UNIT 6 THEORETICAL PARADIGMS FOR CARIBBEAN LITERATURE

6.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit I shall be providing some theoretical paradigms for Caribbean literature. You have already read about the creative uses of issues like history, orality, intertextuality, diaspora in addition to metaphors drawn from these and other fields of popular culture. I will now summarise their theoretical formulations as provided by Walcott, Brathwaite and other Caribbean and post-colonial writers. Do remember that although Caribbean literature can be discussed under various rubrics these are not mutually exclusive categories. Indeed all of them have points of contact and a work analysed from one of these angles will invariably contain insights of other approaches.

6.1 HISTORY

Michel Foucault first forwarded the idea of history as a disconnected range of discursive practices. Each practice is a set of rules and procedures governing writing and thinking in a particular field. These rules exclude and regulate knowledge and taken together they form a culture's "archive." As Edward Said demonstrated in his highly influential work Orientalism, Western discursivity "produced" the Orient or an "idea" of the East based on certain stereotypical representations. An exploration of the history of colonialism and its literary manifestations is one way of examining how power structures discourse. One instance of this is the teleological view of Western historiography which sees Western man's colonising impulse as the historical "origin" of colonial societies, particularly those in the New World.

Caribbean writers have vehemently rejected this idea which not only undermines the cultural diversity of the region by constituting all its inhabitants as colonial subjects but also invests them with the powerlessness accompanying this situation. A rejection of the linearity of history is combined with a negation of its claims to objectivity. Making a connection between history and literature Edouard Glissant comments: "The surface effects of literary realism are the precise equivalent of the historian's claim to pure objectivity" (74). Glissant's theoretical pronouncements on the subject echo, in many ways, Derek Walcott's views in "The Muse of History." Walcott makes a similar comparison, "the method by which we are taught the past, the progress from motive to event, is the same by which we read narrative fiction." Both writers spell out the consequences of such a reading of history in very similar terms:

In the New World servitude to the muse of history has produced a literature of recrimination and despair, a literature of revenge written by the descendants of slaves or a literature of remorse written by the descendants of masters.

(Walcott, "MH" 39)
The effects of submission to history are pointed out by both writers: the "recrimination and despair" of the victim spoken of by Walcott is like the "passive" submission which Glissant mentions. These adjectives suggest a torpor and inaction which in its futility is quite like the sound and fury of those who perceive an affirmation of identity to lie in their dismissal of all colonial influences including language. Searching for an alternative tradition they become, in Walcott dismissive words, "the new magnifiers of Africa." This phrase immediately brings to my mind Brathwaite's work. You are already aware of the importance accorded to African traditions by him. For Walcott history "begins" not "ends" with the arrival of migrants rather than European discoverers in the New World. When Brathwaite discusses the African base of Caribbean folk culture or the African presence in Caribbean literature it does seem that he posits Africa as the teleological origin of this region's culture. This view would ignore the cultures of other ethnicities: Amerindian, European, East Asian, Chinese. When one remembers that it is this diversity which Walcott celebrates as "fragments of an epic memory" in his Nobel lecture, his position on the foundations of Caribbean history seems diametrically opposed to Brathwaite's stand on it. Brathwaite's early writings on history and culture are characterised by a distinctly African orientation. *The Development of Creole Society in America* is about the inter-culturation of West African slaves and in part also deals with European adaptations to this "creole" culture. So in its focus on "two cultures": African and European and their interaction Brathwaite's account can be critiqued on the grounds of ignoring Amerindian influence on creolization.

Brathwaite's work is not caught in the despair-recrimination pattern Walcott outlines. And in later essays he has acknowledged the role of other ethnicities on the culture of the Caribbean. *The Arrivants* trilogy is heavily influenced by the author's historical research. An interaction between the two disciplines has, in Brathwaite's poetry, produced a rejection of the "idea of history as time for its original concept as myth, the partial recall of a race" (Walcott "MH"). So you can see that starting from contradictory positions on history, Brathwaite and Walcott's positions on its uses in literature are not very different.

Another Caribbean writer who has written extensively on this issue is George Lamming who, like Walcott and Glissant, forwards the idea of history as the discourse of the powerful. Discrediting the concept of discovery Lamming writes:

> The early European arrivals may look very heroic for what they did... Yet the history of their arrival has been reconstructed in very strange ways, such that there is no greater collection of lies than what has been written about it. Columbus's journal speaks about meeting a Caribbean aboriginal on arrival and conversing with him. Yet, as far as I know, Columbus spoke not a word of any aboriginal Caribbean language, and the aboriginal spoke neither Italian nor Spanish; it is peculiar that they could understand each other: what Columbus really did was to create what he ordered, because he represented power.

(Lamming, "Concepts" 2)

This has been supported by discursive analyses of Columbus's journals which Peter Hulme has called "by turns a personal memoir, an ethnographic notebook, and a compendium of European fantasies about the Orient: a veritable palimpsest" (367). It contains two distinct discursive networks, a "discourse of Oriental civilization" and a "discourse of savagery." Following Foucault's theories and Said's application of them commentaries like Lamming's and Hulme's have been useful in discovering the
assumptions which govern colonial historiography based on accounts like Columbus's journal. Unreliability is embedded in these narratives or as Walcott puts it, history is fiction subject to a "fitful muse, memory." This effectively puts to rest any claims to objectivity and 'truth value.' These insights can be used to study the textuality of history as well as the historicity of texts. Many Caribbean authors draw on historical events for their poetry, prose, drama or criticism. An examination of the sources used, the aspects foregrounded, their choice of genre, the authorial agenda and effective impact can be made to see in what way the work, whether critical or creative, contributes to the revisionist historiographical impulse of new historicism.

6.2 INTERTEXTUALITY

A revisionist agenda is based on the assumption that no text is self-referential. The inter-relationships between various systems of signs and the transposition of one or several of these systems into another is intertextuality at its broadest level. In practice it has always been a part of the production of textuality. Consciously or unconsciously the writer absorbs something from the world and other literary and non-literary texts. Thus many works use historical, political or cultural intertexts. The term was coined by Julia Kristeva in her essay "Word, Dialogue and Novel" in which she said, "any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another" (66). The concept has been further elaborated upon by Roland Barthes, Gerard Gennette and Michael Riffaterre.

As has already been indicated in the analysis of Derek Walcott's poetry, many post-colonial writers are using canonical European works as intertexts to subvert colonial discourse and cultural stereotyping. Helen Tiffin calls this "canonical counter-discourse." This project, according to her, involves an investigation of European textual capture and containment of colonial and post-colonial space and an intervention in that originary and continuing containment (97). The examples she gives are those of Jean Rhys writing back to Charlotte Bronte's Jane Eyre in Wide Sargasso Sea and Samuel Selvon to Defoe's Robinson Crusoe in Moses Ascending. Besides these other Caribbean authors have also used the figure of Crusoe and characters from Shakespeare's plays. In what follows I will explicate this by referring to Miranda from the much reworked play The Tempest and to Othello, the "noble Moor" who is the protagonist in Shakespeare's play of the same name.

As the original inhabitant of the island, which Prospero claims as his, Caliban is the colonised native. Prospero's daughter Miranda is silently complicit in the project of colonisation. The focus of reworkings of this play has been on the self-Other duality of Prospero-Caliban and on the question of the former's language being imparted to and acquired by the latter. In Shakespeare's play Miranda is presented as an object of desire: illegitimate in the case of Caliban and legitimate when Ferdinand woos her. In David Dabydeen's poem "Miranda" a "black bony peasant" fantasies about her but in curiously asexual terms. This is Dabydeen's transformation of the monstrous Caliban whose attempt to rape Miranda invites Prospero's wrath. Here the peasant's dream of Miranda as a maternal figure is the colonial "fantasy" of attachment to and sustenance from the imperial mother, England. She is,

Sea blue and bountiful  
Beyond supplication or conquest  
A frail slave vessel wracked upon a mere pebble of her promise  
And the sun resumed its cruelty  
And the sun shook with imperial glee  
At the fantasy.

(Heinemann 64)

Dabydeen has, in this poem, made a political statement about the exploitation of colonies through the figure of Miranda.

Michael Gilkes in Prospero's Island juxtaposes the activities of Ferdinand and Miranda in poems which are titled on their names. The oppositional terms in which
they are described is the reason/imagination, culture/nature, male/female binarism. Ferdinand arrives on the island with his scientific vision and instruments and becomes the "cosmic cartographer" of this New World. Miranda's life on the island with its daily routine of "sand to be swept, firewood to fetch" subverts an Edenic view of the island. Her routine is not conducive to the exercise of the imagination:

But mind, her mind has mountains
where deep forests grow,
liana-hung:
another Eden where, as yet,
no bird has sung.

(Arnold Anthology 556)

In this poem too Miranda is a maternal presence. It is she who comforts Caliban "when he screams" out of fear of the storms at sea. Gilkes establishes Miranda in quintessentially idealised feminine terms. Her appearance has the perfection of girls on tourist brochures; her domestic instincts are manifested in daily chores and taking care of Caliban. Gilkes has at once recuperated Miranda from her role as complicit coloniser in Shakespeare's play and positioned her as entrapped in gender based stereotypical representations.

Sylvia Wynter's afterword, intended as a conclusion to a collection on essays on Caribbean women and literature, interprets this figure from the point of view of metropolitan versus third world feminist discourse. Published in 1990 this essay is titled "Beyond Miranda's Meanings: Un/silencing the 'Demonic Ground' of Caliban's 'Woman.'" The "theory speak" of this essay does not make easy reading. Broadly Wynter suggests that the play shows "a mutational shift from the primacy of the anatomical model of sexual difference... to that of the physiognomic model of racial/cultural difference" (Reader 477). What this means is that there is a substitution of the woman as Other to that of the native as Other. Caliban's physiognometrically complementary mate whom Wynter calls "Caliban's Woman" is conspicuous by her absence. This silencing of the "native" woman enables "the partial liberation of Miranda's hitherto stifled speech" (478) and is symptomatic of the power structures inherent in feminist discourse in which the Euro-American intelligentsia dominates and suppresses the discourse of Caribbean and other third world feminists. It is this "demonic ground" which Wynter strives to recover by pointing out Miranda's unsilencing at the expense of Caliban's Woman.

Another instance of canonical counter-discourse evolving a critical paradigm is to be found in Caribbean born British author Caryl Phillips's formulation based on what he perceives to be Othello's function in the Shakespearean play. His work The European Tribe has a chapter on Othello, "A Black European Success," which deals with the options for a black person from the colonies who has been made or shaped in the developed world. Othello is a moor in the service of the Venetian state and is made commander of the forces against Cyprus. Phillips comments that the figure of the black person of African origin who is used as a weapon against non-Europeans begins with the figure of Othello (191). Relating this to the hegemonic desire of co-opting black people in a struggle against other black people, he sees this as symptomatic of insecurity at the heart of the hegemonic power (192). Like Caliban, Prospero, Crusoe and Bertha Mason the figures of Miranda and Othello have been used anew to raise gender and racial construction with reference to power relations. Intertextuality in its specific form of canonical counter-discourse is pan-generic. Besides fiction, poetry and drama the scholarly critical essay is another important site from which post-colonial literatures actively engage with Western literary forms of representation. The subversive implications of such an engagement can be spelt out in an analysis of the intertext vis-a-vis the literary or critical text.

6.3 ORALITY

The spoken word can be just as effective a means of subversion as the written word. Walter J. Ong has called the electronic age of telephones, radio, television (we might
add computers to this list) as the age of "secondary orality." It depends on writing and print for its existence and in it orality and literacy exist synchronically (2-3). The Caribbean cultural scenario with an interweaving of high and popular culture exhibits what Viv Edwards and Thomas Seinkewicz call the "oral-literate continuum." This continuum recognizes the skills of the oral performer and at the same time does not view literate people as hopelessly cut off from oral skills. Sometimes this is perceived as a divide rather than a continuum then the oral/literary polarity is the creole/English debate outlined in Unit 1. Ong expands the term "verbomotor" first used by Jousse to include all cultures that retain enough oral residue to remain significantly word-attentive in a person-interactive context (67). The calypso with its disputed status as oral poetry is perhaps the most important popular cultural form to emerge out of the Caribbean which illustrates this word-attentiveness. The origins and subversive satirical effects of calypsos have been spelt out in the discussion on Walcott's poem "The Spoiler's Return." I will here focus on how expressions of popular culture like the calypso thematise the oral/literary polarity. The famous calypso "Dan is the Man in the Van" sung by Mighty Sparrow - he was crowned calypso king four times and was involved in a song feud lasting several months with Lord Melody - outlines this theme. In it a sustained attack is mounted on Cutteridge's West Indian Readers, a six-volume textbook widely used in the Caribbean for three decades:

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 wall
Humpty Dumpty did fall
Goosey Goosey Gander
Where shall I wander
Ding dong dell . . . Pussy in the well
RIKKI . . . TIKKI TAVI
Rikki Tikki Tavi

(Reader 161)

The English nursery rhymes mentioned in the above passage, meant to be memorised and narrated by children, were transcribed in Cutteridge's Reader for the education of Caribbean children. The oral is inscribed or as the calypsonian says "written" not with the purpose of imparting knowledge or education but "to keep us in ignorance." Children learning these in schools would, according to Sparrow, grow up to be "damn fool[s]." Sparrow prioritises street smartness and verbal dexterity above a conventional colonial education which has no connection with the Caribbean ethos. The hierarchy of the oral/scrinal he establishes is discussed by Brathwaite under the concept and use of the word as revealing itself in "our love of courtroom scenes (both factual and fictional), the rhetoric of yard quarrels, 'word throwings,' tea-meetings and preacher/political orations. The whole tradition of the calypso is based on it" ("African Presence" 240).

The social, communal occasions detailed by Brathwaite attest to the copia and agonistic tonality of oral cultures. The calypso relies on repetitive rhythms and competitions in the form of verbal battles are often a source of enjoyment for the public. However with the increasing trans-cultural popularity of Carnival celebrations the calypso form has been appropriated so that it now owes its popularity more to chirographic (written) and secondary oral sources. The publication of "Dan is the Man" in the Routledge Reader in Caribbean Literature is a case in point. Record labels vie with each other to offer contracts to calypsonians some of whom have become internationally known.
Caribbean Poetry

Myths, legends, folktale, proverbs, riddles which form an inextricable element of the folk culture carry the traces of a primary oral culture with no knowledge of the written word. Their being used in literary and secondary oral forms, much like the calypso, suggests Caribbean culture's embeddedness in orality. Fiction has drawn heavily on folkloric figures by investing characters with some of their features. Oral forms of expression, be it the calypso or an Anancy folktale, is often used as an intertext by Caribbean writers. Probably an interpretative paradigm based on an oral aesthetic can discuss the transformation of orality in the contemporary context.

6.4 DIASPORA

The diasporic approach to Caribbean literature expressed in critical essays from the turn of the century has drawn on metaphors for interpretation. Whereas the work of post-colonial migrant intellectuals like Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak and Salman Rushdie can prove useful in analysing diasporic literary production in general, one must not forget that Caribbean intellectuals at home and abroad have provided their own interpretative models. Bhabha speaks of the "metaphoricity of the peoples of imagined communities - migrant or metropolitan" in "Dissemination: Time, Narrative and the Margins of the Modern Nation." "Their metaphorical movement," according to him, "requires a kind of 'doubleness' in writing; a temporality of representation that moves between cultural formations and social processes without a centred causal logic" (141). This doubleness or their positioning at the interstices of culture is a major theme in literature of the diaspora. In my account of this literature I shall try to show how this metaphoricity has been itself theorised through metaphor by Caribbean writers.

The situation in the Caribbean is more complicated than those of other post-colonial societies with a significant migrant population in metropolitan centres of power. As Stuart Hall has explained, the New World presence is itself the beginning of diaspora, diversity, hybridity and difference, making the Afro-Caribbean people already a part of the diaspora (401). Hall's statement can be extended to include people of all ethnicities in the Caribbean except the Amerindians who are natives of the region. Hall defines the diaspora experience as the "recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity.

... a conception of 'identity' which lives with and through, not despite difference, by hybridity" (402). Since this is by now a commonplace of literary theory one might miss its metaphoricity if one forgets that literally the word diaspora refers to those scattered tribes whose identity can be secured in relation to some sacred homeland. You can see for yourself the similarity between Bhabha's and Hall's formulations: both point out the inbetween-ness of the diasporic experience and see it as an enabling position.

As early as 1957 Edward Brathwaite had said, "the desire (even the need) to migrate is at the heart of West Indian sensibility - whether that migration is in fact or by metaphor" ("Sir Galahad" 7). Brathwaite traces the theme of emigration and/or escape in Caribbean writing as far back as C.L.R. James's Minty Aley (1936) and Alfred Mendes's Black Fuuns (1935). He suggests that it is both the perceived cultural and actual material poverty of the islands that makes authors explore this theme. A way out of this would be to establish connections with the folk culture which can enrich the writer's imagination and establish his (Brathwaite uses the masculine pronoun throughout the essay and discusses only male authors) rootedness in the very culture he desires to escape from. Galahad of Samuel Selvon's novel The Lonely Londoners is the figure Brathwaite uses to metaphorically delineate this situation. He concludes that only when the writer gains a sense of community "will Sir Galahad be able to turn and attempt to return to his own native society" ("Sir Galahad" 207). Galahad, the eternal quester of Thomas Malory's The Death of King Arthur, transformed to the migrant individual by Selvon becomes, in Brathwaite's essay, the author internally (metaphorically) or externally (spatially) exiled from the islands.
George Lamming's *The Pleasures of Exile* published in 1960 is a non-fictional work about "the migration of the West Indian writer, as colonial and exile, from his native kingdom, once inhabited by Caliban, to the tempestuous island of Prospero's and his language" (Lamming, *Arnold Anthology* 482). In the same work he has described subjective experiences of migration including his own. He has also spoken of the material impact of this move in terms of publication opportunities for writers and their "hunger for recognition." These imperatives constitute the "pleasure and paradox" of exile, a condition in which the creative imagination continues to be nourished by the place of origin even while acknowledging the possible gains of being situationally, albeit not socially or culturally, metropolitan. More recently Lamming has again spoken of the Caribbean presence in North America and Europe in terms of the metaphorical usage of "frontier," literally meaning the borders of civilization. Whereas colonial history posited the idea of the Caribbean as an imperial frontier, Lamming forwards the idea of the Caribbean presence in cities like Amsterdam, Paris, London, Birmingham, New York and other parts of North America as making these centres into an "external frontier." Reversing the centre-periphery hierarchy Lamming has, in a sense, made the erstwhile centre the outpost or the frontier of a culture originating in the Caribbean ("Concepts" 9). An almost similar overturning of the materially exploitative aspects of colonialism is outlined in Louise Bennett's poem "Colonisation in Reverse":

What a joyful news, Miss Mattie;
Ah feel like me heart gwine burs-
Jamaica people colonizin
Englan in reverse.

By de hundred, by den tousan,
From country and from town,
By de ship-load, by de plane-load,
Jamaica is Englan boun.

(Hinterland, 62)

The above lines express, in nation language, the immigrants arrival to England as a historical revenge. In the same poem she goes on to describe how a woman on dole passes her days, not searching for a job as she is supposed to, but reading "love-story book[s]." A significant Caribbean presence in England has led to British-born or British-based writers of Caribbean descent to be labelled as "Black British," a term which has been rejected by some who are included in it. Some of these are the poets Linton Kwesi Johnson, David Dabydeen, Jean 'Binta' Breeze and Grace Nichols. Within the last few years many anthologies of their work, like the one from which the above lines are taken, have appeared.

The Caribbean authors you have read about in this course: Naipaul, Walcott and Brathwaite are also a part of the Caribbean diaspora. Most of their literary activity has been carried out away from the Caribbean and their works are now published by foreign rather than local publishers. It would be a valuable research exercise to examine whether their later works differ significantly from their early work in keeping with their almost confirmed diasporic status.

### 6.5 LET US SUM UP

I have attempted to point out a few of the myriad possible approaches to Caribbean literature. This is by no means an exhaustive account and can be supplemented by, for instance, forms of popular culture like music and dance which have been appropriated to analyse literature. Brathwaite's use of the Jazz aesthetic to interpret fiction and Wilson Harris's account of the limbo imagination originating in a popular dance form are only two of many other paradigms. Due to constraints of space and because I have dealt with the connection between music and poetry in previous units I have not outlined these in this unit. However, you can read about them in the books mentioned in the reading list. It would be a fruitful endeavour for you to choose a
Caribbean Poetry

poem from the ones you have studied and try to apply more than one of the paradigms suggested here and any other you can think of to appreciate the eclecticism of Caribbean poetry.

6.6 QUESTIONS

Q.1 Suggest any two possible ways of looking at the use of Shakespeare's play *The Tempest* in Caribbean literature

Q.2 Spell out the implications of the use of metaphors as frames of interpretation.

Q.3 In what way has modern critical theory facilitated our understanding of literature from erstwhile colonised regions like the Caribbean?

6.7 SUGGESTED READINGS

Primary Material


Secondary and Theoretical Material


