

Dehumanization: A social realism in Cyril Dabydeen's DarkSwirl

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Abstract

Caribbean Asian writers play a vital role in displaying colonial history, racial hybridity, migration, love, longing, and guilt. They continue their ongoing exploration of history and its lingering effects on the present. Dabydeen is a prolific author of poetry, prose and novels serves as Poet Laureate of Ottawa explores under the category of racial identity, ethnic culture in realistic concept. The novel Dark Swirl draws on raw material from the author's childhood and youth in the Caribbean island. The novel also depicts the scanty population living on the coast or on the banks of the rivers consists of Negroes, indentured labour, brought from India, and some native Indians. This study attempts to highlight certain details of harmony with the abundant animal life found in the rivers and forests in the form of alligators, fish of innumerable species, reptiles, insects and colourfully plumed birds.

Keywords:- Massacouraman, Creek, Indo-Guyanese migration

Culture plays a vital role in human beings. Dark Swirl a muddy creek which sustains its communal life forming the centre of its culture and its religion and holding together the values. About twenty miles inland in caribbea there are fertile plantations of sugarcane converted from mangrove swamps by settlers. It is in this geographical area where landscape and people offer a mixture of the exotic and the savage, that dabydeen places his village without a name, where the action of the novel takes place.

In that creek, there is a massacouraman a water monster of malignant capabilities who resides within the depths of the swirl and visits the villagers sometimes in their dreams. It is a formidable Guyanese folk legend whose roots in memory and tradition are obscure. The novel begins with ten –year old Indo –

Guyanese boy and his fear of the village creek. Josh is particularly sensitive, but his parents and the other villagers are also well known to the possibility that any freshwater lake or creek might be home to the reptilian massacouraman, a creature once propitiated by natives who no longer dwell in the area. Not only Josh but also “almost everyone in the village at one time or another, had imagined strange reptiles crawling out of the creek at nights and inhabiting the space under the bed, or even crawling into the beds and lying next to them” (8).

A British naturalist arrives at this remote village and peers into the odd places at the edge of the creek. He violates the interdependent relationship between human and the animal world by seeing animals as objects of scientific study. He traps the animals and keeps them in cages in his room ready to be transported to the zoos in different parts of the civilized world. He offers the villagers money for trapping animals for him. He jingles a few coins in his pocket and tells them, “Just let me know . . . if you see strange tods, fish, animals – whatever- I’m willing to pay “ (13). This tampering with a fundamental law of nature is a prelude to the trapping of the subjective world of the native objectified through the massacouraman, and the use of third culture as a showpiece from a bygone past, whose interest lies in its irrelevance to the present.

The villagers see the white man as having brought a curse upon them and regard him as an obeah man; they blame him for his misfortunes and demand that he restore their former condition. One day Josh was pushed into the swirl by the village boys which was noticed by the white man and rescued him. This incident brings the two closer. The white man, in the hope of getting from Josh some information about the creature which scared him, strikes a friendship with him.

The villagers, however, feel uncomfortable about Josh’s increasing friendship with the white man. They attribute to his machinations the changes that have come over Josh, as they find him becoming more and more withdrawn, refusing to partake in the life of the community, even refusing to eat, and having terrible nightmares which make him moan at night. He even falls sick. “Maybe is the stranger. He does something to Josh! He put a spirit in de watta,” (22) is how they explain it. The terrible misgivings expressed by them fall on deaf ears Josh only draws closer to the White Man.

Josh tells the white man about his secret fears and how he actually saw the monster, secrets which no amount of coaxing by the villagers would bring out. The white man does not make fun of his hallucinations. Instead, he pours over his books mulling over theory after theory in a vain effort to find out at least some hints about such a creature. Josh becomes consumed with vivid, feverish dreams of drowning and being pulled under the surface by a creature with “large emerald eyes” and “a mighty board-stiff tail,” and he refuses to eat (23). His parents, Savitri and Ghulam, and then the entire village begin blaming his “sickness” both on the ostensibly haunted creek and on the white stranger, whose collecting of animals and plants is so unfathomable that they quickly accuse him of being a “bad man” who “wuk obeah wid snake an’ cracadile” (27).

The villagers become consumed by the idea of the massacouraman, though no one ever catches more than a glimpse of the creature, and it is more often seen in their dreams than in their waking life. Eventually, Ghulam comes to believe that the advent of the massacouraman is a symbol of Indo-Guyanese migration, a reminder of what the villagers were in India and what they might become in the Caribbean. This realization is linked to Josh’s recovery; in the end, the massacouraman disappears, even though it has awakened in them the idea that they are now resident in the Caribbean. The British naturalist, for his part, is symbolically burned brown by the sun and begins to believe in the existence of the massacouraman, but in the end, he refuses Josh’s invitation to live with and become one of the villagers, disappears into the jungle, and is never heard from again. It is the destiny of the villagers to become citizens of Guyana, though the mythical massacouraman appears as a reminder that, though they might be tolerated because of a history of oppression and displacement shared with the indigenous inhabitants, they themselves are not indigenous. Their relation to the land is a creolized, syncretic one.

In the village in which *Dark Swirl* is set, the Indo-Guyanese residents could hear in the wind echoes of an ancestral past of indigenous men and women fleeing into the bushes; of sugar-plantation owners, white-white, who buried slaves alive under silk-cotton trees with their own dead so their kind would be served even in the underworld; of voodoo brought from Africa to these shores; of jumbies manifesting from smelly hovels; of backoos, who worked in the sugarcane fields in the darkness of the night with an

efficiency no man could match; of a plantation owner riding on a majestic white horse, dragging a heavy chain behind; of Moongazer straddling the road, of indentured people, brown and blackfaces, small-framed, clutching at the *Bhagavad Gita* and reciting remnant words from the *Ramayana* in the flicker of light from the wall lamps in narrow logies as they clung to their faith in this hostile place. (28-29)

The masscouraman invades the dreams and daily lives of Ghulam and the other villagers, and the process of nativization begins as a seemingly forced integration. But the villagers come to realize that they are akin to the masscouraman: “The object in the creek surpassed the stranger, and it was theirs. It was in their own innards, for the creek was inside them; they drank from it when the government’s artesian well was dry” (55). The villagers experience both guilt and a possessive thrill that finally, in the aftermath of colonialism, something might be theirs. Their ‘evil’ is twofold: they are on someone else’s land, regardless of how they got there, and they have been simultaneously deracinated from the Old World and have acquired no other cultural mores in its stead.

In *Dark Swirl*, the appearance of the masscouraman, an environmental spirit, is outside the principle of reason. For the white naturalist, with a reason as his guide, the jungle is not sacred. His goal is to name and control all of its plant and animal manifestations as discrete, disembodied elements rather than as part of a whole landscape. The scientist also has the temerity to attempt to capture the masscouraman, a river spirit, in order to gain fame by exhibiting it in Europe as a freak of the New World. In the colonial construct of “today *magicman*, tomorrow fraud” (Devi 149), he epitomizes the fraud, both because colonialism has failed and because he lacks human empathy. Although the stranger is associated with outside “science” rather than the supernatural, the villagers understand that he is a kind of dark magician. They repeatedly accuse him of working black magic on them:

“He one whiteman jumbieman, tekking out t’ings from the creek; an’ putting t’ings in too!”

“T’ings from the land. . . . T’ings from far.”

“Digging up the ground wid he bare hand,” they imagined.

“Now all ahwe get punish, like Josh an’ he fadder!” (50)

The villagers practise small-scale farming in which they “dig up the ground” and “put things in,” but they do so for survival, and their use of hoes — tools — symbolizes their humanity. Digging in the ground barehanded, as the stranger does, indicates madness or inhumanity. The villagers call the stranger a jumbie, or ghostly spirit, since he is white and represents the attempted return of the colonizer. They imagine that he has brought evil to their slumbering village. Now they fear that they are complicit and will be punished by the massacouraman.

Despite blaming the stranger for the advent of the massacouraman, the villagers understand that the creature is a Guyanese local:

“Is massacouraman he bring wid he?” one questioned nervously.
“It can be, Massacouraman belaang right in dis place. It na he who bring it.” (27)

The massacouraman’s provenance is uncertain but not for long. Ghulam is the first person to question its relation to his own place in the world: “Was it what they called massacouraman, something which was close to him and the other villagers, which was local — wasn’t from outside. Was part of himself, really. Where did such thoughts come from?” (48).

Unlike the scientist, the villagers in *Dark Swirl* understand that the removal of flora and fauna from the jungle is an affront to nature. They have not yet recovered from their dehumanization during indentureship and are averse to caging other creatures. The stranger is the colonial thief and jailer. When Ghulam and the villagers first see animal “specimens” locked in crates and boxes, “they looked at the stranger in disbelief, because this was the first time they had seen these creatures outside their natural habitat. The stranger was definitely a different kind of human being; they were convinced now of his danger” (31). Only a madman would attempt to control nature or transplant its elements; the colonizer does not fit the definition of ‘human’ because he does not respect the natural order. Ghulam intuitively feels that freeing the specimens might rid the village of the spectre of retribution from the massacouraman, and he goes one night on a mission to free the animals. The stranger resists seizure of a crate, saying, “I brought it here and I’ll take it with me; as I’ll take all the other things.” His relationship with the land, again, is one of colonial

acquisition. Angry, Ghulam reiterates what some of the villagers believe: “Is obeah you wuk obeah pon we” (77).

Removal of bits of the land cannot be seen as anything but an act of bad magic. His attempt to free the specimens shows his understanding that the land is already haunted by its history of colonization and that he must stop this last iteration of its disembodiment.

Unlike Ghulam, the colonizing white naturalist never marries and has no progeny. He has been so busy colonizing others that he forgot to ensure his own posterity; even his attempted capture of the masscouraman to secure fame fails. He is left with no legacy, remaining the nameless white embodiment of colonial greed that can never be content, because there is always more to acquire. The villagers, as he says, might be “simple folk” whose history has been taken from them, but they are human folk, and he is an old creature with the sickness of colonialism: “How he festered, like an old disease” (99). He is the rightful sacrificial scapegoat, and the masscouraman takes him: one day he simply disappears into the jungle, falling victim to that old European colonial terror, the ecological excess of the tropics.

Dabydeen’s work also offers the subtle and timely reminders that migrant communities, even with their own socio-economic struggles, can politically and physically displace marginalized indigenous communities and that the national substitution of one historically oppressed minority group with another does nothing, without the alliance of those groups, to remedy the systemic injustices of the colonial legacy.

Reference

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