UNIT 1 INTRODUCTION TO CARIBBEAN POETRY

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1.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit will provide an introduction to the historical processes which have given the Caribbean islands their cultural and literary identity. The discussion will be with reference to the various ways in which the historical fact of colonisation imbricates peoples' minds. The direct consequence of this was slavery accompanied with attempts to eradicate through all means the traces of their own culture from the slave population’s consciousness. I deal primarily with what I consider the most effective means employed to do so, the imposition of the colonisers’ language and the subversion of this means of control by the slaves’ use of creole. The pan-Caribbean dimensions of the politics of language is apparent from the writings of Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, Edward Kamau Brathwaite and Edouard Glissant. The unit concludes with a survey of twentieth century Caribbean poets’ perception of history and the ideology informing their representations.

1.1 THE REGION

The term ‘Caribbean’ indicates the geographical region including all the territories associated with European powers like Britain, France, Spain, Portugal and others. The territories that were part of the British empire came together as the West Indian Federation in 1962. After the break-up of the federation the islands comprising it became independent in the 1960s. Even now there is a common cricketing team of the West Indians. Like sports, literature also continues to be considered regionally rather than nationally. Thus accounts like Stewart Brown’s which discuss West Indian poetry are more common than those of Barbadian, St. Lucian or Trinidadian poetry. So the term ‘West Indian’ is based on the linguistic determinant of the use of English while ‘Caribbean’ emphasises geographical and historical determinants (Ashcroft et al 18).

1.1.1 Colonisation

At the time of Columbus’s ‘discovery’ of Hispaniola in 1492 the Caribbean islands were inhabited by the Caribs who were in the process of subduing the culturally less
advanced tribes of the Tainos, the Arawaks and the Ciboneyes. It is from this date till about the middle of the sixteenth century that native depopulation took place in this region. A small number of African slaves came on Columbus’s second voyage in 1494 and in 1498 six hundred Indians were shipped back to Spain. By the sixteenth century the demand for African slaves had increased in the wake of the decimation of the Amerindian tribes. In this period African slaves were being imported in large numbers first to work in mines and then as workers in sugar plantations. Following the capture of some of the islands by the British a sizeable population of West African slaves had been brought over by them as manual labour for the cultivation of sugarcane. If you have read Jane Austen’s Mansfield Park you will remember that Fanny’s uncle Sir Thomas Bertram leaves England to look after his Antiguan estates or that Mr. Rochester in Charlotte Bronte’s Jane Eyre is married to Bertha Mason, the daughter of a Jamaican plantation owner. The above-given examples point to the fact that British authors were aware of the economic imperatives involved in its overseas dominions and their impact on the social structure at home.

The major European powers which sought control of the Caribbean were Britain, France and Spain. The development of the territories controlled by them followed almost the same pattern leading them to become “plantation colonies.” However, the slave population differed significantly in these regions. In the Hispanic Caribbean islands the slaves comprised about fifty per cent of the total population whereas in the British and French Caribbean they formed eighty five to ninety per cent of the inhabitants. It should be obvious to you that the main motives for colonisation were economic. Here is what Aimé Césaire from Martinique, a former French Caribbean colony, has to say in response to the question, “What, fundamentally, is colonization?”:

neither evangelization, nor a philanthropic enterprise, nor a desire to push back the frontiers of ignorance, disease, and tyranny, nor a project undertaken for the greater glory of God, nor an attempt to extend the rule of law. . . . the decisive actors here are the adventurer and the pirate, the wholesale grocer and the ship owner, the gold digger and the merchant, appetite and force, and behind them, the baleful projected shadow of a form of civilization which, at a certain point in its history, finds itself obliged, for internal reasons, to extend to a world scale, the competition of its antagonistic economies. (10-11)

I find this passage remarkable for the way in which Césaire here lists the religious, philanthropic, psychological, ethnographic, sociological and political justifications offered by the colonisers and demolishes any attempt on their part to show the innate superiority of European systems of social organization. Materialism in its legal and illegal forms is shown to be the primary motive behind the colonial enterprise. The ideological thrust of Césaire’s work Discourse on Colonialism (1995) is a systematic defence of “Negro civilization,” as the passage just quoted aptly demonstrates in its overturning of European civilizational superiority.

1.1.2 Resistance

The exploitation of the slaves by their colonial masters did not go unchecked. Resistance took many forms, primary among them being the slave revolts which occurred sporadically all over the Caribbean. In the sixteenth century there were revolts in various parts of the Hispanic Caribbean: Cuba, Puerto Rico, Honduras and New Spain. In the seventeenth century there was a series of slave revolts historians have labelled the “Akan revolts” in the British Caribbean island of Antigua. In 1655 when the British captured Jamaica from the Spanish some African slaves escaped to the hills. They joined others who were hunters and herdsmen and who were
transported through the Middle Passage from Africa to the New World. New arrivals from Africa, derisively known as Freshwater Negroes, were also looked down upon. There was also hostility between the Creole slaves and the Africans, the former accusing the latter of inciting them to rebellion. Hence the revolts which occurred during the sixteenth and seventeenth century were made less effective due to lack of cohesiveness. Historically the most important insurrection took place in the French Caribbean island of Haiti at San Domingo in 1791. Under the leadership of Toussaint L'Ouverture (Pierre Domingo), a black man who had been a slave till the age of forty five, the San Domingo revolution culminated in the establishment of Haiti as the first black republic of the New World.

You may wonder why it is important for us to know about the history of resistance in the Caribbean. This is because the leaders of these struggles, men like Toussaint, became transformed into heroes in the popular imagination. Songs were sung about these victories, poems were written about them. Speaking about how he came to develop the concept of Negritude, Césaire, in an interview with the Haitian poet and militant René Depestre said: “Negritude [is] action. Haiti is the country where Negro people stood up for the first time, affirming their determination to shape a new world, a free world” (75). Explaining the concept of Antillean Negritude Césaire says “it was really a resistance to the politics of assimilation,” and came into existence because “Antilleans were ashamed of being Negroes.” Haiti represents for him “the heroic Antilles, the African Antilles ... Haiti is the most African of Antilles. It is at the same time a country with a marvellous history: the first Negro epic of the New World was written by Haitians, people like Toussaint l’Ouverture, Henri Christophe, Jean Jacques Dessalines ...” (72-74).

The case of Haiti illustrates the importance of successful resistance. Its effect on the creative imagination is evident in Césaire’s Notebook of a Return to My Native Land (1939) where the first occurrence of the word Negritude coincides with an allusion to the Haitian fight for independence.

1.1.3 Emancipation

At the beginning of the nineteenth century the slave imports continued unabated. Between 1801 and 1807 sixty three thousand slaves were brought to the island of Jamaica. Oppression was practiced with a different emphasis, it was not so much physical as institutional violence which was the norm particularly after Britain was forced to abolish slavery in its territories due to growing pressure at home. Even though slavery ended by 1833 in the British colonies, all major decisions were made through the colonial office. Thirty thousand pounds per annum were granted for the education of former slaves. Religious and secular education was imparted in an effort to convert them into docile wage earners. The nineteenth century saw an intensified growth of both the formal church and authentic African cults. An important rising of this century was the 1865 Morant Bay Rebellion in Jamaica. Largely a demand for control of their rightful share of the land which was under the absentee owners of large estates, the march to the Morant Bay court resulted in the execution of over four hundred people. Among those executed were Paul Bogle, a Baptist minister. and a coloured member of parliament, George William Gordon.

Violence against the peasantry took severe economic forms as well. Indentured labourers from China, India and some European countries were brought over to keep the wages low and the peasantry in a state of perpetual poverty. The opening decades of the twentieth century were years of economic crisis. Hurricanes and droughts...
caused losses to the sugar industry which was already losing out to foreign competition in the world market. In spite of high levels of unemployment planters in Guyana, Jamaica and Trinidad chose to bring over East Indian indentured labourers rather than pay high wages to local people. Due to unemployment there was widespread migration from rural areas into cities, the departure from the land being associated with a sense of spiritual loss.

1.2 LANGUAGE

1.2.1 Creole, creole, the creole continuum

Colonial control and resistance to it took the form of revolutions and battles. Language too is an effective medium for exerting control and battles can be fought on the linguistic terrain. Discussing the politics of language in African literature the Kenyan novelist, playwright and activist Ngugi wa Thiong'O states: “The domination of a people’s language by the language of the colonising nations was crucial to the domination of the mental universe of the colonised” (16). Applying this to the Caribbean situation one sees the various ways in which the slaves were discouraged from using their native languages. They were separated from other slaves of the same linguistic background because their masters feared that communication between them might lead to plans of escape or rebellion. The gradual erasure of the native language from their minds was accompanied with the use of creole, an adaptation of the coloniser’s language. Please do not confuse between Creole and creole. Both words derive from the Spanish word “criollo” which means native born in the New World. However, the former (spelt with a capital C) was first used with pride by European colonists to refer to themselves as born and bred in the New World and was later used to distinguish slaves born in the Caribbean as distinct from those brought over from Africa. The latter, creole, (spelt with a small c) refers to any one of a family of languages developed in the Caribbean by African slaves in contact with one or more of the European languages (English, French, Spanish, Portuguese or Dutch). It became the first language for succeeding generations.

In any given region in the Caribbean a multitude of dialects interweave to form a generally comprehensible linguistic continuum, thus making the discourse “polyglossic or polydialectical” (Ashcroft et al. 39). The theory of the creole continuum or more accurately the “post-creole speech continuum” arises out of this polyglossic situation. I shall explain what this means in simple terms. In a single speech community (say English speaking) people might use variants ranging from creolized forms at one end to language forms closer to standard (English) language at the other end. Most individuals command competence of a small range of varieties along the linguistic continuum, “the breadth of the span depending on the breadth of [their] social contacts” (Decamp qtd. in Donnell and Welsh 13). To put it simply, the more educated a person the more likely is he to speak the standard form of the language. Or a person might speak creole as the language of daily common contact and use the standard form at his place of work. This theory then affirms the notion of language as practice.

1.2.2 creolité and antillanité

The status of creole has been one of the most widely debated theoretical issues in the Caribbean. It is from the francophone Caribbean island of Martinique that most theoretical discussion has been produced. Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon and Edouard Glissant have given considerable attention to the disputed terrain of language in the Caribbean. Like the anglophone Caribbean islands, the francophone Caribbean faced linguistic imperialism. This was experienced in an intensified form in Martinique which continues to be an overseas department of France following a legislative act of 1948. When Césaire was born in 1913, Martinique, his “native land” was still a
French colony which bore the traces of three hundred years of slavery. He forwards the idea of breaking free from French literary traditions and of creating “a new language, one capable of communicating the African heritage” (Discourse 66-67). The creative expression of this is his Notebook of a Return to My Native Land (1939). Although Césaire spoke of inscribing French with the African heritage he had a very conservative position on créolité or creolity, he said that it was already included in Negritude. His own knowledge of creole was very poor and he remarked on the low level of creolity which made it incapable of expressing abstract ideas.

Recently a group of Caribbean writers have adopted créolité as a key word and see themselves as direct descendants of Césaire. So although Césaire did not use creole himself, his work on language has inspired others who, even while acknowledging his influence, move away from some of the tenets of Negritude and embrace a more global and less essentially racial theory of créolité. Glissant for instance speaks of antillanité as “more than a theory, a vision,” the word can be translated as Caribbeanness. Referring to the anglophone Antilles or English speaking Caribbean, Glissant comments that they distrust the theory of Caribbeanness but try to make it work. In Caribbean Discourse (1989) Glissant discusses the relationship between language and identity in an essay titled “Natural Poetics, Forced Poetics.” Here creole is seen as an expression of forced poetics “created from the awareness of the opposition between a language that one uses and a form of expression that one needs” (121). This means that creole emerged from the clash of the language(s) used by the slaves which they were forbidden to speak in their new surroundings and the language of the colonial masters which they perforce needed to use for communication. Since creole was also the language used by the slaves to communicate with their owners it developed subversive strategies. According to Glissant the subversive potential inherent in its usage was a kind of conspiracy to conceal meaning by its public and open expression (125). He does not foresee the continuance of creole usage in Martinique but his views about the possibility of it being used in the anglophone Caribbean are optimistic. This is because although the people from these countries are as English as the Martinicans are French, “they do not want to be English” (Glissant 261). And it is this desire to be Caribbean not English which is reflected in Brathwaite’s coinage of the term “nation language.”

1.2.3 nation language/creole

Before I go on to outline Brathwaite’s views on language I will point out some of the class-based assumptions associated with the use of creole. Commenting on the negro and the question of language in Black Skin, White Masks (1952) Fanon focussed attention on the class dimension in the use of creole in Martinique. It was, as Fanon said, used only by the middle class to speak to their servants. Children were taught to avoid creolisms. He locates in this a colonialist strategy for alienating coloured people from their own civilization and culture. Recently Merle Hodge has observed that although creole is the main medium of communication in the Caribbean, the attitude of the people towards it is one of contempt, parents reprimand their children for using it. This, she says, has serious implications for the mental health since the deepest thought processes of the people are bound up in the structure of their language (Hodge, Reader 495).

The term “creolized English” refers to spoken English that has retained some obvious structural characteristics of creole while it develops more of the features of internationally accepted spoken English. I have pointed out above how the use of creole is looked down upon so it is no wonder that in the anglophone Caribbean there is a move towards the use of standard English. The authors of The Empire Writes Back distinguish between English and what they call “post-colonial engilishes” to indicate the forms taken by this language in post-colonial societies. Creolized English would, in the terms set out by the authors of this book, be an example of the “linguistic code, engish, which has been transformed and subverted into several distinctive varieties throughout the world” (Ashcroft et al 8). The term “non-standard forms of English” when applied to creoles can be taken in a pejorative sense.
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but I think what Ashcroft et al are emphasizing are variations in the use of the language rather than passing any value judgement on “englishes.” Quite often creoles are erroneously considered to be approximate language systems whereas in fact they are language systems in their own right, with considerably sophisticated syntax and lexicons. Brathwaite’s term “nation language” affirms a positive status for an English “influenced by the underground language, the submerged language that the slaves had brought” (262). It is a non-standard form of English inasmuch as its syntax, rhythm and timbre is concerned. Brathwaite contrasts “nation language” with dialect which is thought of as “bad English.” Like Glissant, Brathwaite outlines the subversive potential in the use of nation language because it is the submerged area of a dialect which is closely related to the “African aspect of experience in the Caribbean” (266). Its characteristic features are its orality and musicality and its effect is lost if it is written down (270-71). Brathwaite's own poetry, much of which is performative, concretises the “total effect” of nation language. The importance of Brathwaite’s coinage of the term and his explication of its meaning lies in the revolutionary potential he attributes to language as an effective means of cultural resistance. It does away with the traditional denigration of creole and asserts its efficacy as a means of literary expression.

1.3 LITERATURE

1.3.1 creole poetry

Claude McKay's collections Songs of Jamaica (1912) and Constab Ballads (1912) provide one of the earliest instances of the use of creole for literary purposes. McKay (1899-1940) was born in Jamaica and was a policeman in the constabulary there for some years before emigrating to the States. There he became a leading figure in the Harlem Renaissance so much so that he is often thought of as an American poet. Brathwaite calls McKay's first two books of poetry published in 1912 “the first all-dialect collections from an anglophone Caribbean poet” (275). Here is an extract from the ending of his poem titled “A Midnight Woman to the Bobby”:

Say wha’? res’ me? - you go to hell!
You t’ink Judge don’t know unno well?
You t’ink him givin’ go sentance me
Wid out a soul fe witness I? (Reader 66)

Here the “midnight woman,” probably a prostitute, is expressing her indignation at the high-handedness of the policeman. What I want to bring to your notice in the lines given above is the immediacy and resilience of ordinary speech patterns. The woman challenges the policeman to arrest her, then says that the judge knows all about him and won’t sentence her without any witnesses to the crime (of soliciting customers) she is charged with. The creole words used here are “unno,” which means “you” collectively and “fe” which is a preposition widely used in narrative dialogue to indicate “for.” On the basis of the language he uses one would expect McKay’s poetry to be called nation language poetry. However, he is denied the status of a nation language poet by Brathwaite primarily because of his “literary colonialism and primordial anglicanism” as evinced in his early works. According to Brathwaite, McKay let himself be “imprisoned in pentameter” (275). This clearly indicates that it is not merely the words used, but also the ideology espoused by an author in his choice of structure, style and content which raises a poem from dialect to nation language. So although McKay’s is creole poetry, in Brathwaite’s view, it does little in terms of the “revolutionary” impact language can be made to possess.

I cite Brathwaite’s views on McKay only to indicate how what is new may not be perceived as entirely radical. This does not in any way undermine his achievement or his influence on later poets. McKay’s insistence on the value of everyday speech and
experience and his interest in folk traditions in these early collections is one of the first instances of a re-version of the paradigms of what constitutes literariness in poetry. This is also evident in the poetry of Una Masson (1905-65) and Louise Bennett (b.1919- ) and has led to problems in the critical reception of their work. Bennett’s poetry in particular is primarily oral in its thematic and structural principles. Here are a few lines from her poem “Jamaica Oman”:

Jamaica oman, cunny, sah!
Is how dem jinnal so?
Look how long dem liberated
An de man dem never know!

Look how long Jamaica oman
-Modder, sister, wife, sweatheart -
Outa road an eena yard deh pon
A dominate her part! (Reader 145)

Notice that the style is similar to McKay’s, with a similar omitting of certain letters in a word (like the w from woman) and use of creolisms. In the first line it is said that the Jamaican woman is cunning, a quality revealed in “innal” or the ability to find quick solutions to a difficulty. The poet makes a feminist statement when she says that these women have been “liberated” for a long time without letting the men have any knowledge of it. In the same poem Bennett goes on to say that long before women’s liberation was heard of, the Jamaican women had chalked out their plans. It is a part of her feminist agenda that she chooses to write in everyday speech and about ordinary experiences. She is also a performer of her own poetry and is a pioneering figure in the oral traditions of Caribbean poetry. The titles of some of her other poems “Bed-time story,” “Proverbs” indicate her close connections to folk traditions. In her poetry there is a conscious rejection of imposed traditions and imitative style. In an interview with Dennis Scott she has talked about her reasons for writing in dialect: “I began to wonder why more of our poets and writers were not taking more of an interest in the kind of language usage and the kind of experiences of living which were all around us, and writing in this medium of dialect instead of writing in the same old English way about Autumn and things like that” (Hinterland 47).

I hope that you have understood why the use of creole for poetic purposes was so important. First, it indicated an acceptance of non-standard forms of the English language even if it continued to be called “dialect” both by the practitioners and their critics. Second, at least for some of the poets who used creole, it marked a break from slavish imitation of English poetry (“Autumn and things like that”). Finally, and this is linked to the second reason, it was the language which could most suitably express the Caribbean or the local reality perceived by the poet.

1.3.2 History and poetry

In discussing poetic uses of creole I have tried to emphasise the resistance to the language and poetic forms of the coloniser. It would be simplistic to say that Caribbean poetry, like Caribbean history, is an expression of almost continuous resistance, whether stylistic or thematic. Edward Baugh in West Indian Poetry 1900-1970: A Study in Cultural Decolonisation traces the earliest poetic expressions of the West Indian situation and affirms: “The development of poetry in the West Indies reflects the colonial experience of the region” (Reader 100). According to Baugh, poets before 1940 produced a “strictly colonial poetry” influenced by the Neo-classical, Romantic and Victorian poetry of the “mother country,” Britain. It is easy to see that such generalisations are inapplicable in many cases when applied to pre-1940 poetry like McKay’s early collections. Baugh’s definition of “colonial poetry” does not merely include poetry which glorifies or endorses colonialism but also that which, although it might be rooted in local reality and express patriotic sentiments, is servilely imitative of the trends in English poetry. An instance of the former is to be
Caribbean Poetry found in Albinia Hutton’s poem “A Plea” (1932) in which Britain is seen as a caring mother and the inhabitants of the colonies as her children:

We have our Christian names, and what they are
Thou knowest, nay, who knowest half so well
As thou dost, thou the Mother? Canada,
South Africa, Australia, India,
New Zealand. Far too numerous to tell,

With them a host of smaller gems as fair
Sweet pearls ingathered from the Summer Seas
And strung together for a necklet rare
To deck thy queenly bosom, shining there
In loveliness, Jamaica is of these. 

(Reader 55)

This has been called the “gendering of colonial affiliation” as evinced by Britain being personified as the queenly mother who is adorned (“smaller gems,” “sweet pearls,” “necklet rare”) with her colonies. Such a clear acknowledgement and endorsement of Britain’s supremacy is also present in the poetry of Tom Redcarn and J.E. McFarlane. In Redcarn’s poem “O, Little Green Island Far Over the Sea” (1929) the feelings of nostalgia and admiration for England mingle with his love for Jamaica, the Caribbean island he had adopted as his home:

For England is England, the strong and the true,
Whose word is her bond in her march through the blue.

But my little Green Island, far over the sea,
At eve-tide, Jamaica, my heart turns to thee. 

(Reader 46)

It was not as if all the poetry written in the first half of the twentieth century was jingoistic in tone or imitative in style. In 1904 Mary Adella Walcott, under the pseudonym of Tropica, wrote about various aspects of plantation culture: the slaves, the big houses run efficiently by coloured servants cum housekeepers called “Nanas” and “Bushas” or overseers on cane and banana plantations. Her poem “The Undertone” has for its epigraph two lines from Wordsworth’s “Tintern Abbey.” The “still sad music of humanity” whose undertone can be caught beneath “the brightness of the Southern day” is the “far, faint cry of wounded slaves in chains.” The guilt-ridden past and attempts to obliterate it by dismissing it as “nonsense” and “old nurses’ tales” is foregrounded in this poem which makes no claims to British superiority in order to justify colonialism.

In his later poetry Claude McKay fixes the blame for the colonial guilt expressed in the writings of Mary Adella Walcott and other white poets. Written in standard English his poems “In Bondage” and “Outcaste” (both 1953) express a longing for the African past lost forever by forced emigration to the New World. The nostalgia for a “native clime” is juxtaposed with “the white man’s menace” which made black people “simple slaves” of “ruthless slaves,” the latter being the white masters who were enslaved to “insatiate lust” for power. These expressions of oppression are balanced by poetic articulations of moments of resistance. Mervyn Morris’s (b.1937) short poem “The House Slave” captures succinctly the aftermath of a slave rebellion through the thoughts of a slave left alone in the house abandoned by his former master: “And these are my rooms now:/ My pallid masters fled,/ freeing the only home I knew” (Hinterland 167). Significantly the slave does not use the word “freedom” in connection with himself, he applies it only to the house. This indicates an internalisation of oppression which does not lift even under changed circumstances. And yet there are poetic expressions which move beyond the past towards an optimistic future. Vera Bell’s 1948 poem “Ancestor on the Auction Block” takes cognizance of the humiliating past of slavery only to signal towards
emancipation: “My freedom is within myself.” The poem also indicates the role played by the ancestors, who were slaves, in the birth of a “country”:

Within your loins I see the seed
Of multitudes
From your labour
Grow roads, aqueducts, cultivation
A new country is born
Yours was the task to clear the ground
Mine be the task to build. (Reader 156)

The last line of Bell’s poem points to a sense of responsibility felt by the poetic persona who feels the need to “build” upon the foundations laid by the ancestor.

One of the main concerns of post-1950 Caribbean poetry is to “build” a literary edifice not based on European models but reflective of Caribbean reality. Here is the narrator of Olive Senior’s (b.1943-) poem “Cockpit Country Dreams” who remembers her mother showing her photo albums of “black ancestors” and telling her that “Herein/ Your ancestry, your imagery, your pride./ Choose this river, this rhythm, this road./ Walk good in the footsteps of these fathers” (Hinterland 218). The title of the poem derives from cockpits, deep depressions or glens found in the mountains of Jamaica. This was the rugged terrain preferred by the Maroons, people who refused to accept their slave status. The child in the poem feels a sense of cultural maroonage or alienation from the reality around her. Her mother’s exhortation does not suffice to keep her mind “slipping/ those well-worn grooves of piety, work, praise” and she feels “drown[ed] in the other’s history” (Hinterland 218, 219). The idea that the Caribbean is a region without history “discovered” by Europe, from which discovery its history is said to begin, was perpetuated by colonial historiographers. Arguments countering this view include the attempts to make available the hitherto undocumented facets of Caribbean history: cultures of the tribes existing before Columbus’s arrival, slave rebellions during the era of colonialism, existence of communities like the Maroons and the continuance of African traditions in the Caribbean. I have discussed this in greater detail in Unit 6.

As has previously been mentioned, the Caribbean became home to people from Asia who came as indentured labour and then stayed on. In trade, commerce, religion, food, dress, music and language, the descendants of these emigrants, particularly the Indians and the Chinese, have influenced Caribbean culture in a major way. In Guyana and Trinidad over half the current population are of East Indian descent. V.S. Naipaul is perhaps the best known Indo-Caribbean writer of our times. The writers of these ethnicities have documented their ancestors’ and their own presence in the Caribbean. Writing in the 1980s. Mahadai Das in her poem “They Came in Ships” attempts to link the arrival of indentured labourers or “Coolies” with the coming of African slaves. At the same time she is fully aware of the very different socio-historical conditions which led to these two “diasporas” to the Caribbean. Cyril and David Dabydeen from Guyana have also voiced the diasporic consciousness of people of Indian origin from a very different perspective. Their bonding with the Caribbean is one with an “imaginary homeland” since they have opted to migrate to Canada and Britain respectively. In his poems David Dabydeen speaks both of Indians in the Caribbean as in “Coolie Mother” and also of those chosen few like the “Coolie Son” who migrate to the first world in search of better prospects. Ironically the coolie mother who wants her son to “Learn talk proper, take exam, go to England university./ Not turn out like he rum-sucker chamar dadee” receives a letter from her coolie son who is a toilet attendant in England (Heinemann Book of Caribbean Poetry 62-63). Notice the use of words like “chamar” and “coolie” and observe how Hindi words have become a part of Caribbean poetic vocabulary.

I have chosen to give examples from Indo-Caribbean poetry in the last part of this section. This does not in any way indicate that only poets of Indian descent have had
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an impact on the Caribbean literary and cultural scenario. The writers of Chinese, Portuguese, Irish and Syrian ancestry have also contributed significantly to the eclectic nature of Caribbean literature and society.

1.4 LET US SUM UP

From a Eurocentric perspective Caribbean history is said to begin with Columbus's arrival in 1492. The colonisation of the region was based on economic imperatives and consisted largely of forced migration of Africans as slaves who were denied even linguistic freedom. Almost continuous resistance, whether on the level of language through the use of creole or on the level of combat through the existence of Maroons, characterises the three hundred years of oppression. A variety of stances are evident in Caribbean poetry: the colonialist impulse which leads to jingoistic and imitative poetry like the work of Albinia Hutton; the anti-colonial strategies as evinced in the use of creole language by Claude McKay and Louise Bennett and finally poetry expressing post-colonial concerns of multi-culturalism, hybridity, diaspora. These concerns have been voiced by writers of various ethnicities including those belonging to East Asian Caribbean communities like Cyril and David Dabydeen. The Caribbean culture is a site of amalgamation and assimilation of many different cultures: Amerindian, European, African and Asian. The term creolization when applied in the sense of the development of marked Caribbean characteristics can serve as an apt metaphor for its cultural syncretism.

1.5 GLOSSARY

Amerindian: A member of the Mongoloid race of people whose many 'tribes' were the original inhabitants of the Caribbean and the Americas.

Antilles: Collective name for all the Caribbean islands except The Bahamas. Conceived of as falling into two broad groups - the Greater Antilles (Cuba, Jamaica, Hispaniola, Puerto Rico) and the Lesser Antilles comprising all the other islands to the East and South of these four.

Dialect: Subordinate variety of a language with non-standard vocabulary, pronunciation or idioms.

Diaspora (in this context): A term used for large scale migration of people from the country of their origin to other countries, either voluntarily or due to economic or political compulsions. When we speak of the Indian diaspora we mean Indians settled in England, America, Africa, the Caribbean. Similarly one can discuss the Caribbean diaspora to England, Canada and France.

Middle Passage: The sea journey from Africa to the Caribbean which represents the temporal moment when the slaves were dislocated from Africa.

Negritude: A word coined by Aimé Césaire defining the qualities of the values of Black civilisation in the world. It provided a positive image of race for Black people. It was criticised for its essentialist racial approach.
1.6 QUESTIONS

Q. 1. How does Caribbean poetry reflect the region's experience of colonisation? Support your answer with examples.

Q. 2. Write a note on the poetry of Caribbean writers of Indian descent.

Q. 3. What were origins of the use of creole English in Caribbean poetry? Explain with reference to any one early twentieth century poet.

1.7 SUGGESTED READINGS

Primary Material


Theoretical Material


