

# *Love and the West Indian Novel*

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IN THIS ARTICLE, the word "love" refers to romantic love, "falling in love," which is not the same thing as loving. Psychologists explain that "falling in love" is usually a matter of projecting certain ideal concepts on to a personality that may or may not approximate to them. "Loving," however, concerns the reality of another complete with faults. In what follows, the term, "love," refers to the concept of an attraction distinct from sexuality, powerful enough to overcome the will of the partners and usually causing the sensation that the loved one is in every way uniquely suited to, even predestined for oneself. Historically, its origins probably lie in the tradition of courtly love and romantic passion. Its most recent manifestation is as a part of the Western middle-class ideal of love and marriage which, as a popular song once assured us, go together like a horse and carriage.

A large body of literature exists demonstrating that romantic love arose at a specific time in the culture of Europe; the concept is geographically and historically determined. C. S. Lewis, in *The Allegory of Love*, observes that "love, in our sense of the word is as absent from the literature of the dark ages as from that of antiquity."<sup>1</sup> Elsewhere he says, "there can be no mistaking the novelty of romantic love. Our only difficulty is to imagine, in all its bareness, the mental world that existed before its coming" (p. 4). Denis de Rougemont, in *L'Amour et L'Occident*,<sup>2</sup> blames the rise of romantic love on a misunderstanding of the rhetoric of certain early Christian heretics. The psychologist, Theodore Reik, noted that romantic love is "love one's better self or ego-ideal, seen in someone else." He added that love "is not a biological need, since there are millions of people who do

not feel it and many centuries and cultural patterns in which it is unknown."<sup>3</sup>

The romantic ideal, as a part of what Germaine Greer has called falling-in-love-and-living-happily-ever-after, has had its greatest hold on the European middle classes. The novel as an art form, is like romantic love a cultural development of relatively recent origin and is also associated with the values of the European middle class.

It is not surprising that the ideal of romantic love plays a major role in the European novel, from cheap romantic fiction — that of Barbara Cartland, for example — through the classic works — *Pamela*, *Jane Eyre*, *Madame Bovary*, *War and Peace* — to the extreme of its mirror image, "idealism in reverse," in pornography such as *The Story of 'O'*. But if we examine the West Indian novel we find some specifically non-European responses to the romantic ideal, as well as a consciousness of it as a cultural possibility. For various reasons, the attention of West Indian novelists has been turned towards the working class and in discussing the novels, we should remember that they may reflect not only West Indian but also class values. Novelists who are middle class by virtue of education or upbringing may find that their own values are in conflict with those of the working class they seek to portray. West Indian middle-class values are essentially those of the European middle class.

A social psychologist, Madeline Kerr, in her book, *Personality and Conflict in Jamaica*, suggests that the Jamaican working class custom of weaning male infants by painting the mother's nipples with a bitter liquid seems to lead to "strongly ambivalent feelings to women, a strong permanent tie to the mother, and a promiscuous attitude to wife or girl-friend." She says, "in the Kingston cinema, romantic love always seems to cause cat-calls and exclamations of 'why he fuss so for one woman? There plenty others.'"<sup>4</sup> I doubt that so much can be ascribed to bitter nipples but when one thinks of calypso which is, or was, folk-art and existed side by side with American popular music that fairly dripped sentimentality, one finds it quite difficult to think of a calypso in which anything remotely resembling love appears. None of this is intended to suggest that romantic love is foreign

to the West Indian working class in the sense that they never experience it but rather that the West Indian population, descended from non-European populations, has not chosen to give it an important place in folk-art which suggests at least an attitude rather different from that of European middle classes. There is, of course, a Guyanese word meaning something like romantic love: typee. Wordsworth McAndrew's word-list of typee terms in "Oooiy,"<sup>5</sup> supplies synonyms from Trinidad, St. Vincent, St. Lucia and Grenada. What is interesting about typee, however, is the context in which the word usually appears. There is always humour (stage fourteen of typee in McAndrew's list in "Typhosious Rikkitiks"). Secondly, as McAndrew observes, the relevant verbs are those normally associated with disease — an abnormal, not an enviable condition as in "all the world loves a lover." Thirdly, typee is difficult to distinguish from sexual desire. An anecdote in "Oooiy" illustrates this. A woman and her common-law husband were at a party and he left to go to the lavatory. She followed him and took hold of his penis as he urinated, refusing to let go "even though a crowd gathered and he slapped her quite hard several times." The husband later told friends that this was "something she 'always' did whenever they went out together." McAndrew comments that "the woman suffering from typee feels compelled, even though she and her gentleman live in the same house, to assert her ownership over his penis whenever they go out" (McAndrew, p. 4). One may expect interesting results from the interaction of, on the one hand, the need to be reasonably faithful to the attitude prevalent in the communities treated in fiction and, on the other, the idea of love, whether as romantic passion or as part of the bourgeois concept of love and marriage.

I turn to two quotations, one from Ismith Khan's novel *The Obeah Man*:

She wished she did not need this man who could make her do anything without being able to expect some return of affection from him. Was this what was called love? Or was that something that only people in far away places like they show in films know? In these islands, people lived with one another so that they would

have someone close by to strike or curse each day when the sun was too hot or the rainy season too long. Who knew love?<sup>6</sup>

The second quotation is from Claude McKay's novel, *Banana Bottom*, and it is about the heroine, Bitá, who returns to Jamaica from England where she has been educated and identifies herself completely with the black Jamaican peasants and marries the cartman, Jubban:

They lived their life upon a level completely different from her earlier romantic conception of love. Once, she had thought of love as a kind of mystical force, incomprehensible and uncontrollable. But gradually, she had lost all that feeling of the quality of love for it was a borrowed thing, an exotic imposition, not a real intrinsic thing that had flowered out of the mind of her race.<sup>7</sup>

Both of these quotations suggest some sense of the difficulty of applying romantic love-conventions to a West Indian working class setting. Khan's *The Obeah Man* deals primarily with a rift between Zampi, the Obeah man of the title, and his girl-friend, Zolda. Zampi is a brooding, introspective figure whereas Zolda is an extrovert, a Carnival-loving woman, and their relationship is, at first, tense and antagonistic. Zampi has not danced at the Carnival for four years. During that last Carnival, he met Zolda and fell in love with her. The bulk of the novel concerns their search to re-establish that past relationship. The kind of love Khan is dealing with should be apparent from the following quotation: "a woman in love is in love twenty-four hours a day, each day of the week, each day of the year. No dark of night, no fall of rain, no thunderclap injects the evanescence of the universe into her brain" (p. 31).

Nevertheless, for the greater part of the novel, what we see is a relationship of tension and conflict expressed in terms of a vigorous sexuality. Zolda's flirtation with another man, Massahood the stick-fighter, leads to his attempted rape of her and the murder of a cripple who intervenes to help Zolda. She is then contrite and turns to Zampi. Beyond this point, Zolda ceases to be an independent individual and takes on a girlish submissiveness, her desires totally subordinate to the will of Zampi. The earlier relationship of strife was, for the most part, between two adults. In the new relationship, Zampi has a kind of parental

authority. Khan constructs, at the end, an atmosphere of romance that does not permit even the possibility of disagreement. Zolda's status as an independent personality is sacrificed to provide the required harmony. Some particularly bad writing suggests that Khan is not entirely at ease with the dispensation: "let a firefly glow in the evening, let a frog call, let the crickets scratch their thighs to screeching, let love live like a lonely lost thing locked up in the heart" (p. 31). The alliteration strains for effect and is merely mawkish. So the effect of the appearance of romantic love, as opposed to sexual tension, in *The Obeah Man* has three important results. First, it leads to a dislocation in the novel as far as the portrayal of Zolda's character is concerned. It is accompanied by a failure of the novelist's technique which suggests that the link between the ideal and the world Khan has created is not a comfortable one and, most important, it sets up a contrast by which the sexual relationship of Zolda and Massahood, which the plot shows as leading to disaster, is seen to partake of the negative, destructive nature that Khan ascribes to the Carnival.

The tension of this kind of sexual relationship can easily become associated with some malaise seen in the society as a whole. So in Mittelholzer's novel, *Sylvia*,<sup>8</sup> the problems of a colonial society in difficult economic times are reflected in the central character's suffering and frustration in human relationships. There is a good deal of talk about love in *Sylvia* (her father tells her to marry for love just before going, yet again, to the sea-wall with a friend) but Mittelholzer's preoccupation with Freudian categories results in the appearance of masochism, Oedipus complexes and so forth. Once again, however, the antagonistic relationships are seen in a critical light by reference to the ideal of love.

Out of the emphasized tension of man-woman relationships in so many West Indian novels, a type of the West Indian woman began to evolve. Zolda, for the greater part of *The Obeah Man*, conforms to this type. In her relationship with Massahood, and, most of the time, with Zampi, she shows typical characteristics; she is driven by circumstances and her own contradictory nature to oppose what she deeply wants, to enter into relationships with

men in which she develops an antagonism to them which is usually expressed as the denial of her own sexual desire and the use of her sexual desirability as a weapon; she cannot help acting as she does for her contradictory femininity is like a natural force. We are told that she loves Zampi for the feeling he gave her of not being directly at fault. The same applies to Sylvia who has a weak character inherited from her mother. This weakness endangers both Sylvia and the men she meets. She is almost predatory in her attitude to one young man, Benson. Kenneth Ramchand has referred to the fictional image of the mulatto woman as "socially insecure and sexually overcharged" and he sees Sylvia as a part of this pattern — though he admits that her angst is portrayed as having to do with the spirit of her time rather than the fact of her mixed blood.<sup>9</sup> Yet the vulnerability and sexuality that he sees in mulatto heroines can be seen in heroines not specifically presented as mulatto such as Zolda and in heroines almost certainly not mulatto such as Stella in Austin Clarke's *Survivors of the Crossing*. Elsewhere, Ramchand remarks that Mahler in Hearne's *The Land of the Living* "puts his life back together in the warmth of Bernice's generous and exemplary love" (p. 48); Bernice Heneky, of course, is also a mulatto. It is more likely that a fictional type of Caribbean Woman has arisen out of the antagonistic relationships of insecure male and vulnerable female. It may be important, in this connection, that all of the novels discussed were written by men.

To return to the love-relationship, Roger Mais, in his three novels, moved from a slum-background in which man-woman relationships are again characterized by conflict (*The Hills were Joyful Together* and *Brother Man*) to a pastoral setting which is not easily recognizable as West Indian in his third novel, *Black Lightning*. In the third novel, there are two relationships in which love appears as a positive force. It has been said, that one relationship in the first novel, *The Hills were Joyful Together*, that of Surjue and Rema, is an exception to the usual antagonism.<sup>10</sup> That, however, is a relationship between dominant male and submissive female. Surjue's egoistic and (for that very reason) insecure masculinity which leads him to commit the robbery as a result of which he dies, is also an essential part of his rela-

tionship with Rema. At one point, Rema tries to warn Surjue about his friend, Flitters, adding "I don't ever aim to meddle in your business honey but . . .," to which Surjue replies "You leave him to me, you said you didn't aim to meddle in my business an' that's the way I want it should be." It is precisely this precarious machismo (at another point he boasts of "having the cojones" in the relationship) that leads directly into the disastrous attempt at robbery:

"There's crowds of women chasin' me now."

"Yeh."

"They get a hankerin' for me."

"I know. A chap like you."

"I don't mess myself up with them though. Don't want no strings. Let them do the worryin' see?"

"Yeh, I know."

"Could pick a dozen women, just walk down the street. They'd give me money to sleep with them if I wanted. I'm sickenin' of them, that's the truth." He looked down at the great muscles of his thighs. . . . He looked across at Flitters and light flowed into his eyes.

"Say that over again. Gimme the layout."<sup>11</sup>

The ideal love "works" because it is one kind of male West Indian dream come true, between a macho man with an old knife-scar on his chest and a woman so submissive as to be, at times, almost bovine. Mais depicted an ideal love based on some of the assumptions of that social context but the idealization did not preclude an awareness of its potential danger.

The second novel, *Brother Man*, has a sort of counterpoint between the relationship of Papacita and Girlie and that of Brother Man and Minette. The former relationship follows the familiar pattern of the clash between male economic dependence and male assumptions of superiority. The two spend most of their time fighting, despite one very moving scene in which she sings an American love song. We are assured, however, that they are "in love." Actually, Mais never depicts in *Brother Man* two working class characters, credible human personalities, engaged in a romantic love relationship that differs from the attraction and tension of pure sexuality. In the action of the novel — as opposed to the statements of the characters — we see, in the case

of Papacita and Girlie, a violent sexuality, and, in the case of Brother Man and Minette, a relationship between Messiah and disciple. The ideal remains an aspiration serving Mais's protest intention by becoming a criterion by which the results of poverty can be castigated.

There is a scene in the third novel, *Black Lightning*, in which Miriam falls and cuts her leg:

She looked up from staring mutely at the blood on the thigh and saw him standing there beside her.

"Miriam, you hurt yourself."

He was lifting her in his arms.

She laughed a little jerkily, his sudden movement had unnerved her. She laughed, with her head back against his shoulder. He kissed her on the mouth. She said, still laughing like that: "I — I thought you were going to beat me!"

And he answered her quickly, earnestly: "Don't ever say a thing like that!" (p. 209)

If Mais had placed this incident in the slum setting of his first novels, Glen's last remark might have had an ironic overtone since prevailing attitudes would have made Miriam's suspicion well-founded. Ramchand has said that the healing power of human love is found and celebrated between Glen and Miriam because Mais has moved beyond "social protest" and "materialistic determinism" to the tragic in life, transcending the special social context (*op. cit.*, p. 188). I suggest that the movement from slum to pastoral paradise was necessary simply because West Indian novelists dealing with the black working class seem to have considerable difficulty in presenting romantic love credibly and positively.

A novelist much concerned with romantic love is John Hearne. In *The Land of the Living*,<sup>12</sup> one character who is a drunk delivers an exaggerated attack on romantic love and, of course, the drunkenness and the exaggeration have the effect of neutralizing the attack. One of his characters, Mahler, talks of the sexual snobbery of the West Indian male, unable to comprehend the more subtle assumptions of Aphrodite. Hearne's success in presenting credible love-relationships may depend on the fact that his characters are, as Barrie Davies has said, in *The Islands in*



*Between*, “uncompromisingly middle-class” (which, in a colonial West Indian context, means Europeanized). It is true that the condition of mutual need fulfilled by mutual giving that we see in the relationship of Mahler and Joan, is, in Davies’s words, “credible, with a rightness of its own.” Joan has many of the traits of the misguided, oversexed woman found in other West Indian novels and, when she meets Mahler, a German Jew who lacks the insecure male egoism which, in other West Indian novels leads such women into antagonistic relationships, her selflessness can find fulfilment. It is perhaps a condition of the success of this romance that the hero is a foreigner, a sort of modern Wandering Jew, bearing the accumulated moral subtleties of Europe.

I have so far confined myself to novels which concern black West Indian characters. Novels which have white West Indian characters may be and sometimes are successful love-novels. One thinks of McDonald’s *The Humming-bird Tree*.<sup>13</sup> A more interesting example is Nichole’s *White Boy* in which, as the white hero discovers his racial identity (“I love these people and I love the colony but I also love my parents and I thank God my skin is white”) he also discovers that he never loved the coloured girl, Shirley (“she was a test case”) and that he *does* love the white girl, Romy. Shirley says, “Love is just a word. A sound which covers a lot of things like respect, companionship and understanding.”<sup>14</sup> She obviously is more prosaic about it than Rupert is. The fact that Shirley earlier spent a “dirty weekend” with Rupert and was, as she put it “second-hand” whereas Romy turns out to be the virgin rather suggests a common identification of “coloured” with “lust” and “white” with “love” in the novel. At all events, the love-ideal becomes clearly associated with whiteness. The young Rupert remembers that thoughts about sex are “nigger-thinking.”

One novel set among East Indians, Selvon’s *The Plains of Caroni*,<sup>15</sup> is also a credible love-story. The novel is set in Trinidad and is the story of two couples. Seeta and her husband, Harrilal, a former cane-cutter, have risen in society; this success is entirely due to Seeta’s ambition and business acumen. Her money and care are lavished on her son, Romesh, and she ignores

her other children. She claims to hate Harrilal's brother, Balgobin. Romesh falls in love with a white girl, Petra, who resents the domineering Seeta. It is revealed, when Balgobin falls ill and dies, that Seeta had loved him and had married Harrilal only because the marriage was arranged by their parents. Balgobin is Romesh's real father as a result of a romantic meeting with Seeta in the cane-field before her marriage to Harrilal. At the end of the novel, Romesh rejects his mother's control and leaves for England, promising to return to Petra.

Seeta is not a typical Hindu wife since she holds the purse strings: "this was so unlike the traditional image of the obedient servile wife that Harrilal did not dare to let anybody know the true state of affairs in his house" (p. 12). She is the perfectly amorphous social being; Selvon says she could have "a village face and a city face, or exhibit certain manners and behaviour which fooled people into thinking they had her typed when, at will, she was able to transform herself into somebody else" (p. 61). Thus Selvon separates Seeta completely from her social background and makes room to write a West Indian novel which handles the theme of romantic love without faltering.

Seeta's meeting with the dying Balgobin is remarkable as an example of Selvon's control of emotion:

Her love for him had never died. She had not even tried, in her relationship with Harrilal, to transfer her affections. Seeing him there now, it was as if she stood completely naked inside and out, shorn of every pretension as if a Maracas wave had tumbled over her, leaving a bewildered, panic-stricken girl . . . Seeta, framed in the window by the morning sunlight, she seemed to him to be as he had always remembered.

"Seeta."

He had turned his head to look at her and now, calling her name, he waited for a kind word, a tender look.

"Go away Balgo. . . . Why you come here for?" (p. 131)

The lapse into dialect and the unaccustomed use of the diminutive convey her terrified reaction as resistance becomes longing. Selvon makes the characters express emotion and does not need Mais's more external approach nor is he ever in danger of Khan's sentimentality. Seeta and Balgobin had met and made love "that

dark night in the cane-fields in a love that transcended all ordinary understanding. . . . It was in the dark she had given herself to him so freely, with such utter abandon that, had he not known better, he might have wondered" (p. 123). That Balgobin would have wondered about Seeta's virginity is a detail that places the novel in a very different world from that of Mais's first two novels; Selvon is able to refer to the values of traditional Hindu culture or to ignore them if he chooses. This detail, coming after a description of transcendent love, is dangerously close to bathos but, by a certain perverse realism, it turns the flood into shallows just in time.

Seeta's attitude to her first sexual experience is also significant; She had said afterwards that the only way she could live would be to turn her great love into great hate. She had been a virgin a few minutes before and he had pained her gaining entrance. She would forget the ecstasy and the exquisite joy and remember only the physical pain. (p. 123)

Seeta is making a distinction that Khan's Massahood, Mais's Girlie and Mittelholzer's Grantley Russell would all find incomprehensible. Massahood, for instance, "knew the very fibres of a woman's nerve centre . . . it could not distinguish between pain and pleasure . . . all was love" (*The Obeah Man*, p. 57).

The difference between "love" and "lust" presupposes that in "love," there is the participation, even the ascendancy, of faculties other than the physical. Seeta is separating mind from the physical sensation. That we can accept this psychological manipulation on Seeta's part shows how far Selvon has moved from the majority of West Indian novelists.

In the second love story, that of Romesh and Petra, Selvon uses education as the individualizing force. Romesh describes himself as having "a lot of the Indian idea of filial piety in him" but his half-brother, Teeka, describes him as a "white Indian." Selva emphasizes the Westernization of the boy, Romesh (the girl, Petra, is a white West Indian) using education to separate the characters from the traditional Hindu background (one thinks of the vicious sound Naipaul's Tara can give the expression "love letter"). Selvon individualizes as much as possible in order to produce the best love story in West Indian fiction.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1936), p. 9.
- <sup>2</sup> Denis de Rougement, *L'Amour et L'Occident* (Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions, 1939).
- <sup>3</sup> Quoted in J. A. C. Brown, *Freud and the Post-Freudians* (London: Pelican, 1964), p. 173.
- <sup>4</sup> *Personality and Conflict in Jamaica* (London: Collins, 1963), p. 45.
- <sup>5</sup> "Oooiy: a folklore manual" (Georgetown), n.d., n.p.
- <sup>6</sup> *The Obeah Man* (London: Hutchinson, 1964), p. 63.
- <sup>7</sup> *Banana Bottom* (New York: Harper & Row, 1933, rpt. 1970), p. 313.
- <sup>8</sup> *Sylvia* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1953).
- <sup>9</sup> *The West Indian Novel and its Background* (London: Faber & Faber, 1970), p. 44.
- <sup>10</sup> Jean Creary, "A Prophet Armed," *The Islands in Between*, ed. Louis James (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1968), p. 109.
- <sup>11</sup> *The Three Novels of Roger Mais* (London: Cape, 1970), p. 98.
- <sup>12</sup> *The Land of the Living* (London: Faber & Faber, 1961).
- <sup>13</sup> Ian McDonald, *The Humming Bird Tree* (London: Heinemann, 1969).
- <sup>14</sup> Christopher Nichole, *White Boy* (London: Hutchinson, 1966), p. 260.
- <sup>15</sup> *The Plains of Caroni* (London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1970).