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Intellectual Formations

Paula Morgan

The University of the West Indies, St Augustine, Paula.Morgan@sta.uwi.edu

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The University of the West Indies, St Augustine

August 2013

I am struck by the wisdom of the saying “our beginnings do now know their endings”. My own process of becoming a literary critic was rooted in sheer love of language and story telling - stories told by ubiquitous other mothers within the extended family network to children huddled on the back step on moonlit nights - stories of love and betrayal and tragic females heroines, stories of *The Imitation of Life* and *The Basket of Flowers* - spun out within a context in which it was safe to cry because everyone else was weeping too. This marks the earliest beginnings of my respect for the power of words and love for female-authored fictions. This love was nurtured by an obsession with lurid fairy tales which so possessed the imagination that I once deemed it necessary to burn a lavishly illustrated collection to shake off its nightmarish hold over my imagination. Reading for me has always been visceral and disruptive.

I was too a child of the Caribbean Independence movement. Born in 1956 to parents who were such avid followers of Eric Williams then People’s Education Movement (later transmuted into the People’s National Movement), I am told they deliberately selected for their first born the initials Paula Eleanor Mitchell (PEM) in honour of that movement. My father who eventually served as the General Secretary of the People’s National Movement was one of an army of ordinary people, who, under the sway of the diminutive public educator set out to overcome serious sociopolitical disadvantages with stirrings and later convictions of collective significance. There I detect the seed of another beginning – a love of these gems of complex, multicultural, islands and a sense that we have not been brought here from the corners of the world by happenstance; rather despite our myriad issues, we are a unique and creative civilization, crafted for global impact disproportionate to our size. To my mind, this dovetailed neatly with the pre independence literary project with its obsession with potentiality and challenges of multi-ethnic identity, and the puzzle of how to give birth to newness despite ignominious histories and persistent and diverse adversities.

When I entered UWI St Augustine in 1975 fresh out of Bishop Anstey High School, I was already in possession of precious legacies. There was a settled conviction that despite appearances, there were no limitations before us as women; indeed we are a strong and empowered breed. Secondly there was a memory of being on the periphery of the 1970 Black Power uprising in Trinidad, when as secondary school children dismissed from school early to ensure our safety, we fled, of course, to Woodford Square. The memory has never faded. When the people raised their fists and shouted power, the very earth shook... and

slowly, despite manifest futilities, change mushroomed. And even as children we rejoiced over the first black girl to gain employment in a bank; and the first black woman to be crowned as a beauty queen, for before the people gave a shout that released new potentialities, black was not beautiful.

In 1975, we had to struggle was for the right to study female authors for the assumption was that students with potential should grapple with Harris, Naipaul, Lamming, Braithwaite and certainly not with Jean Rhys, Louise Bennett and Paule Marshall and the emerging female voices. My academic research under the expert guidance of Professor Gordon Rohlehr wended through an undergraduate study on Existential Themes in Caribbean Literature through an M. Phil on The Love Theme in West Indian writing and a PhD on the emergence of the Cross-Cultural Female-Authored Novel of Development in Africa and its Diaspora. It is in retrospect that I can see how these concerns and emphases developed. From age 14, I embraced a deep rooted conversion to evangelical Christianity which was very unpopular within my intellectually oriented extended family. In response to their taunts and challenges, I decided against checking in intellectual enquiry at the church door and determined instead to focus on any governing episteme which could pose a challenge to my faith – existentialism was the hegemonic notion of that moment. I defy the notion that persons of faith are by definition closed in mind and spirit, precluded from intellectual and imaginative participation in the journeys of the other. I ascribe much benefit to the capacity to engage the exigencies of times and season and simultaneously to stand above the tyranny of the urgent, to value the slow necessities of process, and to treasure the conviction articulated by Ghanaian writer Ama Ata Aidoo that things are working themselves out towards a brilliant conclusion. In other words, I ascribe to my faith the capacity to fully engage the issues of my time, from a vantage point of eternity which summons human hearts.

The absolute maze of Caribbean gender relations and involvement in the Women and Development studies group and later the Center/Institute for Gender and Development Studies tugged me into an exploration of The Love Theme in Selected Caribbean Writing. One could not study love in the Caribbean under the tutelage of Gordon Rohlehr and remain within literary confines. It was here that the collision and collusion of the voices of the writers, calypsonians, media practitioners on the bacchanal of Caribbean gender relation deflected attention away from purely literary analyses and sparked interest in insights to be gained by the juxtaposition of a range of discourses. I concluded my PhD dissertation on A Cross Cultural Study of the Black Female-Authored Novel of Development with a statement on the uniformly negative perspectives offered by female authors on the state of gender relations through the Africa and its diaspora. This provided a segue into masculinity studies. Gender relations disallow an exclusive focus on

women; there can be no resolution of its issues until the myriad and deep rooted hurts and vulnerabilities of men are engaged head on by women and by men.

Over the past decade I have become impatient with any literary and critical approach that does not have a pragmatic application to real life scenarios. As homegrown Caribbean-based intellectuals who are looked upon as resources for governments, schools, community groups, churches, we are never far from the people. My brief sojourn into the political arena as a member of the founding national executive of an emerging party yielded a profound appreciation of the gifts, talents, passion and dedication of ordinary people. This juxtaposed with insight into the growing vulnerability of at risk groups, inordinate expense to the State in terms of keeping systems and services afloat, paucity of strategies for implementation, notwithstanding the existence of viable ideas and ideologies, rampant political opportunism and corruption. I emerged from that experience even more persuaded of the power of literary representation to tell us who we are, what we can aspire to be, where we have fallen short, and how we can transcend.

At every juncture, my research has pointed to the cataclysmic nature of the historical foundations of the modern social order and its underlying impact on contemporary social relations. Predictably, my recent research focus has been on gender, violence and trauma. Its interdisciplinary focus has been enhanced by a research and publication partnership with Professor Valerie Youssef, a linguist with a focus on discourse analysis. Our findings indicate that violence is ubiquitous, its forms are intimately intertwined, such that historical, state, and institutional violence all play into the grim scenarios which manifest in the domestic arena. My most recent analyses delve into the broader socio-cultural framework to explore Caribbean literature and culture as creating a dialectic of trauma as reflected in myriad acts of banal violence. It therefore reflects the lacerations of history, migrations, exile, genocide, natural disasters, institutionalized poverty, political apathy and corruption. The topics include fictional, media, and real life personal narratives on areas such as sex tourism, state violence and torture, aging and Alzheimer's, HIV/AIDS, poverty, alcoholism.

All of this is to say that almost four decades later, my scholarly interests lie firmly with real people in real societies and the manner in which literary representation interfaces with real life discourses. I am of view that the spiraling social crises with which the region grapples require research which targets specific issues with an eye to designing ameliorative interventions. These research efforts can in turn support tertiary teaching which is relevant to Caribbean societies and valuable to the University's stake holders. I remain well aware of the benefits which I have derived from a policy which extended free tertiary education to all with the aim of equipping the progeny and slaves and indentees with the skills to govern emerging nations. I also remain fully persuaded of the

agency of the truth of fiction to empower us to address real life issues because it does not require isolation of measurable realities and use of objective tools to explore cause and effect sequences. I pursue the truth to be gleaned through fiction and revel in the swirling amalgam of literary analysis which allows one to draw from historical, psychological, social, legal and spiritual approaches to unlock mysteries of human hearts and social orders. I have every expectation that I will not return to literary study exclusively but rather apply prismatic approaches in which the literary is one of myriad facets which sparkle and illuminate each other as the prism spins, reflects and refracts our complex realities.