indian Literature' published in *The Beacon* in 1933 will substantiate the point. — Gomes' article sets out a manifesto for indigenous literature —

"It is important more over, that we break away as far as possible from the English tradition: and the fact that some of us are still slaves to Scott & Dickness is merely because we lack the necessary artistic individuality and sensibility in order to see how incongruous that tradition is with the West Indian scene and spirit . . . . the sooner we throw off the veneer of culture that our colonization has brought us the better for our artistic aims . . . . One has only to glance through the various periodicals published in this and other islands to see what slaves we still are to English culture and tradition. There are some who lay great store by this conscious aping of another man's culture but to us it merely seems a sign of the immaturity of our spirit" — (113)

The nationalist writers advocated socially realist writings and a literary naming of the landscape as a tool of resistance against the colonial hangover. The publication of regional works such as Norman Cameron's *Guianese Poetry 1831-1931* & Albert Gomes' 'A selection from the fiction and verse of the Island of Trinidad' (1937), journals such as Bim in Barbados (founded 1942) & Kyk-over-al in Jamaica (founded in 1945) and BBC Caribbean voices radio programme helped to create a sense of national pride as well as facilitated localized cultural exchanges. A key text that helped in this project of cultural decolonization was Vic Reid's *New Day* (1949). Reid traced the emergence of Jamaican society from the Morant Bay Rebellion of 1944 through the character of Johnny Campbell and used creole (a native language formed by the combination of a European language with indigenous languages) as the language of narration. The emphasis on resistance, protest and rootedness in this historical novel was to have important resonances for Caribbean literature in the later decades.

This project of cultural decolonization also undertook to expose and oppose the colonial education. Many writers critiqued the colonial educational system as a means of ideological domination that thwarted the rise of indigenous consciousness. Commenting on the overarching influence of colonial education, George Lamming wrote in 'The Occasion for speaking':

"... The West Indians' education was imported in much the same way that flour and butter was imported from Canada. Since the cultural negotiation was strictly between England and the natives and England had acquired, somehow the divine right to organize the natives' reading, it is to be expected that Englands' export of literature would be English. Deliberately and exclusively English. And the further back in time England went for these treasures, the safer was the English commodity. So the examinations, which would determine the Trinidadians future in the civil service, imposed Shakespeare and Wordsworth, and Jane Austen and George Eliot and the whole tabernacle of dead names .... How in the name of Heavens could a colonial native taught by an English native within a strict curriculum .... how could he ever get out from under this ancient mausoleum of historic achievement? ... " (254-5).
Note the voice of indignant protest and strident criticism of the hegemonic control exercised by colonial education! A different register of protest can be seen in a short calypso (A type of song based on a subject of interest in the news and sung in a West Indian manner) 'Dan is the Man' by the Mighty Sparrow (Slinger Francisco). As a folk-form, the calypso originated in West Africa and incorporates elements of digging songs chanted by people at work. The Calypso has remained a cultural form which speaks and to an often illiterate working class audience.

_Dan is the Man_

I

According to the education you get when you small
You 'll grow up with true ambition and respect from one an all
But in days in school they teach me like a fool
The things they teach me I should be a block-headed mule.

Pussy had finished his work long ago
And now he resting and thing
Solomon Agundy was born on a Monday
The Ass in the Lion Skin
Winkin Blinkin and Nod
Sail off in a wooden shoe
How the Agouti lose he tail and Alligator trying to get
Monkey liver soup.

II

The poems and the lessons they write and send from England
Impress me they were trying to cultivate comedians
Comic books made more sense
You know it was fictitious without pretence
But like Cutteridge wanted to keep us in ignorance
Humpty Dumpty sat on a wll
Humpty Dumpty did fal
Goosey Goosey Gander
Where shall I wander
Ding dong dell.... Pussy in the well
RIKKI ... TIKKI TAVI
Rikki Tikki Taxi

III

Well Cutteridge he was plenty times more advanced than them scientists
I aint believe that no one man could write so much foolishness
Acroplane and rockets didn’t come too soon
Scientist used to make the grade in balloon
This time Cutteridge done make a cow jump over the moon.

Tom Tom the piper son
Stole the pig and away he ran
Once there was a woman who lived in a shoe
She had so many children she didn’t know what to do
Dickery Dickery Dock
The mouse run up the Clock
The lion and the mouse
A woman pushing a cow up a ladder to eat grass on top a house.
IV

How I happen to get some education my friends I don’t know
All they teach me is about Brer Rabbit and Rumplestilskin

They wanted to keep me down indeed
They tried their best but didn’t succeed
You see I was dunce and up to now I can’t read.

Peter Peter was a pumpkin eater
And the Lilliput people tie Gulliver
When I was sick and lay abed
I had two pillows at my head
I see the Goose that lay the golden egg
The Spider and the Fly
Morocoy with wings flying in the sky
They beat me like a dog to learn that in school
If me head was bright I would a be a damn fool

I have quoted entire calypso because it offers a significant insight into an alternative oral literary form that subverts and debunks the tool of colonial education – Capt. J.O. Cutttridge’s West Indian Readers (1926-1929), a text book widely used in the Caribbean school curriculum for three decades. It questions the worth of a standardizing education for a Caribbean citizen. The narrator deftly articulates his escape from this debilitating system to save himself from becoming a block headed mule. In its use of irony and cultural mimicry, this calypso can be seen as a sign of protest and resistance that helps shape the emerging Caribbean literature. In fact Braithwaite has firmly argued for according a privileged status to the calypso for not only using it as an available literary model for Caribbean discourse but as a literary form itself.

However it would be naive to presume that this revisionist agenda for a literature of social engagement went unchallenged by a more orthodox position. There were still many writers who accorded an apolitical status to art and subscribed to a more universal, standard and anglocentric view of literature. Two quotations will help us to understand this position. The first is by J.E.C. Mac Farlane from his 1935 address ‘The Challenges of Our Time’ –

“... As representatives of a great tradition. We offer you poetry upon which we feel certain the true foundation of this Europe rests and by which it will be preserved throughout the storm that hangs above the horizon of the civilization...” – (110)

Mr. Farlane also speaks about the function of poetry as being of greatest service to humanity in “restoring the lost outline, in raising it from the maze of sensuous things into the clear atmosphere of the spirit”. E. A. Carr’s opinion concurs with Mac Farlanes’ position –

“...Many good artists today are deliberately denying .... The essential part that tradition plays in art. The flouting of this fact has something evers of the fanaticism of a crusade .... It seems the political unrest of the age has seeped into and infected the serenity of the sphere of art ...”(III).

Notice that both McFarlane and Carr unequivocally divorce art and literature from the social and political context and advocate a Leavsite version of tradition and moral values. They privilege the imperial motherland and speak of themselves as part of the imperial culture. Carr in fact derides socially committed art as a fanatic crusade with the obvious implication that this crusade needs to be tempered down. According to
privileged and enabling position to the Western tradition is also evident in C.L.R. James' essay ‘Discovering Literature in Trinidad’ (1930). He claims an undisguised pride in his intellectual heritage and emphasizes his apprenticeship to western literature. However it is significant to remember that C.L.R. James was a central figure in Trinidad’s anti-colonial movements and he drew upon his ‘mastery’ of classical education to make Trinidadians aware of their society and literature. He is also responsible for upholding cricket as a West Indian sport. His ambivalent subject position reflects the paradoxical situation of a colonized intellectual. He both incorporates the view of the colonizer and the colonized. At least James denies ideologically fixed positions to the heritage of Western Tradition. In this, his position is markedly different to that of McFarlane and Carr who subscribe totally to the ideology of colonial traditions.

The texts and debates within this period were clearly shaped by and instrumental in major cultural transitions that emerged in the Caribbean in later decades. They sought to remake their national identities and Caribbean homelands from their colonial selves. Yet the powerful dominance of the colonial ideology continued to spawn orthodox positions and aesthetic models. The project of cultural decolonisation was far from complete, as our next section will testify. We shall turn to the ‘booming’ of the West Indian novel in the 1950s and examine the critical practice of this decade.

3.3 THE ‘BOOM’ AND THE WRITER IN EXILE

The decade of the 1950’s is very often referred to as the decade of the West Indian novel. George Lamming believes that the West Indian novel was one of the important tools that facilitated the rise of national consciousness and challenged the anglocentric ideologies of colonial educational and cultural practices. According to Lamming, the West Indian novelist articulated the voice of the West Indian society and its community. In fact many of the novelists who constitute the dominant voices in the Caribbean canon, emerged during this decade. Some ‘classics’ associated with the Caribbean canon like Lamming’s In the Castle of my Skin (1957) Naipaul’s A House for Mr. Biswas (1961) and Wilson Harris’ Palace of the Peacock (1960) belong to this period of the booming of the West Indian novel. Significantly all these writers, Samuel Selvon, Naipaul, Lamming, Andrew Salkey, Wilson Harris, Edgar Mittelholzer, Kamau Braithwaite, John Hearne, Jan Carew, V. S. Reid, Derek Walcott were male, middle class, educated and with very few exception, based in England. So the formation of a Caribbean canon, inspite of its nationalist revisionist agenda was formed in and was a function of exile in the metropolitan center (mostly London) and excluded women writers. The marginalized Caribbean operated within its own system of further margins and peripheries. However, the influence of these writers in the creation of an aesthetic of Caribbean canon cannot be underestimated. Two seminal critical texts – Kenneth Ramchand’s The West Indian Novel and its Background (1970) and Wilson Harris’ Tradition - The Writer and Society (1967) firmly established the critical practice to study these writers. The practice included the notions of a separate and specific tradition (different from the English tradition), relationship between writer and society, questions of audience and the responsibility of the artist, themes of alienation and isolated individual, highlighting the importance of the autobiographical novel or the novel of childhood as formative to an emerging of Caribbean literature, the centrality of themes of displacement and dislocation, and the symbols of unhoused and unaccommodated characters (notably in Naipaul’s Mr. Biswas which explores the symbol of the building process). The criticism also included analysis of stylistic and linguistic experimentation (for example the use of Creole by Selvon and Naipaul), the dual pulls of African, Asian or European heritage, preoccupation with naming the landscape, validating the local, the notion of exile, nostalgia and rewriting histories within a largely realist tradition.
However this boom in literary production was largely a function of exile of a number of Caribbean writers for whom London became the literary capital. The phenomenon of exile is not peculiar to Caribbean writers or to this period, but it did have significant impact on Caribbean writing. These writers were a part of a large scale migration of Caribbean people to the ‘motherland’. These ‘British subjects’ were recruited for the service industries after the second world war and they found it hard to resist the allure of the metropolitan center. London was after all part of their cultural myth. David Dabydeen remarked in *Slave Song* (1984) that a mutual representation of otherness has been going on – perhaps for a very long time.

"...England is our Utopia, an ironic reversal, for Raleigh was looking away from the ‘squalor’ of his homeland to the imagined purity of our whereas we are now reacting against our ‘sordid’ environment and looking to ‘England’ as Heaven..." (121)

The writers who migrated to Britain cited various reasons for their departure. Most like Braithwait felt stifled in the limiting circumstances of the islands. He remarked – "...the West Indies could be written about and explored. But only from the vantage point outside the West Indies. It was no point going back. No writer could live in that stifling atmosphere of middle class materialism and philistinism..." (346). George Lamming, writing about the reasons for large scale migration of writers said, "...The West Indian of average opportunity and intelligence has not yet been converted to reading as a civilized activity ....... Reading seriously at any age is still largely associated with reading for examination ....... The Writers are afraid of returning ............ Because they feel that sooner or later they will be ignored in and by a society about which they have been at once articulatart authentic..." (259). The historical exigencies, massive illiteracy, lack of responsive audiences, few publishing houses and lack of opportunities to make a career out of writing forced these writers to leave. The situation was worse for black writers as is evident in C.L.R. James' articulation of the social and material reality faced by them – "...We (the blackmen) went one way, these white boy all went the other way. We were black and the only way we could do anything along the lines we were interested in was by going abroad ...... you (the white) stayed not only because your parents had money but because your skin was white; there was a chance for you, but for us there was not – except to be a civil servant and hand papers, take them from the men downstairs and hand them to the man upstairs..." (164).

The metropolitan center (London) did provide a measure of literary and commercial success, but the experience of exile did not prove as liberating and enabling as these writes had expected it to be. Disillusioned by his experiences as a Cambridge undergraduate and the metropolitan attitude to his work, Braithwaite commented on the reasons for his return in *Timehri*, "...I felt that I had arrived, I was possessing the landscape. But I turned to find that my ‘fellow Englishmen’ were not particularly prepossessed with me.... the Cambridge magazines didn’t take my poems.... or rather they only took those which had West Indian, to me ‘exotic’ flavour. I felt neglected and misunderstood..." (346) Naipaul’s case offers a good example of the ambiguous position of the third world post colonial writer. He chose to stay, he attained fame and popularity, he acknowledges his debt to the wider English tradition, yet he feels ‘peripheral’ to the English Society. He says "...London is my metropolitan center; it is my commercial center; and yet I know that it is a kind of limbo and I am a refugee in the sense that I am always peripheral..." (41).

This articulation of a sense of marginalisation and Braithwait’s discomfort at being labeled as ‘exotic’ points to a larger post colonial paradox. The benchmark for the post colonial writer still remains the acceptance and success in the center, yet the center refuses to offer unconditional accommodation. Thus these writers in exile both gained and lost something, they remained both inside and outside their metropolitan centers.
In the Caribbean, these writers in exile came in for severe criticism. Questions were raised about the efficacy of writing produced for the consumption of a largely metropolitan literati at the expense of the local audience. One of the fiercest critic of the writer-in-exile was Margaret Blundell. Writing in her 1966 article "Caribbean Readers & Writers" she commented:

"...Can a people achieve a real literature if it only produces for export? A society produces writers and artists of ability and imagination. The society can provide its authors with the raw material for their arts, but can the finished work continue to be valid when it is continually played to an alien audience .... After ten years in exile, writing about the Caribbean of ten years ago. The writer is in danger of creating the equivalent of the stage Irishman, a sort of never-never calypso man of Caribbean fiction designed to amuse the fog-bound silent Englishman...

Blundell states her objection forcefully. She also drew attention to the problems of audience created in this situation especially in relation to the use of language –

"...Not enough of our poets speak to us through our own vernacular. Inevitably when they are moulded, consciously and unconsciously by far wider reading than most literate West Indians, there is a gap in communication .... Sometimes the acclaim of an absentee and largely urban audience makes the situation worse as the intellectual qualities of poetry are over-emphasized at the expense of more imaginative and intuitive qualities. There is scarcely any local West Indian audience to speak to in this literary idiom..." (212).

However this phenomenon of the writer-in-exile was balanced by other committed writers who chose to stay. Derek Walcott was one of these, he established himself with three poetry collections in 1948, 1962 and 1965. In 1959, he founded the Trinidad Theatre Workshop which provided a significant creative outlet for him and other Caribbean dramatists. Commenting on the contrary pull to remain in the Caribbean, Walcott termed it "the power of the provincial". The Guyanese writer, and editor of Kyk-over-al, A. J. Seymour also 'stayed' and provided crucial guidance to Kyk-over-al. Another very important writer who 'remained' was Martin Carter, who published an important volume, Poems of Resistance from British Guiana in 1954. S. O. Asien traced the protest tradition in West Indian poetry in a seminal article in the Jamaica Journal in 1972 and said that Carter’s poetry is basically situational, intensely personal in the exclusiveness of private experiences and responses but representative and contemporary in their "...stunning reflection of the bleak slice of Guyanese history..." (40-5).

The Caribbean literary practice in this decade of 'boom' of the novel remained caught within the dichotomy of the expatriate writer and the 'provincial' writer. The aesthetics of socially committed writing continued within the region, where the Caribbean little magazines like Bim, Kyk-over-al, Kaie etc. provided the necessary valuable cultural space for these writers. The threat of Caribbean writing being subsumed within the English canon forced the 'provincials' to commit themselves to establishing regional literature and criticism and to rephrase Blundell to not only, produce for export – for consumption of the 'fog-bound Englishman' but for the locals, in a language and idiom that was their own. This call for a literature and criticism of their own was to have resonances in the next decades - the late 1960's and 1970's to which I shall now turn.

3.4 THE DECADES OF THE CRITICS

The decades of 1960's and 1970's were years of transition for the various nations in the region. Some had achieved independence, some were aiming for independence. This period saw the transition to post colonially for these newly independent nations...

“... In 1962, the Federation of the West Indies broke up. . . . True, we been left with had universal adult suffrage, and this had taken us into our various independencies and certainly, especially in Jamaica, there was a certain spirit and expression of nationalism. But our ‘actions’ had been mainly ‘international’ gesture; anti-establishment, anti-colonial: not popular people-based, certainly not native . . . . The Federation turned out to be a dream of London. Somewhere along the line we had forgotten Garvey, our grass root selves, the insurrection of the 1930’s...” (282)

Braithwaite’s formulation reechoes Albert Gomes’ 1930 manifesto for West Indian literature and Margaret Bludnell’s prescription for localizing literary activity. This recentering of literary and critical activity within the Caribbean, rather than from the expatriate base of London, was a seminal feature of this period. This recentering can be located in a series of significant journal essays which I shall look at. These essays made important contributions to debates concerning linguistic and formal experimentation in Caribbean literature. The writers who contributed to these debates included Braithwaite, Walcott and Sylvia Wynter. Other new poets who emerged in this decade and contributed to this revisionist agenda included Mervyn Morris, Dennis Scott, Anthony McNeill, Victor Questal, and the dub or performance poets like Bongo Jerry, Mutabaruka, Oku Onuora, Michael Smith and in Britain Lionton Kwesi Johnson.

It is possible to locate a shift within the Caribbean literary practice from the earlier West Indian to a proper Caribbean matrix in this period. I shall try to locate this shift through 4 journal essays – ‘...We must learn to sit down together and discuss a little culture – Reflection on West Indian writing and Criticism...’ by Cuban born Jamaican writer and critic Sylvia Wynter, ‘Timehri’ and ‘Jazz and the West Indian Novel, I, II, III.’ by Braithwaite and ‘The Muse of History’ by Derek Walcott. These essays offered introspective theorizations about Caribbean literary and critical discourse, and about the individual subject positions and version of personal revisionist histories of the authors. Their championing of Creole had significant resonances for the use of nation language in the subsequent years of the last century.

Sylvia Wynters’ essay, We must learn to sit down together and discuss a little culture – Reflection on West Indian writing and criticism, (1968 – 1969) discusses the historical and material impact colonialism and migration had on West Indian society where Literature and critical practices were merely reduced to the status of being ‘branch-plants’ to the metropolitan centre. She criticised writers, notably Walcott who she said were ‘trapped at times with the cultural myth rather than the cultural reality of Europe’. This cultural myth underproped the economic and political power of Europe in its exploitation of the non-Europeans. The writers and critics had to come to terms with the cultural reality of Europe and free themselves from the dominance of Europe as a super culture. She also attacked the ‘acquiescent critic’ who is ‘mediated to his bones by the colonial myth in which he is involved’. For Wynter the ‘swing of the pendulum will redress the balance towards the myth of Africa’. Reflecting on her subject position Wynter said ‘I returned because I had no choice. I could not write, my talent did not suffice, except I could return to the lived experience of my own corner of reality. I accepted that writing would have to be done in the interstices of my time’ (308) Wynters’ essay was one of the seminal essays that reiterated the need to centre critical activity within the Caribbean and shake off the appendage of the branch plant syndrome and to articulate the lived reality of the Afro-Caribbean experience.

Jazz and the West Indian Novel I, II, III is an attempt at theorizing the critical practice of the West Indian novel where Braithwaite was trying to show a form of literature
similar to the Jazz. This essay is a little confusing as Braithwaite is unable to offer correspondences between a musical form and literature. However what he implies is a linguistic aesthetic that would incorporate the folk experiences and privilege the indigenous form of calypso, reggae, ska, which would position itself against the ‘head centered Romantic / Victorian tradition’. This alternative aesthetic would be ‘belly centered’. He offers a somewhat ambiguous definition of the Jazz novel – “The Jazz novel ... deals with specific, clearly defined, folk type community... (and) will try to express the essence of this community through its form ...” but his agenda for Caribbean writers is unambiguous – “a Creole culture. And a Creole way of seeing first” (342 – 43), thereby reiterating his position that the site of protest, resistance and social engagement had to be located with in the physical and figurative space of the Caribbean.

In Timehri (1970) Braithwaite examined a range of issues pertinent to his own critical practices and Caribbean criticism in general. Braithwaite’s position about Creole was still in a formulative state, he saw it as a national – language only in 1984. He advocated the reclamation of the Amerindian and African past of the Caribbean experience and a positive reinscription of Caribbean culture. This essay was significant as Braithwaite articulated the seminal contribution made by the Amerindian culture to contemporary Caribbean art forms. In framing the development of a Caribbean aesthetic, he projected it as a “...journeying into the past and hinter land which is at the same time a movement of possession into present and future. Through this movement of possession we become truly ourselves, truly our own creators, discovering word for object, image for the word...” (350)

Braithwaite articulated the need to transcend the cultural problem of rootlessness and plurality foreground by the writers of 1950’s. The repossession that he advocates would become possible if the writers could rediscover their sense of community as he had done in discovering his historical diviners’ in a Ghanian village.

“...I was coming to an awareness and understanding of community, of cultural wholeness of the place of the individual within the tribe, in society. ... I came to a sense of identification of myself with these people, my living diviners. I came to connect my history with theirs, the bridge of my mind now linking Atlantic and ancestor, homeland and heartland.... And I came home to find that I had not really left. That it was still Africa, Africa in the Caribbean.... The connection between my lived, but un-heeded non-middle class boyhood, and its Great Tradition on the eastern mainland had been made...” (347)

There is a complete rejection of the Eurocentric Leavisite “Great Tradition.” Instead Braithwaite reaffirms his African ancestry that went on to provide him with valuable critical insights for his later work. In this extremely personalized history, Braithwaite offers a commonality with Wynters’ position of coming back to her ‘lived corner of reality’, to her sense of personal time. Both Wynter and Braithwaite firmly relocated themselves in their margins rather than at the metropolitan centre.

The other essay that helped to reformulate Caribbean aesthetic was Derek Walcott’s ‘Muse of History’ (1974), where he discussed the relationship between a writer, his ancestry and history. Walcott rejected the linearity of time and based his revisionist agenda on the cyclical and fluidity of historical moments. He categorized history as a narrative discourse without morality and argued that writers had to emerge out of the trap of linear history, out of their engagement with bitterness and recriminatory involvement with the past. Instead they had to grasp the fictionality of history, so that they could have a more interpenetrative engagement with the past and the present. In Walcott’s formulation, this is the only alternative that Caribbean people and artists have of liberating themselves from the tyrannies of their colonial memories and histories. This liberation would be enabling as it would offer a more productive and honest engagement with their individual subject position. Walcott carried forward his
reformulation of his revisionist history in his 1992 Nobel Prize lecture, "The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory" where he privileged the present and the unconsciousness rather than the recovery of the past. He rejects a notion of Caribbean history that only engages with its sense of loss and oppression. He anticipates a culture of change and newness and affirms the Caribbean as a place of emotional possibility with enormous creative resources that can be enabling, inspirational and liberating for its people and writers.

This introspective critical practice opened new possibilities for Caribbean literary production in the following years. Whether it was Wynters' and Braithwaite's formulation of recuperating the African self and connecting with a sense of community or Walcott's vision of cyclical historicity with possibilities of liberation, these essays provided significant insights to our understanding of the rise of performative or dub poetry that dominated the decade of 1980's. The 1970 and 1979 Savacou anthologies also provided the impetus to this new aesthetic and in opening up the canon to new trends and new voices. These two anthologies foregrounded a shift in concerns from anti-colonial oppositional modes to more introspective and non-colonial oppositional modes to reclaim a Caribbean subjectivity. In the next section, we shall turn to the aesthetic of dub poetry and the use of nation language that has been an enabling and liberating experience for the Caribbean writers.

3.5 TOWARDS NEW VOICES

I have already pointed out that the preoccupation with linguistic idiom was a dominant trend in the attempts to forge an indigenous Caribbean aesthetic. Linguistic experimentation with Creole as a narrative trend was an important constituent of the many 'classics' produced in the boom period, specially in the works of Selvon and Naipaul. In the 1930's and 1940's, Louise Bennet experimented with Jamaican Creole in her poetry. However it needs to be pointed out that these earlier experiments were not well articulated theoretical positions and very often were criticized for merely reproducing an exotic flavour, specially as noted in the criticism by the metropolitan critics, who failed to understand the subversive implications of Creole language. Even within the Caribbean, Creole was regarded as a "Dialect... a 'broken tongue' with which it is impossible to build an edifice of verse possessing the perfect symmetry of finished art (McFarlane, 1956:12). Samuel Selvon was asked by metropolitan critics to modify his linguistic range so that he could be 'understood' by a wider audience and the pioneering poetry of Louise Bennett was seen as 'dialect' rather than literature. Mervyn Morris commented, rather sadly in 1967 that 'The language which maids and yard boys (use) is not yet accepted simply as one of our Jamaican ways of speech" (Morris, 1967:12). In his introduction to Bennett's Jamaican Labrish (1966), Rex Nettleford referred to Creole as an 'unruly substance' and 'an idiom whose limitations as a bastard tongue are all too evident' (Nettleford, 1966:12). All these observations point to the uneasy status that Creole occupied in the Caribbean. It was either not literary enough, and of course that benchmark for literariness was British Standard English, or if it was used, it was relegated to the lowly status of a dialect, broken tongue, bad English, exotic use or as comic intrusion!

The reception of Creole started changing with ground breaking linguistic studies on Creole from 1960's onwards. I have already pointed out that the Caribbean writers and critics were championing the cause of Creole and a vernacular idiom during the 1960's. Closely read, Margaret Blundell's prescription for West Indian writers (1966) she exhorts them to speak to their people in the vernacular and not tailor their literature to suit the preferences and expectations of a literate/urban/international audience. She criticizes the writer in exile for packaging the language to suit a literature written for export. The central issue at stake was to privilege the use of Creole as a literary linguistic idiom that would help define the indigenous Caribbean
aesthetic. The emphasis on indigenous, grass roots and folk resources in the critical practice of the 1970's championed the cause of Creole. The strongest statement in favour of Creole have been made by Braithwaite and Merle Hodge. Braithwaite traces the historical origins of the low status of Creole to the language spoken by African slaves on the sugar plantation. These languages were severely undermined in favour of the European 'standard'. This led to the formation of a submerged language with rich potential for cultural resistance (refer to the calypso \textit{Dan is the man} where you see the subversive use of Creole vs standard English) where it becomes simultaneously powerless and empowering. (1984). Braithwaite articulated his theorization about Creole in his 1979 Harvard lecture - \textit{'History of the voice : The Development of Nation Language in Anglophone Caribbean Poetry'} which was later published in 1984. He elevated Creole to the status of a ‘nation language’ as a more culture specific term, which is less neutral than Creole and affirmed, a positive status for Caribbean non-‘standard’ language. Merle Hodge in her 1990 essay \textit{Challenges of the Struggle for Sovereignty} makes an impassioned plea for the recognition of Creole -

\begin{quote}
\textit{...We speak Creole, we need Creole, we cannot function without Creole. for our deepest thought processes are bound up in the structure of Creole, but we hold Creole in contempt...} (Hodge, 1990 - 13)
\end{quote}

The fact that Hodge makes this emotional and passionate appeal for acceptance of Creole testifies to the problematic status still accorded to Braithwaite's nation-language. Inspite of making inroads in to the literary practice, Creole has not been widely accepted within and outside the Caribbean as a viable alternative to standard English, for usage in academic or journalistic discourse. However linguistic experiments with nation language continue and some journalists like Carolyn Cooper are using Creole journalism (1989) when she reviewed \textit{Lion heart Gal} in Creole. This testifies to the powerful hegemonic domination of the colonial discourse that still exists in the Caribbean.

Yet one significant contribution of nation language and indigenization has been the emergence of performance or dub poetry. I have already mentioned that performance poets like Bongo Jerry, Mutabaruka, Oku Onuora, Michael Smith and Linton Kwesi Johnson in Britain were among the new poetic voices that emerged in the 1970's. Dub poetry relies heavily on the performative and musical element where occasion and delivery are as important as what it written down. Hence it has been categorized as an oral literary form. Louise Bennett's \textit{Jamaica Labrish} (1944) and her later poetry and Braithwaite's 1973 \textit{The Arrivants : A New World Trilogy} are considered important forerunners of performance poetry. Braithwaite's experiments in \textit{The Arrivants} in making use of black musical rhythms and forms, like work songs, spirituals, mento, ska, reggae, steel pan, calypso, jazz the blues etc and Bennett's use of Jamaican Creole heavily influenced the later performance poets. It is difficult to grasp the potency and vibrancy of dub poetry unless you witness this poetry being performed. I will quote a few lines from Linton Kwesi Johnson's \textit{Five Nights of Bleeding}.

\begin{quote}
\textit{...night number one was in BRIX / TON :}
\textit{was a-beatin out a riddim/wid a fyah,}
\textit{commun doun his reggae - reggae wyah;}
\textit{it was a soumm shakin doun you spiral col/unn,}
\textit{a bad music tearin up you flesh...}''
\end{quote}

Notice the powerful mesmerizing rhythms which have a jabbing, stabbing physicality which delivers the aggressive tone which would be quite impossible to achieve in the use of standard English.

I shall also quote some praise in nation language from Harry Narain's \textit{A letter to the Prime Minister}. 

40
Dear Comrade Prime Minister,

This letter I writ (t) ing you is not really to ask fo’ anything. Is just to tell you what’s going on, an I left it to the kindness of you heart to mek we small man something lil mo’better than dey-bad. I don’t want it sound like a complaint either, but I got few things on me mind because I see the situation going bad to wo’ss in the rice industry.

You always say when we see things go bad complain. Mek report. Down here who I gon complain to, the police? They gon sey they not concern with the rice industry; go talk to Mr. Burnett, the big boss man at the local rice board. Mr. Burnett office lock up whole day, you don’t know whether he in or he out. And with the crowd that brace that office you might give Mr. Burnett all right to protect heself. Any time he pull the bolt it might be like if hydro dam you tell we’ bout break. Complain to the radio? Cde. P.M., how you go about that? My radio does only talk, it don’t listen. The Chronicle? The only person I know connected with the newspaper down here is the lil boy who does bring it round. And the way he behaving he already got one foot in Berbice, if you know what I mean...

You could compare this to Braithwaite’s use of nation language in the poetry you read.

Johnson’s ground breaking collection Dread Beat and Blood (published 1975) in London and Oku Onuora’s Echo (published in 1977) in Jamaica paved the way for a new generation of dub poets. These two anthologies were characterized by the use of nation language, a strong performance aesthetic, formal and thematic influence of reggae-music, use of biblical allusion and highly politicized contents. Other poets who have contributed to the growing popularity of dub poetry include Jean Binta Breeze, Benjamin Zephaniah, James Berry, Jamaica Kincaid etc. David Dabydenes’ ground breaking collection Slave Song also uses Creole to record the often marginalized Indo-Caribbean experience and seeks to redress the Afro-centric biases of Caribbean literature. Poets like Grace Nicholas, Lorna, Goodison testify to the enabling and empowering place of oral literary model and indigenization of language within the Caribbean discourse.

It is evident from the brief and selective mapping that the emergence of Caribbean aesthetic has been a project fraught with problematics of identity, history, cultural decolonisation and attempts at indigenization. In this Unit we hope that the key debates will enable you to engage with the writings of Naipaul, Braithwaite and Walcott within their historical, social and material contexts.

3.6 LET US SUM UP

I began this unit by giving you the historical background of the diasporic nature of Caribbean identity where I discussed the impact of colonization, emancipation and the indentured system. In the next section, I briefly outlined the emergence of cultural decolonisation as it took shape during the 1930’s and the debates relating to the colonial educational systems and literary models. Gomes and Mc Farlanes’ position show us the two extreme positions – Gomes’ call for complete decolonisation, while McFarlane subscribes completely to the ideological assumptions of the colonizer.

In the next section, I referred to the ‘booming’ of West Indian prose fiction that led to the construction of a ‘canon’ of ‘classic’ West Indian novels. However, this consolidation was the product of the large scale migration of West Indian writers. The next important point in the development of Caribbean literature was a recentering of literary and critical practice within the region. I have used the four journal essays to point out the major preoccupations and formulations of this period.
The last section points to the new confidence with which contemporary poets and writers are articulating their local existential realities generated by the use of oral literary forms. This trajectory towards a Caribbean aesthetic does in no way imply one homogenous notion of 'Caribbeanness'. The Caribbean identity is still being constructed out of overlapping domains of 'oneness' and 'differences', relating to different language origins and diverse hobbies.

3.7 QUESTIONS

1. What are the three major historical moments that have helped create a hybrid Caribbean culture?

2. Colonial educational system was inadequate for creation of national consciousness. Comment with regard to the Caribbean situation.

3. Language is a marker of identity. Comment on the use of nation-language as constitutive of the process of indigenous Caribbean identity.

3.8 SUGGESTED READINGS

Asein, S.O. (1972) The Protest Tradition in West Indian Poetry from George Campbell to Martin Carter in Routledge Reader (p. 117)


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James, C. L. R. (1930) Discovering Literature in Trinidad, Routledge Reader (164)


Naipaul, V. S. (1964) *An Area of Darkness*, London, Andre Deutsch (209)

Naipaul, V. S. (1959) *A House for Mr. Biswas*, London, Andre Deutsch (397)


Wynter, Sylvia. ‘We Must Learn to Sit Down Together and Discuss a Little Culture—’ Reflections on West Indian writing and criticism – Routledge Reader, 307, 308