

## NOVEL AND HISTORY, PLOT AND PLANTATION \*

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First let us define our terms. What, in our context, is novel? What, in our context, is history? What is our context? George Beckford, a Jamaican economist writes:

“ In America, the locus of the plantation system is the Caribbean. Indeed this region is generally regarded as the classic plantation area. So much so that social anthropologists, have described the region as a culture sphere, labelled Plantation America.”

The Caribbean area is the classic plantation area since many of its units were ‘planted’ with people, not in order to form societies, but to carry on plantations whose aim was to produce single crops for the market. That is to say , the plantation-societies of the Caribbean came into being as adjunct to the product, to the single crop commodity - the sugar cane - which they produce. As Eric Williams has shown, our societies were both cause and effect of the emergence of the market economy: an emergence which marked a change of such world historical magnitude, that we are all, without exception still “enchanted”, imprisoned, deformed and schizophrenic in its bewitched reality.

Now, the novel form itself, according to Goldman, came into being with the extension and dominance of the market economy, and " appears to us to be in effect, the transposition on the literary plane, of the daily life within an individualist society, born of production for the market." The novel form and our societies are twin children of the same parents. No wonder Miguel Angel Asturias a Plantation novelist of a Plantation Republic, Guatemala, wrote in unbelieving despair, after the C.I.A - backed overthrow of the legally elected Government of Arbenz: "These things that happen?...It's best to call them fiction!" History, then, these things that happen, is, in the plantation context, itself, fiction; a fiction written, dominated, controlled by forces external to itself. It is clear then, that it is only when the society, or elements of the society rise up in rebellion against its external authors and manipulators that our prolonged fiction becomes temporary fact. The novel *New Day* shows not one, but two of these historical collisions, and links them, suggesting in fiction, their factual connection.

The epic form, Lukacs remarks, knows nothing is questions. The hero is essentially at one with the values of his world. With the novel form, the rupture of the hero and the now inauthentic values of his world begins. The novel form is in essence a question mark.

In *New Day*, the second, and young hero, the hero whom we can term 'positive hero's as a distinct from Davie the earlier and 'problematic hero' asks his great Uncle, the narrator, a question which is crucial to the novel and to our discussion.

"Tell me Uncle John. You have spoken of the old things, but you have never given me an opinion. We have been taught in our history classes that Gordon and Bogle were devil's, while Eyre was a saint who only did what he did because it was necessary. You knew both Gordon and Bogle. Were they as bad as they were painted?"

The old Man's answer is evasive and ambivalent. It is part and parcel of the evasive ambivalence of the 'ideology' of gradualism which was the ideology of the more idealistic middle class movement summed up in the People's National Party, a party which emerged after the upheavals of the Jamaican people in 1938. In fact it is clear that Garth himself is a thinly disguised portrait of Norman Washington Manley. On the negative side one could dismiss this movement as Ken Post does, by calling it merely the 'middle-class backlash' against the threatened takeover by varied and manifold popular forces. But in the context of plantation societies like ours, the usual terms cannot be applied without examination.

To evaluate the old man's answer, we must examine the basic significance of the question. The question he is asked is one of historical fact. Yet, from the way Garth asks the question we see that the history taught in the schools is a history based around a Manichean myth. Bogle and Gordon are devil's. Eyre is a saint. This was the version of history taught by the forces that upheld the plantation and the forces that upheld the plantation were the forces of the market. These forces, the forces of the emporium, (emporio) (to borrow Austrias's pun) are the forces of the the imperio - the Empire. The emporialist forces and the imperialist forces are one.

Bogle, Gordon and Eyre are personalities, figures caught in a clash and conflict that are not even primarily of their making. For they are caught in a collision and a clash that was inherent and in-built, and still is, between the plantation system, a system, owned and dominated by external forces, and what we shall call the plot system, the indigenous, autochthonous system. Miguel Angel Asturias defines this clash as the struggle between, "...the indigenous peasant who accepts that corn should be sown only as food, and the creole who sows it as a business, burning down forests of precious trees, impoverishing the earth in order to enrich himself."

Basically then a struggle between the indigenous man still involved in a world of what Marx terms use value where a product is made in response to a human need; and the market economy world with its structure of exchange-value where the product is made in response to its profitability on the market. In the world of use Value, human needs dominate the product. In the world of exchange value the product, the thing made, dominates, manipulates, human need.

Now, as Goldmann argues, the novel form is, "among all literary forms, the most immediately and directly linked to the economic structures in the narrow sense of the term, to the structure of exchange and production for the market." But because the writer, the artist, is by the very nature of his craft linked to the structure of use-value statements, the impulse of

creation thus being directed by human needs, he remained as a hangover in the new form of societies. The novel form reflects his critical and oppositional stance to a process of alienation, which had begun to fragment the very human community, without which the writer has neither purpose, nor source material, nor view of the world nor audience. The novel form, a product of the market economy, its exchange structure, its individual here set free to realize his individuality by the 'liberal' values of individualism, linked to the very existence of the market system, nevertheless, instead of expressing the values of the market society, develops and expands as a form of resistance to this very market society. In effect, the novel form and the novel is the critique of the very historical process which has brought it to such heights of fulfillment.

*A House for Mr. Biswas* whilst it celebrates the talent of its author, and awards him a recognized place among the elite world, is nevertheless a profound indictment of a deprived world in which, to realize his being, Biswas must alienate himself from an impossible community, distorted by phantasmagoric circumstance, to shelter in a jerry built house: and a Prefect car. The individual, dreamt of in the liberal market economy, as being now totally sovereign and free, is shipwrecked by the later developments of this structure which prohibits his fulfilment; and leaves him huddled in a house, escaping from civilization; a Robinson Crusoe clinging to his island for survival through escape from the outside world. His victory, like ours, is pyrrhic.

The 'problematic hero' is the corollary of the problematic novel. This problematic hero is exemplified in Davie; and to some extent, in his father. For like Okwonko in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, old father Campbell, clinging to his belief in God's order and in the inevitability of British justice is shot down by British soldiers, defending the market economy, i.e the plantation, against the challenge of the peasant farmers and the agro-proletarian workers. To make the world safe for the market economy, families are broken up (As in James Ngugi's *Weep Not Child*) and indeed, in *New Day*. Hundred are shot down. The techniques of horror which will be brought to perfection under Hitler and Stalin against European, in Europe itself, are perfected in the emporium-emporium, plantation units. Vic Reid in *New Day* describes the actual historical fact of Colonel Hobbs, a gentle man, who grew roses up at the barracks at Newcastle, getting nine 'rebels' to hang each other in a chapel at Fonthill, ordering thirteen others to dig a trench, and then having the soldiers shoot them into the mass grave. Hobbs had a problem of finding enough quicklime to sanitarly dispose of the bodies. He had another problem too. Afraid of being mocked at for his natural inclination to clemency for the rebels, he felt he had to match and outdo in terror, his fellow officers. He committed suicide after.

In James Ngugi's '*Weep Not Child*', the hero confronts and is tortured by the English settler-farmer who grows pyrethium for the market.

The reaction of the planters in 1895 to the death of a handful of the manager colon-creole class who are killed by Bogle and his followers is one of outrage, not only at the thought of blood-shed but at the threat to the plantation, which was to them the very core and seat of the structure of their 'civilized' values. It is not accidental that H.G. de Lisser, a colon

– creole writer who dealt with 1885 in a novel called *Revenge* sees the battle between the plantation forces and Bogle's forces as a battle between light and darkness. Bogle's followers watch anxiously for a sign from heaven, after a Cecil B. DeMille type ritual ceremony. Joyce, the English plantation heroine, watches anxiously too, as she observes "a great mass of black clouds... moving slowly across the sky... It seemed as though the inky mass were gaining inch by inch on the shining space (i.e. lit up by the moon)... were menacing it with an inevitable doom of obliteration; it was like a huge formless monster advancing slowly but with pitiless tread towards a thing of beauty which it had doomed to extinction..."

The symbolism is quite clear. This passage illustrates what Ramchand, paraphrasing from Fanon has called 'the terrified consciousness' of the Whites. But I am trying to shift from the ground of race which is but one factor in the equation, to the ground Asturias defines. Bogle's followers are men who predominantly sow for food, secondarily for the market. Thus, use value determines their structure of values. Joyce belongs to the plantation system, the exchange structure; and 'the thing of beauty' whose extinction she fears is the complex of values by which she lives; values which have their positive aspect; for example the hero shows a sense of responsibility, thoughtfulness etc.; but values too which bolster their dominant and exploitative position.

Bogle's followers, according to deLisser, cheer wildly when the black clouds cover the moon. It is a sign that they will be helped by God to purge wickedness from the land: and the white creole hero's mother is in no doubt that it is her race, class and their structure of values that are to be purged out of the land. In both deLisser's novel and in Vic Reid's, the basic confrontation is between the plantation and the plot and the structure of values which each represents. I suggest that the conflict and clash that has taken place between two defined groups on this conference, between those who defend the "autonomy" of the "civilized" highly educated artist; and those who defend the claims of the community and the folk, has little to do with racial division and everything to do with who, like Joyce, defend the values of the plantation and those who like Bogle, represent the values of the plot. [...] For if the history of Caribbean society is that of a dual relation between plantation and plot, the two poles which originate in a single historical process, the ambivalence between the two has been and is the distinguishing characteristic of the Caribbean response. This ambivalence is at once the root cause of our alienation; and the possibility of our salvation.

To explain briefly the plantation-plot dichotomy we are compelled to make generalizations.

1. Before the unique Western experience which began with the discovery of the New World, all societies of mankind existed in what Senghor describes as a dual oscillatory process in which Man adapts to Nature, and adapts Nature to his own needs.
2. But with the discovery of the New World and its vast exploitable lands that process which has been termed the 'reduction of Man to Labour and of Nature' had its large scale

beginning. From this moment on Western Man saw himself as the “lord and possessor of Nature” The oneway transformation of Nature began. Since man is a part of Nature, a process of dehumanization and alienation was set in train. In old societies with traditional values based on the new dehumanizing system. In new societies like ours, created for the market, there seemed at first to be no possibility of such a tradition.

3. But from early, the planters gave the slaves plots of land on which to grow food to feed themselves in order to maximize profits. We suggest that this plot system, was, like the novel form in literature terms, the focus of resistance to the market system and market values.
4. For African peasants transplanted to the plot all the structure of values that had been created by traditional societies of Africa, the land remained the Earth - and the Earth was a goddess; man used the land to feed himself; and to offer first fruits to the Earth; his funeral was the mystical reunion with the earth. Because of this traditional concept the social order remained primary. Around the growing of yam, of food for survival, he created on the plot a folk culture – the basis of a social order – in 3 hundred years.

This culture recreated traditional values - use values. This folk culture became a source of cultural guerilla resistance to the plantation system.

But since he worked on the plantation and was in fact the Labour, land and capital, he was ambivalent between the two. After the abolition of slavery the slave-turned-peasant, grew crops both to feed himself, and to sell on the market. The plantation, dependent on mass-labour, was determined to use their ownership of the land to compel him back to work; and to his role in the structure of exchange value. The plantation was the superstructure of civilization; and the plot was the roots of culture.<sup>1</sup> But there was a rupture between them, the superstructure was not related to its base, did not respond to the needs of the base, but rather to the demands of external shareholders and the metropolitan market. The plantation was run by the manager class, the colon class. This class and the labouring indigenous class faced each other across barricades that are in-built in the very system which created them. That is why the clash in 1865 and the clash in 1938 and the future clashes are unavoidable unless the system itself is transformed.

In 1865, in the historical records, the rebels as they killed Charles Price, a black bus contractor shouted back to his claim that he was black: “ You are black but you have a white heart!” Several white doctors were allowed to escape, unhurt. There is, as Barrington Moore points out, a logical and rational basis to peasant resistance to the market economy. “A white heart” aptly describes the man whom Miguel Angel Asturias calls “the man who sows for

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<sup>1</sup> The Custos Baron van Ketelhadt, one of the principal figures of 1865 defended the needs of sugar against beet, by claiming that the sugar estate was the centre of civilization in the island.

O Custódio Barão van Ketelhadt, uma das principais figuras de 1865, defendia as necessidades de açúcar em detrimento da necessidade de beterraba, alegando que a propriedade açucareira era o centro da civilização da ilha.

profit.” The man involved in a structure of Exchange value – which is all of us. Our place in the confrontation is largely determined by whether we accept or reject this structure.

Our appreciation and revaluation of the folk is not therefore, the heroic folkish mythology of a Hitler. For we accept folk culture as a point outside the system where the traditional values can give us a focus of criticism against the impossible reality in which we are enmeshed. But there is no question of going back to a society, a folk pattern whose structure has already been undermined by the pervasive market economy. Robert Serumaga shows this in *Return to the Shadows*. Joe running away from yet another army takeover, goes home to his mother, to tie himself back to the umbilical cord. But his mother has been raped; and his young cousins raped and murdered by soldiers who are the representatives of the large central force which monopoly capitalism, with or without state intervention, must, by the logic of its existence, have at its disposal, to crush any dissent from its totalitarian power. The plantation system which, under the liberal *Free Trade* rethoric, the rethoric which freed the slaves, compensated the masters and set the slaves free in a world dominated by market relations to fend naked for themselves, was the first sketch of monopoly capitalism. George William Gordon, we suggest, wheeling and dealing, buying land, speculating, owning a newspaper, acting as a produce dealer, speaking vehemently in the House of Assembly, claiming the rights of Magna Carta as a freeborn son of Jamaica, embodied the liberal rhetoric and took it seriously. When he became a threat to the emporio/imperio dominance he was hanged by the reality of a totalitarian monopoly system. The out-cry in England was made by Liberal elements who could in England enjoy the freedom offered by liberal free trade politics. But Carlyle saw clearly that plantations were made for lazy Negroes to learn the gospel of work under the spur of the whip. No one dissented when Crown Colony Government was a piece of liberal rhetoric which the brute reality of the system could no longer afford. Bogle and his followers were taught a lesson: in the same way as Indian peasants rioting in Bengal in the 1860's against having to grow indigo as a commercial crop for the English, had to be taught a lesson. The world had to be kept safe for the market economy.

History, to help in this task had to be distorted. The myth of history was used by the plantation to keep its power secure.. It was necessary that Gordon and Bogle should be painted ‘black’; and since “remembrance of things past can give rise to dangerous insights” much of the history was suppressed.

“they do not know what we have seen, for no place has been found in their English history books for the fire that burnt us in Sixty Five.”

He tells his grandnephew Garth, some of it; and this consciousness of the past, and of his grandfather, Davie's, role in it, causes Garth to see himself as the new dedicated elite leader of the masses. But his historical apprehension will be different from theirs. For he still asks “Were they as bad as they were painted” ? The history he has been taught is the history of the plantation, the official history of the superstructure; the only history which has been written.

But the plot too has its own history. A secretive history expressed in folk songs “War down a Monamds, the Queen never know, War O War O War O,” and the old Anglo-Indian General Jackson hunting down rebels in a tragic-comic folksong:

Oh General Jackson

Oh General Jackson, you kill all the black men dem.

In the kumina cult ceremony, Bogle appears through an initiate as an ancestor-god. When asked in 1965 about Bogle, Morant Bay people answered about Bogle and Gordon:

‘Is Justice they were seeking! Justice for the people.’

Again as Moore points out, there is a profound peasant sense of justice which is separate from the abstract concept of the rights of property. The justice of the community. The justice of the peasant is based on the needs of the people who form the community. There is hardly an aspect in which there is not this dichotomy of attitudes. No aspect in which the attitudes and values of the dominant ‘creole-colon plantation structure’ is not used in an essentially exploitative relation to the indigenous plot values.

The clashes of 1965 and 1938 are episodes in a historical continuum. It is significant that deLisser sees 1865 as an isolated episode told through the personal relations of three white character – the hero, the heroine, and the villain who joins with the black “against his race and class” in order to win Joyce but who dies protecting her from an “unmentionable horror” in the end. The real conflict is banished and suppressed even though deLisser senses the continuing unease in his society and writes his book as warning to the dark clouds not to cover the moon.

Reid on the other hand caught up in the release of 1938 and the growth of national feeling, wrote his novel to restore the written past to a people who had only the oral past; and to the middle class who thought, as Naipaul did, that nothing was created in the West Indies and therefore there was no history. Reid wanted to prophesy the future by placing his then present in the context of an almost epic past. In the first part of his book when he deals with the problematic hero Davie who fails ( he goes off to the Morant Cays and creates a community, which is broken up once his son establishes wage scales to respond to the market business of shipping bananas). But Davie died before that, having lost Lucille Dubois, his wife through his new obsession. His quest then turns out to be in vain; and finally inauthentic, as with all the great novels. He dies in a hurricane, imprisoned under the weight of a tree.

The second part of the book with its ‘positive’ hero fails because Garth is made to bear the weight of an expectation that can never be realized. Whilst the first part of the book parallels and patterns the structure of its society; and reflects its failure to satisfy human needs, the second part, fails by ignoring the fact that a change in the superstructure of the plantation, a new Constitution, even Independence, were changes which left the basic system untouched; and which only prolonged the inevitable and inbuilt confrontation between the

plantation and the plot; between the city which is the commercial expression of the plantation and its marginal masses, disrupted from the plot; this is the conflict and its marginal masses, disrupted from the plot; this is the conflict and the clash that we have seen reflected here in this conference, on different levels of awareness, between those who justify and defend the system;and those who challenge it.