

Narration in the Post-Colonial Moment: Merle Hodge's "Crick Crack Monkey"

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I. *Writing After Colonialism*

MERLE HODGE, WHOSE novel *Crick Crack Monkey* marks a crucial transition from nationalist discourse to post-colonial writing in the Caribbean, has written on how colonial education, by presenting the lived experiences of the Caribbean people as invalid, negated the very subjectivity of the colonized by taking them away from their "own reality": "We never saw ourselves in a book, so we didn't exist in a kind of way and our culture and our environment, our climate, the plants around us did not seem real, did not seem to be of any importance — we overlooked them entirely. The real world was what was in books" (quoted in Dabydeen 78). If existence and significance are defined by the texts we write and read, as Hodge seems to suggest here, then the absence of female texts in the Caribbean canon meant that political independence had not restored speech to the Caribbean female subject. If independence represented the triumph of modernist forms, it had legitimized a situation in which the lives of Caribbean women were still surrounded by a veil of silence perpetuated by a male-dominated discourse. For this reason, the current outpouring of Caribbean women's writing can clearly be seen as the first major challenge to the project of modernity initiated by the colonizer.

Caribbean women writers such as Hodge, Zee Edgell and Michele Cliff do not appear to be sympathetic to postmodernism in the way it has been defined by Lyotard — as the rejection of those metanarratives that legitimize "knowledge and its institutions" (Lyotard 37). As a matter of fact, these women writers are

involved in the quest for narrative forms that might recover, and hence legitimize, the experiences of Caribbean women within the unstable contexts of ideology and power in the modern Caribbean. As Ford-Smith of the Sistren Theatre Collective has aptly put it, “[T]here exists among the women of the Caribbean a need for a naming of experience and a need for communal support in that process. In the past silence has surrounded this experience” (Sistren 22). Narratives like those of the Sistren Collective are indeed some of the most important ways in which Caribbean women devise what Pat Ellis aptly calls “strategies to overcome the obstacles that threaten to curtail their freedom” (1); in this sense, these texts seek to establish the authority of metanarratives.

And yet these narratives cannot be defined by the modernist paradigms which have hitherto defined the texts of major Caribbean male writers such as Césaire, Lamming and V. S. Naipaul, to name just a few. For if the doctrine of modernity transfers the authority of power and utterance in the Caribbean from the colonizer to the black male, then a feminist renaming of experience implies the revision of modernism, even the outright rejection of its totalizing tendencies.¹ Thus, although the ideologies of postmodernism may not appeal to these Caribbean women writers, they increasingly fall back on postmodernist narrative strategies — such as temporal fragmentation, intertextuality, parody and doubling — to devalorize the modernist project.² Moreover, by positing gender differences as a site for representing and reconstructing new identities (in narrative and semiotic terms), these writers establish what de Laurentis calls “the conditions of existence of those subjects who are muted, elided, or unrepresentable in dominant discourse” (9).

In a sense, for post-colonial Caribbean women writers to reconfigure modernist discourse, and to unmask its function as an instrument of male domination, they invent strategies of representation which reject the notion of a subject that is defined, and fixed by, the dominant patriarchal culture. As I will show in my reading of Hodge’s *Crick Crack Monkey*, Caribbean women writers are concerned with a subject that is defined by what de Laurentis calls “a multiple, shifting, and often self-contradictory identity, a subject that is not divided in, but rather at odds, with language” (9).

In this context, then, language and subjectivity challenge the assumption that modernism and modernization necessarily liberate the Caribbean subject from the tyranny of tradition. For the kind of modernist discourse we have witnessed in Caribbean male writing must be seen, like its European counterpart, as a symptom of what Andreas Huyssen calls “a crisis both of capitalist modernization itself and of the deeply patriarchal structures that supported it” (58). As the Sistren Theatre Collective from Jamaica has reminded us, narration in the post-colonial moment questions the liberating claims of modernization; it suggests “an altering or re-defining of the parameters of political process and action”; this revision in turn signalizes factors which “would otherwise disappear or at least go far underground” (4), including the voice and identity of the subaltern.

2. *Narrative and the Recovery of Voice*

Merle Hodge’s *Crick Crack Monkey* was the first major novel by a post-colonial West Indian woman writer to problematize and foreground questions of difference and the quest for a voice in a social context that denied social expression to the colonized self and hence cut it off from the liberating forms of self-expression which define the Caribbean narrative. For Hodge, this emphasis on voice as a precondition for black subjectivity in a colonial situation was necessitated by both ideological and technical reasons. First of all, in the plantation societies of the Caribbean, the voices of the oppressed and dominated slaves and indentured labourers survived against the modes of silence engendered by the master class. For these slaves and labourers, then, the preservation and inscription of a distinctive voice would signify the site of their own cultural difference and identity. Second, the voice was, in radically contrasting ways, an instrument of struggle and a depository of African values in a world in which the slaves’ traditions were denigrated and their selfhoods repressed (Brathwaite; Glissant). In terms of narrative, the recovery of voice becomes one way through which unspoken and repressed experiences can be represented.

In Merle Hodge’s novel, then, the voice is a synecdoche of the

unwritten culture of the colonized, the culture of Aunt Tantie and Ma, and its privileging in the text signifies an epistemological shift from the hegemony of the written forms; alternatively, the negation of the spoken utterance through education and assimilation is a mark of deep alienation. When Tee opens her retrospective view of her childhood at the beginning of *Crick Crack*, she discovers that the past cannot be narrated without a cognizance of the voices that defined it. The voice is shown to be both central to the subject's conception of her past and as a paradigm that defines the context in which her multiple selves were produced. At the opening of the novel, a moment in which the birth of a new baby is superseded by the death of the mother, the world appears to Tee merely as a relationship of voices: “a voice like high-heels and stocking,” “an old voice . . . wailing,” “Some quavery voices,” “a grumble of men's voices” (2). Tee's subsequent alienation in the colonial world is prefigured by her inability to identify with these fetishized voices as easily as she identifies with the voice of Tantie and Ma.

In addition, Tee's alienation as a narrating subject is obvious in the way her authority of representation is propped up and denied at the same time. At the opening of the narrative, the narrator is not placed in the position of innocence and the absence of consciousness which is such a common tradition in the Caribbean *bildungsroman*. True, Tee has already placed herself on a pedestal — “We had posted ourselves at the front window, standing on a chair” (1) — from where she represents her own experience with ostensible authority, controlling the reader's response to her context. However, on closer examination, the reader discovers that what Tee represents is not her unique “reading” of phenomena, but her reproduction of the views and opinions of adult figures, and that what appears to be a clear perception of things (from her position) is hazy and ill-defined (2-3). The reader knows that Tee's mother and the new baby are dead and her father has left the country, but the narrator's limited knowledge is obvious in her conclusion that Papa “had gone to see whether he could find Mammy and the baby” (3).

In a sense, then, Hodge's narrative develops along what appear to be contradictory lines: the subject is privileged in the discourse,

but this privilege is undercut by her function as the reporter of other's speech, or by her limited perspective. This is an important strategy for showing not only how the subject develops in multiple and contradictory ways, but also the extent to which a unique sense of self is often produced by a painful struggle with the discourse of others. We have moved away from trying to invent a new language of self to a recognition of Bakhtin's famous assertion that "language, for the individual consciousness, lies on the borderline between oneself and the other. The World in language is half someone else's" (293).

But even as she reproduces other people's words and views, Tee still struggles to establish the integrity of her voice and her privileged position as an observer and narrator; she seeks strategies of expressing things "otherwise," or of endowing received discourse with what Bakhtin would call her "semantic and expressive intention" (293). For example, while her mother lies dying, Tee, who is only aware of the original reason for the mother's hospitalization (the birth of a baby) sits watching at the window, "struggling to keep my eyes open," her words expressing her now belated expressive intention and expectation: "There were fewer people going past now, so that I all but fell asleep between each set of footsteps. But I always revived to see if it was them, and if not to shout 'We gettin a baby!' to whoever it was" (2). And yet, her attempt to evoke an authority of narration which is built on her position as an observer — that is, an eyewitness account — is immediately shown to be seriously flawed because she is not privy to the knowledge of death and suffering which, at this point in the story, is shared by the adults. At this junction, Tee's voice and perspective are overwhelmed by a multiplicity of other, adult voices, disconcerting and estranged from their speakers, prefiguring her later alienation in the language of the school and Aunt Beatrice. Her own semantic and expressive intentions become secondary.

Still, there is greater tension in the novel between what we may call "objective reality" — the unmediated, non-projected experience — and the subject's self-representation in images and spectacles. For Tee, the self has the power to put the primary claims of experience into question, for it is only when the self has recreated

reality in its own image, or evoked that reality as a projection of its desires, that self-representation (and hence narration) become possible:

At the shed there was usually a fringe of children hanging about, and they let us shake the chac chac; there were some little boys who were regular pan-men and who even got to beat a pan on the road at Carnival. The players felt about idly and aimlessly on their pans for a long spell until without one noticing the sounds had converged into order. So close to the band that the bass-pans thudded through your belly, and the iron-section with the sounds crashing out from the touch of the tiny stick on the anonymous piece of engine entrails was your teeth clashing together in time with the beat. (6)

The passage began with a general description of the steelband shed, but as it progresses, we notice how the dichotomy between subject and object is narrowed; the narrator/character internalizes the objects (the bass-pans thud in her belly) and eventually merges the external with the internal so that at the end of the quotation she cannot tell the difference between the sounds from the iron-section and the clashing of her teeth. In essence, experience has value insofar as it is projected as a spectacle which the self itself has created. External reality is populated, to use Bakhtin's words, with the speaker's intention (293).

There is another sense in which the above shift from an “objective” to a “subjective” form of representation brings out the ambivalence which characterizes, indeed produces Tee, as a colonial subject: the author needs to maintain a disjunction between Tee's functions as a narrator and a character, and this necessitates not only the doubling of the self but also its alienation in the very strategies it develops to represent its doubleness. For if Tee were just to tell her story from the (ostensibly) nonproblematic perspective of a child (compare Anthony's *The Year in San Fernando*), the author might succeed in maintaining the integrity of the narrating self, but this unity would lead to the negation of her primary thematic concern — the alienation of this subject through language. On the other hand, if she were to narrate this story from the vantage point of the adult, then the representation of the subject's alienation could only be achieved by the erasure of the important illusion of integrity and unity we associate with the childhood

narrator. This illusion is of utmost importance in the Caribbean text because it prefigures the collective desire for wholeness which motivates cultural production in the islands. Thus, although Hodge's goal is to thematize alienation, she operates from the premise that childhood holds the utopian possibility that Tee can exist, to quote Thorpe, "in complete harmony with her environment" (32).

Furthermore, to understand the conditions in which the character becomes alienated, we must also be in a position to read the gap that separates childhood from adulthood: as a character, Tee becomes alienated almost without her knowledge and consent; as an adult narrator, she posits self-representation in dominant discourse as a form of alienation which she has mastered through narration. In his introduction to *Crick Crack Monkey*, Narinesingh argues that the reader of Hodge's text is "made to share in the diversity and richness of Tee's experience without being able to discern at times where the child's voice with a child's perception of things slides into the adult voice and vision of the omniscient author" (vii). Now, while it is true that there are instances when the child vision and the adult vision seem to be indistinguishable, a more attentive reading of the text will surely highlight the differences between these two voices or call attention to their paradoxical relationship. For it seems to me that Hodge's intention is to expose the illusionary nature of Tee's desire for assimilation by highlighting the gap between her as a child and as an adult narrator. In other words, the narrator draws our attention to the divisions and separations the child goes through in its struggle to become the "other" and measures its loss against the narrating self which has, presumably, overcome its alienation by mastering its history through narration.

What this adds up to, everything else aside, is that there is no authentic subject before its representation in language; the pleasure of writing is inherent in the search for a language which will recover the fragments of a past life and turn it into a spectacle. After all, before the writing of *Crick Crack Monkey*, who was Tee except the projection of other people's desires and intentions — Aunt Tantie, Ma, Beatrice, the colonial school? The value of the juvenile perspective lies precisely in its capacity to show how Tee

was colonized by the utterances of other subjects. And in significant ways, a return to childhood does not establish a metaphorical relationship between the child and her landscape; what she hears, and often appropriates, are the “disembodied voices” of others: “Women going past walked a gauntlet of commentary on their anatomy and deportment. And for Mrs Hinds in particular they had no mercy. Like any proper lady (it seemed to me) she had a high, stiff, bottom and spectacles and stockings” (7). Here we not only have the narrator representing the child’s perspective of the boys’ comments on Mrs. Hinds, but also using a parenthesis to make a distinction between how things seemed to Tee then, suggesting that she knows better now. Between the boys’ commentary, Tee’s juvenile view, and the narrator’s qualifier, can we ever identify an original experience? Isn’t the loss of original experience — a loss which becomes more and more apparent as Tee moves away from the “organic” worlds of Tantie and Ma and enters Beatrice’s colonial orbit — what generates the autobiographical text?

3. *Narration and the Mask of Language*

Tee’s identity is, of course, constructed by her shifting speech or language communities: she moves to and fro between the universes defined by Tantie, Ma, Aunt Beatrice, and the colonial school. The important point, though, is that she belongs to all of them, and to none; in reality, she is consumed and confused by all of them; the narration of her confused identities is an excellent example of how language both masks and unmasks the subject’s conditions of possibility. For instance, what appeared at the beginning of the novel to be Tee’s vantage position, a position of mastery and insight, is an adult position that conceals the uncertainty of the little girl. Similarly, Tee’s apparent security in the world of Tantie and Ma conceals, as does her later involvement with Beatrice’s middle-class culture, the state of anxiety and unbelonging she lives in.

My argument here runs contrary to Thorpe’s influential reading of *Crick Crack Monkey*, where she casts the novel in a structural opposition in which Tantie’s creole world represents “belonging

and security” while Beatrice’s colonial world stands for “alienation and displacement” (37). Admittedly, these binary oppositions can be sustained if we approach the text through the eyes of Tee, the narrator: after her exile in Europe, the narrator is strongly nostalgic and appreciative of the creole world she had been displaced from by the colonial culture. But from the perspective of Tee the child, there is a strong ambivalence toward oppositions such as alienation/security, Beatrice/Tantie; in none of these worlds can she posit herself as a subject. In Tantie’s world, what Tee echoes and repeats is her aunt’s language and views (12); after she has lived with Beatrice for some time, her utterances now reflect the language and ideology of the colonized bourgeoisie (85). In none of these cultural universes can the child appropriate a language to designate herself as a self that is not the effect of the other’s language system; she cannot choose one entity as a way of overcoming her alienation because the moment she does so, she will become entrapped in another language system.³

So, the value of Hodge’s text does not lie in any resolution to the cultural dichotomies we have discussed so far. On the contrary, I want to suggest, the value of this novel lies in the author’s capacity to sustain both the creole and colonial cultures as opposed sites of cultural production which the “modern” Caribbean subject cannot transcend entirely, nor reconcile. Although Tee feels at home in Tantie’s creole world, she is also aware of its incompleteness, of its marginalization in the colonial economy; her desire is hence for the scriptural universe of the colonial school:

I looked forward to school. I looked forward to the day when I could pass my hands swiftly from side to side on a blank piece of paper leaving meaningful marks in its wake; to staring nonchalantly into a book until I turned over the page, a gesture pregnant with importance for it indicated that one had not merely been staring, but that that most esoteric of processes had been taking place whereby the paper had yielded up something or other as a result of having been stared at. (20)

Here, the school and writing are posited as both mythological practices (an “esoteric process”) and as forms of empowerment. In retrospect, however, literacy is a form of mastery that is achieved at the expense of the self which, as we have already seen, becomes

alienated in the modes of representation which were supposed to empower it:

My reading career also began with A for Apple, the exotic fruit that made its brief appearance at Christmas time, and pursued through my Caribbean Reader Primer One the fortunes of two English children known as Jim and Jill, or it might have been Tim and Mary. (25)

Paradoxically, this alienation becomes a precondition for the colonial subjects accession into the language and discourse of colonialism.

Tee’s cultural alienation is built around a crucial chiasmic reversal: the tangible reality of the Creole culture is dismissed as an unreal construct, while the fictions promoted by the colonial textbook are now adopted as the “real” Caribbean referent:

Books transported you always into the familiar solidity of chimneys and apple trees, the enviable normality of real Girls and Boys who went a-sleighing and built snowmen, ate potatoes, not rice, went about in socks and shoes from morning until night and called things by their proper names. . . . Books transported you into Reality and Rightness, which were to be found abroad. (61)

The colonial library, represented here by the book van — which Tee awaits every Saturday “with the greatest of impatience” — is a mirage which has become a tangible reality in the girl’s imagination. The world of the “ordinary” is denied referentiality because as Thorpe notes, it is the exact opposite of, indeed contradicts, “the values of the former colonial masters” — the realm of colonial desire (34).

It is in this context that Tee, in an attempt to deal with her dualities and crisis of identity, begins to apprehend herself as the other: she invents a double, a mirror image of herself, who is, nevertheless, white and thoroughly colonial, one who doesn’t have to negotiate the dangerous chasm between Creole and Colonial, self and other because she is ideal —

Thus it was that I fashioned Helen, my double. She was my age and height. She spent the summer holidays at the sea-side with her aunt and uncle who had a delightful orchard with apple trees and pear trees in which sang chaffinches and blue tits, and where one could wander on terms of the closest familiarity with cowslips and

honeysuckle. . . . Helen entered and ousted all the other characters in the unending serial that I had been spinning for Toddan and Doolarie from time immemorial. (61-62)

Indeed, in Tee's imagination, Helen is more than a double: she has usurped the subject's identity — "She was the Proper Me. And me, I was her shadow hovering about in incompleteness" (62).

In the Lacanian notion of the "mirror stage" (Lacan 2), the colonial subject has recognized itself in an ideal I, but this form of identification is also a misrecognition because the externalized image is achieved only at the cost of self-alienation, and the subject can never assimilate this idealized image because it has no existence except in the imaginary. However, the mirror image which cannot be assimilated, is, as Kaja Silverman has succinctly noted, the object in relation to which the subject defines herself: "As a consequence of the irreducible distance which separates the subject from its ideal reflection, it loves the coherent identity which the mirror provides. However, because the image remains external to it, it also hates that image" (158). Tee does not express any overt hate for Helen, but there is obvious recognition (from the narrator) that there were profound tensions between the two characters. This tension is clearly brought out in an important passage in the novel when the narrator explains the social and historical conditions that necessitated a double:

For doubleness, or this particular kind of doubleness, was a thing to be taken for granted. Why, the whole of life was like a piece of cloth with a rightside and a wrongside. Just as there was a way you spoke and a way you wrote, so there was the daily existence which you led, which of course amounted only to marking time and makeshift, for there was the Proper daily round, not necessarily more agreeable, simply the valid one, the course of which encompassed things like warming yourself before a fire and having tea at four o'clock; there were the human types who were your neighbours and guardians and playmates — but you were all marginal together, for there were the beings whose validity loomed at you at every book, every picture. . . . (62)

Tee is structured by a set of oppositions, none of which offer her true identity: her Creole world is makeshift and marginal; her desired colonial universe is artificial. When she recognizes the

sources of marginality and the nature of artifice, then she will outgrow Helen “in the way that a baby ceases to be taken up with his fingers and toes” (62). Herein lies the value of narration in the post-colonial moment: as the adult narrator of her own experiences and subjectivity, Tee will not need external mediators molded in the image of the colonizer; having discovered that idealized images are unreal and that the colonial subject cannot adopt the colonizer’s discourse for her new identity, the narrator will write about her past to exorcise the ghost of colonialism and to challenge the assumption — often sustained by the neo-colonial élite — that independence is the native’s way of appropriating the modernity project initiated by the colonizer.⁴

NOTES

- ¹ My premise that postmodernism is a revision of, rather than a break with, modernism, is indebted to the works by Huyssen and Laclau. From a post-colonial perspective, there is great suspicion that the so-called postmodernist breakthrough still sanctions Western hegemony. As Miyoshi and Harootunian have aptly observed, by tolerating post-industrial capitalism, “postmodernism ends up consenting to the first world economic domination that persists in exploiting the wretched of the earth” (388).
- ² For a comprehensive study of theories of narrative in the postmodernist tradition, see Hutcheon.
- ³ For another view of *Crick Crack Monkey* see Lawrence.
- ⁴ There is no greater indication of how the colonization of the Caribbean initiated the project of Western modernity than Christopher Columbus’s famous claim that the “discovery” of America ushers in “that time so new and like no other” (see Todorov 5).

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