The West Indian Fiction

edited by

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The West Indian Fiction: An Introduction

R.K. DHAWAN

West Indian writers have produced some of the most enduring literary pieces by any standards in the world. It was duly recognized in the recent years when Derek Walcott was awarded the Nobel Prize for his contribution to literature. Perhaps the most significant feature of the West Indian writing is that it is deeply rooted in its culture. It is especially true of the fiction produced there. A noteworthy function of the West Indian novel is that it aims primarily at investigating and projecting the inner consciousness of the West Indian community. This view was expressed by George Lamming in *The Pleasures of Exile* (1960). But only two years later, after the publication of this remark, the still-born West Indian Federation was finally declared dead. Since then, Guyana, Jamaica, Trinidad and Barbados, the larger territories of the English-speaking Caribbean have become independent nations.

In spite of the island nationalisms that have arisen, we continue to recognize a West Indian community. It is persistent of some common features in the arts in general and in the literatures of the new separate nations in particular that contribute most to the sense of a unity. Readers and scholars continue to share certain values and concerns that have assumed cultural significance. In the world of sports, these islands represent a unified and consolidated West Indies cricket team.

II

Roger Mais is a Jamaican, born in 1905. He was educated at Calabar High School. He worked as civil servant, journalist and photographer. He was associated with the political activist Norman W. Manley in the 1930s and 40s. He was imprisoned for six months in 1944 for his anti-colonial essay. He died in 1955. His works include *And Most of All Men* (stories & verse) (1939). *Face and Other Stories* (1942).

in a seemingly journalistic manner but his statements have a touch of universal truth, which gives a deep philosophical touch to the entire work.

I.K. Masih critically examines Naipaul's *An Area of Darkness* and challenges many of the writer's ideas expressed in this work. India may be a land of darkness for Naipaul, says the critic, but for him, "it is an area of light and will remain so." T.S. Borate evaluates the changing Indian critical response to *An Area of Darkness*. He analyzes the varied response to the book, from condemnation and outright rejection to appreciation and acceptance of the book as a work of art.

According to R.K. Kaul, in *The Loss of El Dorado*, Naipaul traces the history of expeditions to Trinidad, Guiana, Venezuela and the neighbouring islands. Naipaul directs his wrath especially against the Western media which treat the coloured people as playthings.

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Significant works continue to make additions to the richness of the West Indian fiction. In the late nineties, many new novels have appeared. Notable amongst these is one by Opal Palmer Adisa's first novel, entitled *It Begins with Tears*. Drawing on the Jamaican folklore, it is set in rural Jamaica and deals with the return of young woman to the community of Kristoff village. Another recently published novel is *The Festival of San Joaquin* by the author of well-known novel *Beka Lamb*, Zee Edgell.

Patterns of Communication in Roger Mais's *Brother Man*

GILLIAN DOOLEY

Communication, and failure to communicate, is at the basis of human relationships: find out about the nature of communication that exists between two people, and you will find out a great deal about the nature of that relationship. In *Brother Man*, Roger Mais anatomizes three relationships quite closely, and sketches several others. The plot of the novel is simple three story-lines which are essentially independent—and the interest lies mainly in the exploration of the dynamics between the three couples: Girlie and Papacita; Jesmina and Cordelia; and Brother Man and Minette; and, looking beyond that, of the nature of Brother Man's relations with his community. The three plot-lines are not closely interlinked: they offer points of comparison and contrast with each other, and enhance the psychological authenticity of Mais's characters, without providing the main driving force behind the narrative. And despite the claims of some critics that he was a social realist,[1] psychology rather than sociology or political ideology is his chief interest in *Brother Man*.

The novel is structured in five parts, each beginning with a "Chorus of People in the Lane." The need to communicate is thus a basic undertow in the novel. People gather to exchange gossip. It passes the time, it's free, and it entertains and distracts them from their own troubles: "There are those with an accounting of troubles the same and equal to and over and beyond the ones they tell. . . . It is their own story over that they tell in secret, overlaying it with the likeness of slander, licking their own ancient scrofulous sores."[2] This gossip is partly communication in self-defence—people's attempt to deflect the pity and shame of their own situations on others they can imagine as even more unfortunate than themselves. When Cordelia complains "Ah shame fo' walk down de street. De women stare, dem shame me, can 'most hear dem a-whisper, whisper, *dem tek-up Jonas fo' ganga, hush, see Cordy de a go-long down de street. . .* " (17) she knows what people are saying because she has no doubt said the same things about others, before her

own misfortune. She now feels ostracised: as the subject of gossip, she can no longer participate in it.

The scene straight after the first Chorus shows, almost cinematically, Girlie and Papacita. The tension between them is so great that everything either of them does in the other's presence is a form of communication, even when they are pretending to ignore each other:

> Girlie was idly turning the pages of magazine when Papacita came in through the door. She did not look up. He closed the door quietly—too quietly—behind him, without taking his eyes off her, came cat-footing across the room.
>
> He noticed that a corner of the page picturing Ingrid Bergman in Kodakcolor trembled a little between her fingers. Something tickled him at the back of his throat. He wanted to cough.
>
> He said: "*Hm!*" trying to clear it.
>
> She turned the page, slowly, put her other hand up to her back-hair.
>
> He went past her, across to the window overlooking the lane, threw it open with a bang, and said, angrily:
>
> 'It's like a furnace in here.'
>
> She went on turning the pages of the magazine she held across her knee. She put a finger up to her lips, wet the tip of it with her tongue, raised her eyes slowly to look at him, as though aware of his presence for the first time, saw him without recognition, without change of expression, and brought her eyes back slowly to the page.
>
> He leaned against the window and stood to look at her a moment, shrugged, turned away, went across to the bed, sat down, started pulling off his shoes.
>
> 'Lousy bum,' she said, causing, as though she was speaking to herself, just turning her thoughts out to air. (9-10)

What follows is obviously a scene which has been played out before. Papacita tells Girlie, "I know you're jus' bustin' with things to say. Why n't I come home las' night, hey? Don't you want to know?" (10) The fight continues with withering scorn and sarcasm on Girlie's part, and frustration and, presumably, lies on Papacita's part. What is most obvious about their relationship is that there is no trust between them. Their verbal sparring turns physical, and they fight until he can overcome her resistance. He forces her to have sex which gives them both "deep physical satisfaction that was like nothing else on earth," (28) but

any healing, reconciling effect of their love-making is short-lived. It seems that Girlie is not fulfilled by the "deep physical satisfaction," she wants more, and this fact is "there between them, not to be dismissed." (28) This interrupts their communication, which for a short time has been wordless and deep.

> . . . they tried to talk around it, but every time it came back at tail-end of everything they said, and it was like a secret embarrassment between them. It was a goad and a taunt to him, to her a great barrenness and a void in her flesh. (34-35)

Embarrassment is almost as detrimental to communication as the hostility and mistrust which usually characterizes their relationship, and the fight resumes, ending with Papacita walking out, bleeding from a knife wound. This is the pattern of their communication. They have moments of great tenderness, for example the scene in the night-club when Girlie sings, but their bond cannot survive Papacita's need to escape commitment, aggravated by Girlie's jealousy, which eventually leads her to murder him.

Girlie and Papacita use words as weapons: they are far from inarticulate. Jesmina, on the other hand, often cannot even formulate her thoughts, let alone express them. Nameless fears impede her, and she is troubled by the power of words: when Cordelia says, "wish ah was dead," Jesmina replies, "Don't say it, Sis. Hush, do! Is a sin." (15) Her reluctance to express her feelings is justified here, when she bites her lip to hold in her tears (17), as she does not want to upset her sick sister. However, her inability to express herself to Shine causes trouble in their relationship at first:

> . . . even when he pressed her she wasn't able to give her secret fears, forebodings, concrete form. So that in truth she was unable to tell him, though she would, if just to set his own mind at rest.
>
> And presently they got up and left the ice-cream parlour with that feeling between them that something had come into their lives to set them apart.
>
> He was hurt that a thing like this could have happened to them already, hurt and puzzled, not knowing what this thing might be, and like a child he wanted to kick it down and stride across the ruins, but her own silence thwarted him, cancelled him out like a digit, and he was hurt and angered and dumb. (86)

In their case, though, the need for love overcomes the communication barrier. In their last scene together, he asks her if she feels like talking, and she declines, but "she felt, suddenly, it was loving more than anything she wanted; that alone had any meaning out of all the tumult and confusion." (156) After this, Jesmina seems to lose the fear that had constrained her. She confronts Cordelia with her betrayal of Brother Man, and comes to understand the value of communication, talking to Minette and Brother Man:

> They sat for a long time talking it over, the three of them.
> Jesmina, all her primitive, intuitive fears now resolved and confirmed in her mind, told them all she had seen. She said she would never forgive herself for not speaking about them before. (169)

Brother Man seems to stand out as the ablest communicator in the novel:

> . . . somehow the words didn't sound banal, coming from him. He spoke with such simple directness that it seemed to give a new import to everything he said. It was as though the common words of everyday usage meant something more, coming from his lips, than they did in the casual giving and taking of change in conversation, the way it was with other folks. (24)

But he is certainly not perfect in this respect. Communication is a two-way process, and involves understanding others as well as making them understand. It is clear from the frustration Minette feels with Brother Man at first that he is completely successful in neither way. Although he gives "a new import to everything" he says, Minette still doesn't "understand a word of all this." (24) On the other hand, "she was young, and things were stirring inside her, and she couldn't make him understand, or aware of her in that way at all," (32) meaning in a sexual way. When she asks him directly why he has never married, he finds himself "stumbling for words." (40) It is not until he responds to Minette's love, and "something that went without words" (137) passed between them, that communication between them is finally completely open, allowing them to move ahead to a hopeful future at the end of the novel:

> 'They'll all come crawlin' to you yet, an' beg to you forgive them.'
> He just bowed his head before her. His heart was too full to speak.

> He saw all things that lay before him in a vision of certitude, and he was alone no longer.
> 'Look at me,' he said.
> Her gaze met his, unfaltering.
> 'You see it, out there, too?'
> She looked up above the rooftops where that great light glowed across the sky.
> She said: 'Yes, John, I have seen it.'
> 'Good,' he said, and again, 'Good.'
> He moved away from the window, back into the cool dimness of the room beyond.
> And she went before him, carrying herself proudly, shielding the little flame of the candle with her hand. (190-91)

Brother Man is a good man, but he is far from omnipotent. He preaches to the crowd which gathers around him at the height of his popularity, telling them simply "that they were to turn away from evil and to follow after righteousness," but he knows that they will not be able to fast for three days as he instructs them; and when he is accused of counterfeiting money, the community quickly turns against him. His powers of communication are useless: he tries to reason with them, but "his voice was downed in the shrieks and curses of the mob," (185) and they attack and defile him. He has, at any rate, the capacity to appeal to the emotions of people but not to change their basic attitudes: he can soothe Cordelia, for example, so that her mind is "bright and clear" (134) for ten minutes, but "her thoughts muddied and clouded again, and things that were straight and simple before seemed blurred and complex." (134) Mais's point is perhaps that good cannot overcome evil, but that they can nevertheless co-exist. Brother Man does not have the influence one would expect from a Christ figure, despite the obvious parallels between his experience and the crucifixion and resurrection; but the survival of the pure and good, even if it is weak in terms of temporal power, is surely intended as a sign of hope for the world.

NOTES

1. Evelyn J. Hawthorne, *The Writer in Transition: Roger Mais and the Decolonization of Caribbean Culture* (New York: P. Lang, 1989), p. xiii.
2. Roger Mais, *Brother Man* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1974), pp. 8-9.