

PSYCHIC IMBALANCE IN THE MIDDLE-CLASS WEST INDIAN: EDGAR MITTLEHOLZER'S *CORENTYNE THUNDER*

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Abstract

*The Caribbean can rightly be referred to as a plural society with different sets of cultural values existing side-by-side the other. This can, to a good extent, be attributed to the brutal mode of "founding" and settling of the place. However, with the abolition of slavery, education was introduced into the area. But education in the early period of colonial rule was designed not to equip the blacks with any practical skills, but to impart the rudiments of reading, writing and moral instruction. This underscored the subordinate and acquiescent status of the negroes in relation to the whites and further intensified the deep-seated sense of inferiority and lack of confidence in the blacks. The latter responded in several ways, which included the total acceptance of foreign values and a nostalgic attachment to vestiges of the folk tradition, or, a blend of both cultures. The objective of this paper is to investigate (if any) the psychological effect of the above historical realities on the West Indians. The methodology of the work is to first examine Edgar Mittleholzer's *Corentyne Thunder* which is the primary text in the study and then have recourse to relevant critical materials in a bid to enhancing the focus of the discussions. In the end, it is found out that there exists in the Caribbean a complex situation created by the existence and interlocking of different sets of cultural values. The result is psychic imbalance; a psychological dilemma between a yearning force and a loathing of the major different cultures. This is depicted in Edgar Mittleholzer's *Corentyne Thunder* and discussed in this paper.*

Key Words: Caribbean, Psychic, Imbalance, Middle-class, Mittleholzer, Plurality

Introduction

Following the abolition of slavery in the Caribbean Islands, literacy was introduced into the area. But education in the early period of colonial rule was designed not to equip the blacks with any practical skills, but to impart the rudiments of reading, writing and moral instruction. This, which was initially organised by the missionaries underscored the subordinate and acquiescent status of the negroes vis-a-vis their white masters. Later on, the blacks were tutored in foreign history, literary and musical traditions and even the value system of the metropolis was imposed wholesale on them. Thus, the focus of colonial education encouraged further amnesia and shame about the African past and pushed the blacks towards accepting Europe as good. This intensified the deep-seated sense of inferiority and lack of confidence in the blacks.

The blacks responded in several ways which included the total acceptance of foreign values, which presupposed a negation of one's racial roots. There was also the rejection of Western values and a nostalgic attachment to vestiges of folk tradition, or a blend of both cultures. This situation gave rise to the creation of a plural society.

The post-emancipation West Indies was thus, still strongly under foreign domination through colonialism. Consequently, there exists in the Caribbean a complex situation created by the existence and interlocking of different sets of cultural values: the foreign-derived metropolitan culture which is mostly seen among the upper and middle-classes and the black Creole culture which contains many African-derived elements and is practised mainly by the lower-classes. Also present is the rural Indian peasant culture.

These various social classes act and think differently and one class is elevated and aspired towards, to the detriment of the other. While the upper and middle-classes speak Standard English, contract legal marriages and practise the culture and religion of their former European masters (attend either the Catholic or Anglican Church), the lower classes, on the other hand, generally speak the Creole dialect, engage in fetish practices and do not contract legal marriages. Thus, the upper and middle-classes usually have a formal education, are financially secure and also have unit families with the father as the apparent head. They, unlike the lower classes refuse to be associated with anything reminiscent of the African past. Consequently, their world is cold, artificial and pretentious with very little evidence of communality within the families.

And so, the Caribbean has been described as a plural society made up of people displaying different modes of behaviour, who are held together by economic reasons rather than by a sense of belonging to a common culture. The place therefore, became a deterministic society where social status was predicated upon skin pigmentation and people were divided into exclusive water-tight colour compartments. This divisive unity was the result of different responses and modes of adjustment to the void created by dispossession. The slave ancestors had been dispossessed of their motherlands and forced to live in an alien and hostile milieu in which they were made to feel racially and culturally inferior. The result was a psychological dilemma between a yearning force and a loathing of the major different cultures – the peasant and the middle-class cultures. This psychic imbalance in the middle-class West Indian as explored by Edgar Mittleholzer in *Corentyne Thunder* is the subject of study in this paper.

Methodology

Being a literary research, the work is mainly library-based. First, Edgar Mittleholzer's *Corentyne Thunder* has been rigorously examined and as many relevant critical materials as could be found have been consulted to further elucidate on the subject. These include, reviews, critiques, articles, and interviews.

Psychic Imbalance in the West-Indian Intellectual

Published in 1941, *Corentyne Thunder* focuses on the attempts of the Caribbean middle-class to respond creatively to the various influences in the Caribbean social system. In the novel – *Corentyne Thunder* - Edgar Mittleholzer considers the problem arising from alienation, uprootment and of being heir to several cultures, which is a common psychological dilemma of New World blacks. In the work, Geoffrey Weldon, the central character is shown as oscillating between two diametrically opposed socio-cultural systems as he tries to figure out how to reconcile the diverse cultures offered by the diverse pasts of the Caribbean. At the

root of Geoffry's dilemma is the problem of cultural identification with a particular set of norms which could provide him with the framework for everyday life.

The two opposing cultural systems presented in the novel are the metropolitan culture and the rural Indian culture. The West Indian middle-class is heir to both cultural systems and the dilemma arises when he tries to divorce himself at any time from either culture. Mittleholzer highlights the dilemma of the West Indian intellectual who is alienated from his peasant roots, yearns to be fully accepted by the Western world, and yet feels a sense of void and incompleteness because of his rejection of the folk experience. The author thus, explores extensively the issue of psychic imbalance resulting from racial mixtures in the West Indies and shows Geoffry Weldon trying unsuccessfully to come to terms with his dual racial and cultural heritage. And so, *Corentyne Thunder* deals simultaneously with the unadorned, resilient nature of Guyanese peasant life and the divided consciousness of the West Indian intellectual.

The author deals with the schisms that exist between these two groups of characters i.e., the peasants and the middle-class West Indians. The dilemma arises when the latter tries to divorce himself at any time from either culture.

However, side-by-side the exploration of the dilemma of the middle-class West Indian who, through education and socialization has become cut off from the peasant world and whose desires, ambition and attitude to life are informed by Eurocentric consciousness, the author satirises the West Indian "arrivistes" middle-class for their foolish, uninformed and indiscriminate imbibing of Western ways as seen for instance, in Baijan, Ramgollal's son and his fiancée, Elizabeth Ramjit. Geoffry Weldon, the prototype of the West Indian intellectual tries unsuccessfully to reach a median between assenting to his father's Eurocentric expectations and acknowledging his visceral attachment to Indian folk culture. Geoffry cannot reconcile his liking for classical music, European philosophy and art forms with his uncontrollable sexual attraction towards Katree. Katree represents all that Geoffry despises: she is unlettered, poor and lives in a poorly ventilated dirty hut. She is content to enjoy passions of the moment and does not analyse or attempt to justify her actions as Geoffry does. The relationship between these two characters represents a temporary encounter between the European-oriented, calculating and intellectual world and the indigenous, physical and spontaneous peasant existence. It is an imaginary confrontation between the most unsophisticated member of the Indian society and the "hypercivilized" member of the middle-class.

However, Mittleholzer delineates the world of the East Indian peasants in all its stark reality. He shows this world as gradually adjusting to modern ways. The different generations of peasants have different attitudes to life but share the strength of the folk experience which makes them pragmatic in the face of vicissitudes and change. The differences between the peasants' expectation of life shows that this experience is neither static nor pre-apportioned. The various generations respond differently to different aspects of their life, for instance, due to Ramgollal's bitter history of deprivation through indentureship, and anxiety because of financial uncertainty, he translates each new disaster into fiscal terms; for instance, the issue of Katree's pregnancy. There is also his hidden store of coins which provides him with a sense of security against future deprivation, even though he agonizes over any unexpected expenditure.

The emphasis here is not on the ludicrous dimensions of Ramgollal's miserliness but on the security provided by his possession of this money. Ramgollal regards money as an abstract, though comforting quality, while his daughters have a more pragmatic approach to money; for example, Sosee and Beena do not hesitate to plunder their father's store of money for their personal purposes.

Ramgollal belongs to the generation of East Indian peasants who have been socialized into self-deprivation. His inordinate attachment to money is an index to the depth of his insecurity. His offspring are not weighed down by such considerations and are more open, spontaneous and therefore, more human in their attitude to life, for instance, Katree engages in an affair with Geoffry, despite the knowledge that he is her kin and that the affair must necessarily be transient. Beena also plunders his father's store of money to save the life of the man she loves despite the fact that he is married. The need and desires of Ramgollal's children do not, thus, always coincide with his end. Their love for him does not prevent them from defying him in order to achieve their purposes.

Like Selvon, Mittleholzer also however, presents the peasants world without sentiments. He places the beauty and ugliness of this world side-by-side its changeable policies so that simultaneously, we see the physical beauty of the girls, their devotion to hard work, their father and to picking the lice in their hair. We also see the filthy, untidy interior of their home. Nature itself is not romanticized and while it occasionally reflects the inner turmoil of some of the characters, it is usually implacable and uncaring about the problems of the people.

Mittleholzer has a vision of a West Indies in which the middle-class can learn enduring lessons from the peasants' experience. While depicting the peasants' world as less than sanitary and harmonious, he shows that the middle-class West Indian could cope better with existential problems by adopting the pragmatic attitude of the peasants. Through the depiction of Big Man Weldon and Geoffry Weldon, Mittleholzer shows how inhumane and distant the Eurocentric West Indian can become; for example, Big Man, though not fully European himself deplores anything native and berates his son, James for speaking like a "coolie". Geoffry is shown to be selfish and calculating in the way he handles Clara's abortion and in the casual way he starts an affair with Katree without regard to its implications and outcomes.

The latter relationship clarifies the fundamental differences between these two groups of people - the peasants and the middle-class. Geoffry regards the affair as a pleasurable way of spending his vacation and feels no remorse at leaving Katree pregnant with his child. He, however, agonizes over his conflicting inclinations and is unable to reconcile both his physical desires and intellectual leanings. Katree, on the other hand, fully acknowledges her physical desires and welcomes the idea of having a baby with or without Geoffry's support. She is not overwhelmed by Geoffry's erudition and whenever the latter embarks on an intellectual monologue, she ignores him.

However, through Ramgollal's offspring, Mittleholzer also delineates the different possibilities open to the West Indians. Ramgollal is a miserly peasant whose vision and expectation of life are limited to monetary considerations. However, other possibilities are open to his progeny, such as the life of the alienated middle-class intellectual, like Geoffry; the experience of the confused superficial "arrivistae" such as Baijan and Sosee; and the impassive but resourceful lives of contemporary peasants as exemplified by Katree and Beena.

In the end, Mittleholzer's depiction of the dilemma created by the middle-class West Indian's divided consciousness loses its potency through the depiction of Geoffry. His uncertainties might be real but he is too superficial and machiavellian to sustain the reader's empathy. Ultimately, Mittleholzer implies that all the valuable lessons can be learnt from the world and responses of the East Indian peasants which he explores without bias.

Conclusion

This paper has thus, examined the issue of psychic imbalance in the West Indian middle-class as explored in Edgar Mittleholzer's *Corentyne Thunder*. The psychic imbalance arises from alienation, uprootment and of being heir to several cultures. The slave ancestors had been dispossessed of their motherlands and forced to live in an alien and hostile milieu in which they were made to feel racially and culturally inferior. The result is a psychological dilemma between a yearning force and a loathing of the major different cultures. At the root of this dilemma is the problem of cultural identification with a particular set of norms which could provide the framework for everyday life. And so, the novel while dealing with the unadorned resilient nature of Guyanese peasant life also simultaneously deals with the divided consciousness of the West Indian intellectual. It explores the schisms that exist between these two groups of characters.

However, while depicting the peasant world as less than sanitary, Mittleholzer shows that the middle-class West Indian could cope better with existential problems by adopting the pragmatic nature of the peasants. He implies that all the valuable lessons could be learned from the world and responses of the East Indian peasants which he explores without bias.

Generally, the emphasis on folk characters in the literature of a changing milieu helps in the creation of a myth about the authentic, organic and harmonious traditional life as a foil against the onslaught of disruptive foreign influences. Mittleholzer does not however, simplify issues and delineates the world of the East Indians in their stark reality. He locates his fictional world firmly within the tradition of this "little" people (the rural dwellers). He uses their speech patterns, refers to their customs, world-views and responses to a changing society in order to show the tangible existence of a way of life which must be properly evaluated in order to enable West Indians to adjust easily to change. He consistently shows that without a fundamental attachment to the beneficial aspects of folkways, the West Indian is liable to become adrift as seems to be the case with the West Indian intellectual in this novel. He sees the West Indies as being on the brink of confrontation with Western civilization and he shows that although aspects of traditional life are reactionary and should be discarded, the positive attributes of this life are necessary to successfully confront a foreign culture.

He encourages creolization as long as it is accepted with caution and does not involve a fool-hardy abdication of folkways. This vision is conveyed through the characters who, though represent various responses to change, share the strengths of the folk experience.

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A BRIEF NOTE ON THE CONTRIBUTOR

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