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RESEARCH ARTICLE

REFLECTIONS OF CARIBBEAN SOCIO-POLITICAL SCENARIO IN JEAN RHY'S "AGAIN THE ANTILLES"

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Abstract

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Introduction:-

While Historical criticism insist on the biography and socio-cultural background of an author to understand a literary work, New Historicism seeks to understand a text by considering the work within the framework of the prevailing ideas and assumptions of the historical era. New historians do not consider history as a mere chronicle of facts but as a complex description of human reality and evolution of preconceived notions. In other words, New Historicism as a school of thought is based mainly on the socio-historical materials which emerge from the cultural and ideological assumptions of the members of a particular society and period and not on the so called historical truth. According to New Historicists, the main role of literature is to provide its readers the information about the prevailing socio-political scenario, social organisations, race relations, social norms, taboos etc., of any particular period of time and place.

Being born and brought up in Dominican island as a daughter of a Welsh father and a Dominican mother, Jean Rhys has been the forerunner of exploring various aspects of Caribbean society in many of her works. By interrogating various issues related to race, gender and class in the post emancipatory West Indies through her writings, she has deconstructed the so called Imperial Historiography. With this process of deconstruction, she has investigated her own identity as a West Indian White Creole, being one among the Caribbean colonized subjectivities with the marginalized Caribs and Africans.

Again the Antilles, written in 1927 is one of the best Short Stories of Jean Rhys, which portray the verbal skirmishes that took place in the Dominican press at the end of the 19th Century, between a powerful Mullatto elite and a White English colonial. It is to be noted here that the Press occupied a significant role in autoethnographic expressions during the 19th Century Dominica. Being a prosperous plantation colony, Dominica had been shuttling between the French and British powers for many years until 1782, when a fierce naval battle decided its status as a British possession. Though the language spoken in Dominica was a Normandy based French Patois, English became the language of the Government, Press, Education and all other important departments after the British possession. However, French Patois continued to be the language of the common folk for many years.

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The Mullatto or Coloured elites of Dominica seemed to have challenged the white hegemony to a great extent through their autoethnographic expressions, when compared to the Coloured people of any other islands of the Caribbean. The Mullattos domination over Press is clearly brought out by Jean Rhys in the story "Again the Antilles" with the description of a character called Papa Dom, editor of the "Dominica Herald and Leeward Islands Gazette". Mary Gregg opines that the Papa Dom figure of the short story strongly resembles the famous historical figure Charles Gordon Falconer, a fiery Methodist of 1840s (Gregg 138). Rhys' incorporation of such historical figures and related events through her fictional characters prove her wide knowledge of Dominican History. To Read and understand the political situation described in "Again the Antilles" one has to go back and study the historical scenario of Dominica between the periods of 1830 to 1900.

While elaborating the Mulatto Ascendency and its significance in the history of Caribbean in his "How Crown Colony Government Came to Dominica by 1898", Joseph Borome gives an account of the "Brown Privilege Bill" which granted complete political rights to the freed black people enabling them to contest in Assembly Elections. Consequently, there developed two major political parties, Conservative Party and Liberal Party, supported by two leading newspapers, the Colonist (Whites) and the Dominican (Coloured) respectively. Beginning with three Mullatto representatives in the 1832 Assembly Election, the Liberal party formed the majority in 1838 Assembly Election with Charles Gordon Falconer, the editor of the newspaper "Dominican" as the leader of the so called Mulatto Ascendency. Thus, the Liberal party under the leadership of Falconer, who was described as a "sharp tongued and sharp minded editor of the Dominican", became a powerful party after the election of 1838. Though the House of Assembly comprising more number of Mullatto members was dissolved due to various efforts taken by Lieutenant Governor Thomas Price, the Mullatto Ascendency once again came to power with majority (Gregg 22-23).

The Assembly and its proceedings during the period when Mullattos formed the majority had many unending arguments and differences of opinions because of inter-racial intolerances. At this period, there was a complicated issue related to religion discussed by the members in the Assembly, which became the major reason for the Religious Riots of 1847. As Lenox Honeychurch observes,

"On 4th May, a staunch Catholic member of the House of Assembly, T.F.Lockhart, introduced a bill to provide incomes for the Roman Catholic clergy. Mr.Lockhart's emotional address in the House caused much agitation among Catholics and this was heightened by the strong opposition of Charles Falconer, a fiery Methodist. He objected to any religious denomination receiving money from the government, especially in a poor island such as Dominica. Because of this, Falconer and his fellow Methodists became the targets of insult... On this evening of 18th October, 1847.... a general riot ensued." (Honeychurch 106)

The Mullatto majority and their voices in the assembly were highly ridiculed by some of the whites who wanted to change the entire system of government by making Dominica a federal state guided by the Crown colony. This opinion of them was also supported by the printer of the Colonist, John Finlay. One of the main reasons that the Whites claimed to oppose the Mullatto Assembly members was that the Mullatto legislators did not know either to articulate or write English with accuracy. In spite of the opposition of the Mullatto members headed by Falconer, Dominica was made a federal colony in 1865. After this, many newspapers like "Dial" and "Dominican Guardian" run by William Davies and his subordinates fought for the cause of the Mullatto uprising. "Leeward Island Free press" started by another Mullatto, A.R.C.Lockhart in 1905, continued to fight against the Crown Colony government.

Jean Rhys has fictionalised her own understanding of these factual informations and great personalities of the period in her Short Story, thereby making it a part of the historical records of the period. The narrator of the story describes Papa Dom, the Editor of the "Dominica Herald and Leeward Islands Gazette" as,

"A born rebel, this editor: a firebrand. He hated white people, not being quite white, and he despised the black ones, not being quite black....."Coloured" we West Indians call the intermediate shades, and I used to think that being coloured embittered him.

He was against the Government, against the English, against the Island's being a Crown Colony and the Town Board's new system of drainage. He was also against the Mob, against the easy and easy morality of the negroes and the "hordes of priests and nuns that overrun our unhappy island", against the existence of the Anglican bishop and the Catholic bishop's new palace.

He wrote seething articles against that palace which was then being built, partly by voluntary labour - until, one night his house was besieged by a large mob of the faithful, throwing stones and howling for his blood.... In the next issue of his paper he wrote a long account of the "riot": according to him it had been led by several well-known Magdalenes, then, as always, the most ardent supporters of Christianity." (Rhys 39-40)

According to Gregg, Papa Dom of "Again the Antilles" has many resemblances to the famous historical figure Charles Falconer, the leader of the Mullatto Ascendancy. Charles Falconer, being a Mullatto not only opposed the white politicians, but also the African people's struggle for civil rights and their destructive attitude after Emancipation of Slavery. He felt annoyed at the attitude of the black people, who considered their freedom as part of the restitution of their long suffering. Russel Jr.Chase, in his "Protest in Post-Emancipation Dominica: The Guerre Negre of 1844, observes that Falconer was very much against this "Guerre Negre". To Falconer, the Guerre Negre Movement was a "shameful rebellion against the lawful authority" (qtd. in Gregg:23) which represents,

"a determination to impoverish the Proprietors of the Estates by a wanton destruction of property, and in some cases of dishonestly converting it to their own use reckless of consequences... We must believe that the rebels consider themselves to have been first wronged. It is a fact that many have always regarded their freedom to be only a part of the restitution due to them for their former bondage and that between their Queen and their former Owners something more ought to have been given them – and that something many have not scrupled in times past to say – should have been "a small piece of land!!!" (qtd. in Gregg:23)

In this story, the narrator recalls the feud that took place in the newspaper "Dominican Herald and Leeward Island Gazette" between the Editor Papa Dom and a transplanted English planter Hugh Musgrave, who had been living in Dominica for 20 years. The hot exchange of ideas between these two people about each other drew attention of the readers which made the publication increase. While the narrator of the story refers Hugh Musgrave as a person who has never been neither ferocious nor tyrannical to his labourers, Papa Dom writes about him in his Newspaper as;

"It is a saddening and a dismal sight to contemplate the degeneracy of a stock. How far is such a man removed from the ideals of true gentility, from the beautiful description of a contemporary, possibly, though not certainly, the Marquis of Montrose, left us by Shakespeare, the divine poet and genius".

"He was a very gentle, perfect knight....." (Rhys 40).

The next edition of the Newspaper carried the hot reply of Mr. Musgrave's sarcastic comments about PapaDom's ignorance about the English texts;

"I never read your abominable paper. But my attention has been called to your scurrilous letter about myself which you published last week. The lines quoted were written, not by Shakespeare, but by Chaucer, though you cannot of course be expected to know that

It is indeed a saddening and dismal thing that the names of great Englishmen should be thus taken in vain by the ignorant of another race or colour" (Rhys 41).

Papa Dom, in his next edition counteracted Mr. Musgrave with the same level of sarcasm:

"My attention has been called to your characteristic letter. I accept your correction though I understand that in the minds of best authorities there are grave doubts, very grave doubts indeed, as to the authorship of the lines, and indeed the other works of the immortal Swan of Avon. However, as I do not write with works of reference in front of me, as you most certainly do, I will not dispute the point.

The conduct of an Englishman who stoops to acts of tyranny and abuse cannot be described as gentle or perfect. I fail to see that it matters whether it is Shakespeare, Chaucer or the Marquiz of Montrose who administers from down the ages the much needed reminder and rebuke" (Rhys 41).

Though Mr. Musgrave's sarcastic comments about Papa Dom's ignorance about the great English texts and its authorship clearly highlight the Englishmen's attitude of contempt towards the Mullatto's inadequate knowledge

of English and English texts, Papa Dom's replies are suggestive of the Mullatto's intellectual capacity to challenge the colonial superiority.

This English attitude of dislike towards the Mullatto is best displayed in the words of John Finlay, the printer of the newspaper "Colonist" in his July 1854 issue, where he talks about the Mullatto majority in the legislative Assembly of Dominica. He says that the government was,

"...mostly composed of men who are entirely ignorant of the first principles of government and whose only reason for going there is to aggrandize themselves, and to bring ruin on the more respectable classes of society. They are uneducated, ignorant and revengeful; and most of them have neither status (n)or property in the Island. The majority of these would-be-legislators is made up of journey-men Printers and Tailors, Bankrupt shopkeepers, a Blacksmith and a few fourth rate Planters. Very few of them articulate English decently, and a still smaller number are able to write it with any degree of accuracy or propriety. (qtd. in Gregg 136)

The socio-political scenario of Dominica in the nineteenth century with debates related to knowledge of English texts and articulation is well exposed by Jean Rhys in her Short story "Again the Antilles". As Sue Thomas points out, the "humour of "Again the Antilles" turns on exposure of the relative lacks of highbrow English cultural capital of Papa Dom and Mr. Hugh Musgrave" (Thomas 59) each representing different race. Though Rhys has adopted her recurrent techniques of layering or eliding different time periods, her story provides her readers as much information about Caribbean society as provided by the Press and other historical records of the period.

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