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'ISLANDS' AND 'CONTINENTS' IN WEST INDIAN FICTION: A POST-COLONIAL READING

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'Islands' and 'Continents' occur in West Indian fiction, almost like a motif. Protagonists of novels often refer to their countries as mere 'islands' and evoke the geographically-bound quality, their smallness and lack of significance. The sub-text of their discourse suggests an imagined deficiency in comparison with the awesome, sprawling, opulent, whiteman's continents.

In this paper, I am going to examine 'islands' and 'continents' as signifiers for different kinds of power relationships in post-colonial West Indian literature with special reference to the novel. 'Islands' in my paper signify any disempowered group. 'Continents' signify the dominant group. The sites of power that I am going to focus on, concern history, race, class and gender as they have been constructed during the period of colonisation.

I am aware that the West Indies are a collection of independent countries; so the term "West Indian" is being used here as a nomenclature of convenience and not as an attempt at homogenisation. Again, almost all literatures grow out of trans-national literary influences. There is, however, an element of overdeterminism of certain historical, geographical, cultural, religious, belief systems which characterise the mind of a people and lend distinction to their culture/literature. It is in that sense that I have clubbed together texts written by Barbadian, Trinidadian, Tobagoan, Martinican writers and called them "West Indian". In this paper, I have adapted Edward Said's seminal approach spelt out in *Culture and Imperialism* with respect to British fiction, for reading "the structures of location and geographical reference"[1] as they appear in West Indian fiction, sometimes allusively and sometimes directly, across different individual works.

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[1] Edward W. SAID, (1993) *Culture and Imperialism* (London, Vintage, 1994), p. 61.

In 1962, V. S. Naipaul made a statement in the travelogue *The Middle Passage*, which earned him the appellate of 'renegade' from its West Indian readers. He had written:

> Trinidad was too unimportant and we [the West Indians] could never be convinced of the value of reading the history of a place which was, as everyone said, ***only a dot on the map of the world. Our interest was all in the world outside*** ... The threat of failure, the need to escape: this was the prompting of the society I knew. (p. 45; my italics)[2]

Notwithstanding his tongue-in-cheek manner (many would call it arrogance), it is obvious that the historical signals behind the geographical signs, 'islands' and 'continents' were already present in West Indian writings well before 1962 as I shall show a little later. According to Naipaul, Trinidad, "a dot", and "the world outside" were symbiotically tied up in polarities that evoked a Darwinian scale of development and evolution. Naipaul explains that the described mental frame and mind set were not his alone. This was "as everyone said", he maintains. The unimportant, peripheral island, the yearning to make a new beginning in the metropolitan continents of consequence – Europe and America – constituted the West Indian dream.

Although very different as writers, George Lamming's reasons for leaving Barbados were not very different from Naipaul's. According to Lamming, the West Indian middle classes were philistine and the environment oriented more towards the business of making money than to the development of culture and art. The artist was an unimportant person whose work could not be "used" in a practical way. In such a situation, the artists were left with no option except to migrate. Lamming sums up his agony in *The Pleasure of Exile* (1960): "We [the artists] had *to get out*."(p. 41)[3] Given the choice to return, Lamming betrays fear and reluctance: "... [N]o one would feel secure in his decision to return".[4]

In *The Middleman and Other Stories*, Bharati Mukherjee, the expatriate Indian writer has a story titled "Jasmine" (1989). In it, she describes the escape to the USA of a smart, educated, young Trinidadian named Jasmine. Jasmine is an illegal immigrant who pays for her entry into Detroit, and undertakes an arduous journey to reach the land of her dreams. Her explanation for the departure is simple and familiar:

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[2] V.S. NAIPAUL, (1962) *The Middle Passage: The Caribbean Revisited* (Harmondsworth, Penguin Books Ltd., 1975).

[3] George LAMMING, *The Pleasures of Exile* (London, Michael Joseph, 1960).

[4] G. LAMMING, *Pleasures*, pp. 46-47.

> Trinidad was too tiny. That was the trouble. ***Trinidad was an island stuck in the middle of nowhere***. What kind of a place was that for a girl with ambition? (p. 128; my italics).[5]

Her naivety and overconfidence apart (she ends up as a nanny in America), there is the same reference (as in Naipaul and Lamming) to the island as constrictive and inconsequential. The need to flee the West Indies and fulfil one's aspirations in the continents – lands of opportunity – echoes in West Indian literature as an unchanging refrain.

England is a small island too. Three continents, besides Europe of which is a part – are its neighbours. Yet, England always figures in English literature as a land of power, glory, romance, courage, daring, might and greatness. Her size or her geographical positioning has never inhibited her people.

Large Africa, one of England's neighbours, has figured in her literature more as a distant passive, supine continent waiting to be conquered and led out of darkness, than as a leader. Australia, far away, figures as a continent of desolate landscapes, weird climate, queer flora and fauna – a penal colony fit for the criminal outcasts of English society.[6] Protagonists in English literature shun going to Africa or Australia. However, characters in all post-colonial literatures yearn to go to England. The anxiety is most pronounced in the West Indies – historically, the most dispossessed of all former colonies.

Clearly, the difference between the West Indian longing and the Englishman's abhorrence, lies less in the islands' geographical realities than in the unequal power, the site of which is the colonial/imperial experience. The motif of 'islands' and 'continents' in Caribbean fiction connotes this historically-created power differential. To belong to the white man's world is for the West Indian to achieve fulfilment and empowerment. On the positive side, it could be viewed as the West Indian's desire to draw upon his/her inner strength and faith to become "more", if given a different set of circumstances and opportunities.

But more often than not, it is the consequence of sheer conditioning. What seems common and, therefore, natural, is in reality an ideological construct. An extract from J. S. Mill's *Principles of Economy*, quoted in Said's *Culture and Imperialism*, leaves no doubt as to how the feeling of imagined deficiency was systematically inculcated in the native during colonisation. While using the vocabulary of Economics, Mill belittles the very geography and identity of the Caribbean islands:

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[5] Bharati MUKHERJEE, *The Middleman and Other Stories* (New Delhi, Prentice Hall of India Pvt. Ltd., 1989), pp. 125-138.

[6] E. SAID, *Culture*, pp. 14-15.

> These [outlying possessions of ours] are hardly to be looked upon as countries ... but more properly as outlying agricultural or manufacturing estates belonging to a large community. Our West Indian colonies, for example, cannot be regarded as countries...[7]

Frantz Fanon (1961), Ashis Nandy (1983), Edward Said (1993) have variously exposed the hidden ideology that has informed colonialism. Each has revealed the closely-guarded nexus between culture and imperialism and shown how the colonised become willing conspirators in the act of their own cultural colonisation. Most West Indian novelists have deconstructed the making of a colonised mind. The texts trace with sensitivity, the 'willing' surrender of the colonised to the dominant culture, and its consequence.

In George Lamming's novel, *In the Castle of My Skin* (1953), the peasants of Creighton's village turn off their lights nightly only after the landlord has switched them off in his house befittingly situated on the hill. Almost unnoticed, his way of life becomes an ideal for the simple villagers. The older and the younger generation are similarly contamined. Lamming describes how the village children secretly aspire to emulate the Landlord, and his imposing lifestyle:

> They made saucers and cups with a mixture of dirt and water and saliva, leaving them in the sun to bake dry. Then they served tea from the tap of a standing pipe nearby. The make believe was impressive ... The world of authority existed somewhere along the fringe of the villager's consciousness. (p. 28)[8]

Gradually a harmless, children's game begins to get overwritten by the deeper tragedy of the villagers as their desire to mimic the coloniser grows intenser. The stories of Jon, Jen and Susie (pp. 122-125), and Bots, Bambi and Bambina (pp. 133-141), dramatise the disastrous consequences for a people who imitatively substitute alien cultural values for their own. The astonishing fact, however, is that despite their schizophrenic existence, the imperialised continue to admire the coloniser/imperialiser and to read his culture as superior. Said's observation made about nineteenth century British fiction may be used here to understand West Indian literature:

> These structures [of 'attitude and reference'] do not arise from some pre-existing (semi-conspiratorial) design that the writers then manipulate, but are bound up with the development of [West Indian] cultural identity, as that identity imagined itself in a geographically conceived world.[9]

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[7] J.S. Mill, quoted in Said, *Culture*, p. 69.

[8] G. Lamming, (1953) *In The Castle of My Skin* (Trinidad, London Caribbean Ltd., 1970). Referred to as *Castle* hereafter.

[9] E. Said, *Culture*, p. 61.

Thus, the West Indian fictional protagonist's escape route to the Continent remains intact, despite the achievement of political freedom in the Caribbean 'islands'.

Dwelling on the unbroken connection between the colonised and the coloniser beyond political independence, Ashis Nandy has described colonisation as "the intimate enemy" since it takes root in the mind and psyche of the colonised.[10] Like Fanon, he shows how colonisation begins well before the formal establishment of alien rule, and how it outlasts political independence. Colonialism has the following consequences. First, as a result of shared codes between the rulers and the ruled, the original cultural priorities on both sides change, almost imperceptibly. The colonial culture brings its own subcultures centrestage while displacing native subcultures which were earlier central to the culture of the colonised (pp. 1-2). Secondly, colonialism displays a certain style of managing dissent. It prevents recognition of the violence it does to its victims. The violence lies in the fact that it conditions the colonised to 'fight' the colonisers (pp. 1-2), a point that I shall exemplify with a reference to Marlene Nourbese Philips's prize-winning novel, *Harriet's Daughter* (1988).[11]

The protagonist's father, Guthbert Cruickshank, is a Barbadian expatriate settled in Canada. He is touchy and defensive about the way his family behaves in the adopted land. He lives in constant fear of the adverse opinion of the whites and constantly warns his wife and children against spoiling their image. His explanation unwittingly directs attention to the real source of his anxiety:

> The first thing they're going to say is 'There they go again, those Coloured People – always causing trouble.' How many times do I have to tell you that you have to be careful, people are very quick to believe the worst about us. (p. 89)

Here, *they* represent the white people ('continent') and *us*, the non-white West Indians ('islands') who have migrated to Canada. Although Cuthbert is a hypersensitive person, his mental anguish and apprehensions are not imaginary. Racial rejection of non-whites is the white countries of Canada and Britain is well-known.[12] Cuthbert's deep sense of shame and unquestioned acceptance of the whiteman's verdict on the inherent 'delinquency' of his people reveals the extraordinary pressure on him, the West Indian migrant to live within the psychological limits imposed by the host society.

The violence done to the non-whites is suppressed as they become willing partners to the whites in their 'civilisational' mission. The phenomenon accounts for the tragic acquiescence of the West Indian Jasmines, Naipauls, Lammings and Cuthberts to the acknowledged "superiority" of the whiteman and his world. Their complicity makes them anxious to flee the islands and recover their lost identity in the whiteman's continents – megacentres of wealth, culture, history, civilisation and development.

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[10] Ashis Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism* (Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1983), pp. 1-2.

[11] Nourbese Marlene Philips, *Harriet's Daughter* (Oxford, Heinemann International, 1988).

[12] John Rex, *Race, Colonialism and the City* (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), pp. 127-136.

Nandy further argues that congruent with the prevailing Western sexual stereotypes (subculture) and the philosophy that they represented, colonialism "produced a cultural consensus in which political and socio-economic dominance symbolised the dominance of men and masculinity over women and femininity". [13] So, it was considered "manly" and "lordly" to colonise. This had two fallouts. On the one hand, colonisation was seen as "a product of one's own emasculation and defeat in legitimate power politics"; that made colonialism acceptable and even welcome. [14] On the other hand, as modern Europe delegitimised femininity, the traditional gender balances in the non-white colonies got violently disrupted.

The internalisation of colonialist gender role definitions resulted in the downgradation of women in the colonies. Both the ruler race and the ruled began to look upon women as property, as territories to be conquered and controlled. Another tragic consequence was the violent inscribing of the woman's body by the coloniser and the irresponsible miscegenation that took place in the West Indies on a vast scale during colonialism. The products of such unions have never had an easy existence on the islands.

"Mothers stupid, that's why most of us without fathers" (p. 46) observes one of the schoolboys in *In The Castle of My Skin*. This is a telling comment on the status of all those brave women who had struggled fiercely to raise their children in the absence of their black or white fathers who were either dead or had deserted them or were away at sugar plantations where families were disallowed. The role of slavery and colonialism in destroying family life and marginalising the women on the islands is not even apprehended by the young boys who, being young, resent their mothers' strictness with them. A feminist reading reveals that the women's hardships and sacrifices are not only erased, but they are also seen by the sons as fit punishment for the women's failure to retain their "manly" men.

In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, that extremely complex novel by a Creole woman writer, it is no accident that both mother and daughter become mad ("islands" unto themselves). [15] As Thomas Loe has pointed out, Antoinette is the "symbolic double" of her mother; her mother's destiny is also hers. [16] The marginality she experiences in her marriage with a white man is compounded by the fact that not only is she not English/continent, but also that she has a Martinican/island mother, a fact which "puts the family outside the dominant white creole self-identification as 'white'" (p. 9). [17] Both Antoinette and her mother represent Rhys's vision of the disempowered and displaced woman/island, up against "the unified ideology" [of] "capitalism, colonialism and patriarchal ["continent"] domination..." [18]

To Frantz Fanon goes the credit for first drawing attention to the Manichean character of colonial society in *The Wretched of the Earth*, to the colonial world that is partitioned into two. In this world, the poor are separated from the rich, the blacks from the whites, the 'islands' from the 'continents', if we read the geographical signifiers into his thesis. [19] Almost every West Indian text has, up to the seventies, given us the picture of Manichean colonial society.

In *Castle*, the landlord's large brick house is perched atop a hill, surrounded by trees and a high stone wall with bits of bottle along the top (p. 25). Below and around it, spreads out the village with the tiny houses harbouring a population of three thousand. The contrast between the well-maintained fortress-like mansion and the neglected, overcrowded village stuns because inequality is given a concrete, almost folk literary form. The novel reveals the indigent and hopeless existence of the peasants. The flood with which the book opens, renders many of them homeless. Mr. Foster, unable to bear the loss of his house, can't let go off its roof and is nearly drowned in the flood waters. Mr. Slime's Penny Bank and Friendly Society touches a deep chord in the villagers anxious to possess a house of their own. But after the land swindle, the affected villagers are again rendered shelterless and Pa, the oldest and most respected citizen of the village, is forced to enter an Alms House – the refuge of none but the poorest and the most destitute. The landlord's concern for the flood-affected villagers is superficial. There are two sets of rules in this society – one for the 'islands', the other for the 'continent'. The haughty expression on the face of his young daughter who accompanies him in a car during his survey of the flood-hit village, conveys the unconcealed lack of concern, that was characteristic of the coloniser. Creighton's village is also typically divided into two quarters – one for Landlord Creighton/the whites/'continent', the other for the poor peasants/the blacks/'islands'.

Naipaul's *Guerrillas* [20] located on the fictitious West Indian island is a more chilling account of the existentialist tragedy inherent in the lives of the West Indians. Jimmy Ahmed, a product of a Negro-Chinese liaison, is initially cultivated as a figure of glamour by the English government; then accused of a rape he is deported to the West Indies. In the Caribbean, under instructions from London, Sablich an imperialist firm (anxious to launder its record as a slave-trading company) promotes him as a socialist and radical. The company gives him a few acres of land to develop a commune for the people.

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[13] A. NANDY, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

[14] A. NANDY, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

[15] Jean RHYS, (1966) *Wide Sargasso Sea* (London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1989).

[16] Thomas LOE, "Patterns of the Zombie in Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*", *World Literature Written in English*, vol. 31, n. 1 (1991), pp. 34-42.

[17] Peter HULME, "The Place of *Wide Sargasso Sea*", *Wasafiri*, n. 20 (Autumn 1994), pp. 5-11.

[18] Judith Kegan GARDINER, *Rhys, Stead, Lessing and the Power of Empathy* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1989), p .132.

[19] Frantz FANON, *The Wretched of the Earth*, transl. by Constance FARRINGTON (New York, Grove Press Inc., 1966), p. 33.

[20] V.S. NAIPAUL, *Guerrillas* (London, André Deutsch Ltd., 1975).

Provided with only second-hand, discarded equipment and ill-staffed, the commune ironically named "Thrushcross Grange", is doomed to failure. Aware of his failure to make the commune a success, he begins to affect the pose of a revolutionary and to indulge in delusions of himself as a "saviour" among the "good for nothing people" (pp. 38-39). The arid surroundings, weed-choked commune, the concrete-walled hut with a pitched roof of corrugated iron is where his "boys" (mostly former criminals) live. The commune, as well as the slum where his boys' families live, provide the binary contrast to the Ridge where whites like Jane and Roche live in big houses with large manicured gardens. The death of Stephen, one of Jimmy's boys, in a fake encounter with the local police, leaves no doubt in the mind of the readers that there is little hope for the poor in the West Indies because they are former natives, and because they are black. The double bind of history and race keeps them 'islands', pinioned where they are.

Edward Said in *Culture and Imperialism* proposes that we read English novels not merely for binary oppositions but for the shared history of coloniser and colonised. He observes:

> We should regard the historical experience of empire as a common one. The task is to describe it as pertaining to Indians *and* Britishers, Asian, Latin Americans and Australians... (p. xxiv)

He makes a close study of a few prominent nineteenth century English novels written during the period of colonisation to prove the point. He deconstructs the writings of Conrad and Kipling to show that these writers maintained a dual stance throughout their works. On the one hand, they mocked at the arrogance of their white protagonists. On the other, they themselves were reactionary enough to assume that Africa, South America, India could never have had an independent culture which was disrupted by the imperialists. Said does not examine post-colonial texts to substantiate his approach.

Therefore, in the rest of this paper, I shall read two West Indian novels, *In The Castle of My Skin* and *Guerrillas*, using Said's approach. I shall deconstruct these novels for the joint historical experience of the coloniser and the colonised West Indian.

Castle is a novel about a West Indian island (Barbados) during its nationalist struggle movement. Two small episodes will illustrate my point. Early in the novel, eight-year-old Gordon, a poor native boy, eager to sell his fowlcock accidentally messes up the clothes of a white gentleman about to board a bus to office. The bird dirties the whiteman's face, helmet and suit. Surprisingly, while eight-year old Gordon shows no remorse at the deed, the older native boys too, standing close by, begin to laugh, sing and taunt the white gentleman: "Look, look what fowlcock do, / Look what fowlcock do to you." (p. 21) Confused, the white gentleman flees home. The text suggests that he does not (dare) report the matter to the police. I found this passage to be very extraordinary in the sense that it is among the few scenes in the book that captures the moment of change in the psyche of the islanders as they begin to renounce the psychological limits imposed on them by the colonisers. It also captures the crucial moment when the coloniser knows that his authority on the island has eroded. The other such scene is the one where, soon after the riots, Landlord Creighton barely manages to escape the wrath of the men waiting to stone him, as he walks up the hill to his home. Both the scenes provide the text of defiance towards the coloniser, and the resulting fear in the erstwhile master.

In *Guerrillas*, Roche and Jane similarly flee to their houses on the ridge after the riots that follow Stephen's death. Again, after Jane's murder by Jimmy, a frightened Roche rushes back from Jimmy's house to the safety of his house. He neither reports Jane's murder to the police nor charges Jimmy with the crime. Instead, he pretends to Jimmy that all is well and that Jane is packing up their things for their return to England. Like Mr. Creighton, Roche leaves the island forever.

Reading Western colonial texts reveals the omniscient feeling of superiority on the part of the whiteman/imperialist/continent. But reading nationalist West Indian texts reveals the whiteman's growing diffidence, insecurity, loss of power. The whites are also showing as becoming aware of their changing relationship with the non-whites. The erosion of their earlier authority and the challenge to their superiority by the newly-assertive West Indians, are novel experiences for which the whites are unprepared. They respond in the only way they can, namely by leaving the islands.

However, despite their clearly anti-colonial stance, both novels suppress the whiteman's superiority very much in the manner of nineteenth century British novels. When Mr. Creighton leaves for England after selling the village land to the rich blacks, the novel represents the blacks as being more merciless and insensitive than the coloniser in evicting their own people from the village. The feeling at the end of the novel is that the situation in the village is worse under the blacks than under the coloniser.

Guerrillas, too, conceals a similar feeling of the power and superiority of the whiteman while undermining that of individual whites on the island. This is obvious in the scene where the landing of American troopers on the island is enough to stop the rioters and send the rioting blacks hack into their homes. It is also obvious in the scene where Jimmy calls up Roche after Jane's murder, in the full knowledge that Roche has neither dared to challenge him nor reported him to the police. Roche attends the phone but warns Jimmy against trying to follow him to the Ridge. Roche leaves the island shortly after pretending even to his friends that Jane is returning with him to England. But the feeling remains that

Jimmy's 'island' will degenerate further. The subtext suggests the inability of the natives to rebuild their lives or their country in spite of the departure of the imperialiser race from the island. Thus, these texts too preserve a dual stance. On the one hand, they are overtly Manichean and anti-white. On the other, they suppress the coloniser's stereotype about the superiority of the white race.

A final question: How do West Indian texts fare with regard to their representation of women? What about Jane in *Guerrillas*? Notwithstanding the feeling that she was "playing with fire", Jane had taken Jimmy as a lover with the confidence of the empire behind her. Her affair with Jimmy is full of power, not normally conceded to women in a patriarchal situation. Her sexual humiliation of him and his retaliation and murder of her, problematise the historical and gender sites of power. Throughout the narrative, Jane (never Jimmy!) is referred to as "rotten meat", a woman whose "eyes were screaming". A rapist like Jimmy is subtly made to appear superior to her while the promiscuous Jane is shown earning a mindless though "well-deserved" death.

Guerrillas is a brutal study of the renewed encounter between old enemies – the coloniser and the colonised, the male and the female. Yet, it suppresses two popular stereotypes received during colonisation. The first is about the superiority of the "cool-headed" white man (Roche) over the "irascible" native (Jimmy). The other concerns the power of man over woman. This is also the case with *Castle*. *Castle* landlord's teenage daughter's dalliance with a visiting English sailor is connoted with moral overtones, while blame for Jon's and Bambi's ruin is written into the narratives of Susie, Bots, Jen and Bambina. Thus, it is seen that in West Indian fiction, the 'islands' remain 'islands', and the 'continents', their holy grail.

To conclude, my post-colonial reading of West Indian novels reveals that the world has two kinds of populations – those who are strong ('continents' – whites, males) and those who are weak ('islands' – non-whites, females). While humanists like Said would wish to erase binary oppositions in search of a cosmopolitan, trans-national future together, the ground reality in the former colonies is deeply ingrained in inequality.

It is not only the magnanimous, conciliatory gestures of "forgive-and-forget" of the formerly colonised/women towards the coloniser/men that will make the world a more equal place, but a paradigmatic shift in the current levers of power with which the white world/'continent' relates with the non-white world/'islands', and the men with the women. This is what a deconstructionist, post-colonial reading of West Indian fiction shows.