

The Bittersweet Comedy of Sonny Ladoo: A Reading of "Yesterdays"

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WHEN HAROLD SONNY LADOO died on 17 August 1973, as a result of a brutal physical attack, West Indian literature lost what most surely would have become a major voice. For in two small novels, *No Pain Like This Body* (1972) and *Yesterdays* (1974), Ladoo succeeded in creating a unique fictional world, quite different from anything that has appeared in the Indo-Caribbean fiction of V. S. Naipaul, Shiva Naipaul, Ismith Khan, or Samuel Selvon. His mysterious death and the persistent rumours surrounding it temptingly suggest that his fiction is auto/biographical, and that he exposed too much. But as long as the Calcutta Settlement community continues to be silent about his death, this must remain speculation.¹ Only Ladoo among West Indian writers has probed the psyche, individual and collective, of the enclave of Indo-Caribbean peasantry known as the "janglees."² The history of the "janglees" is sketchy, but it is accepted that they comprised a community living, as it were, on the fringes of society, for whom profanity, violence, and poverty were a way of life. In all probability, they hailed originally from the hills and forests of their native India, and once in the Caribbean, sought similar habitats, for example, the hills and forests of the Central Range in Trinidad. They were, in a sense, beyond caste, below the Chamars, who historically occupied the lowest rung on the caste ladder. Among the "janglees" were the "bhangees" and "topas," whose social function was the cleaning of latrines and the disposal of fecal waste.³

The real meaning of the title "Yesterdays" lies in the intended temporal interplay between then and now. It is quite possible that Ladoo in this novel is decrying the Hindu caste system that locks

an individual into a social niche forever, preventing any significant upward social mobility. But the author's primary aim, I believe, is to depict a community of men and women who tragically cannot dispel the "janglee" from their individual and collective lives. Although with the inevitable passing of the years, the characters have become shopkeepers, tailors, and even priests, they are still in their hearts "bhangees" and "topas," cleaners, dumpers, and purveyors of filth. This accounts for the novel's obsession with ordure. Neither time, nor rise in social standing, nor the acquisition of wealth and property has essentially changed these men and women. They possess none of the graces we have come to associate with being civilized or refined; nor will they ever, it seems. Even Poonwa, on whose shoulders we would normally expect Ladoo to place the promise and the burden of the future of his fictional world, is condemned. In the final analysis, notwithstanding his education, albeit a high-school education, Poonwa remains a "janglee," because his motivation in life is pure, blinding revenge. When he declares his wilful decision on that fateful night to Sook (109), his fate is sealed. Both *No Pain Like This Body* and *Yesterdays* may be seen as attempts to render Ladoo's looking back in anger, through the fictional constructs of Jangli Tola⁴ and Karan Settlement, at Calcutta Settlement, teeming with peasant life, canefields and ricefields, among which Ladoo must have spent much of his early life.

No Pain Like This Body is a tragic work in that it depicts the impossibility of meaningful success for human effort within its fictional world. The title, taken from the Dhammapaba, a portion of Hindu Scripture, affirms what Pozzo in *Waiting For Godot* roundly proclaims: "The tears of the world are a constant quantity" (22). In Ladoo's tragic picture, children starve and die, the elements threaten to snuff out life, and hardworking mothers go mad for no good reason, in a godless, joyless, male-dominated world of unrelenting brutality and darkness. To add some comic relief to what might very well be the bleakest fictional world in West Indian literature, and at the same time to reveal certain customs and values of this peasant enclave, Ladoo devotes one-third of his novel to a description of the wake of Rama, an eight-year-old boy who dies of pneumonia. A Madrassée wake, some-

what like an Irish wake, is a time for celebration, for laughter and merriment. Rama's wake affords Ladoo the opportunity of widening his gallery of characters to include a comic company comprising Benwa, the stickfighter, after whose grandfather Karan Settlement is named, Jasso and Pulbassia, "jamettes" (whores) and "rum suckers," the anonymous one-legged villager, and the Chamar priest who pretends to be Brahmin. Through racy dialogue and storytelling among the characters, the reader comes to grasp certain values and concerns of the community. The seeds of *Yesterdays* are sown here in this comic interlude; for in the second novel Ladoo expands and develops the comic potential of this peasant enclave and in so doing creates a rich canvas of characters, dialogue, and situations.

Yesterdays is a comic *tour de force* in the tradition of Chaucer's *The Miller's Tale*, Petronius's *Satyricon*, and in contemporary literature, Mordecai Richler's *Cocksure* and Henry Miller's *Tropic of Capricorn*. It is therefore not for everyone; some will no doubt find it disgusting and obscene; others, a slight thing not deserving to be finished, let alone be read a second time. But the reader, familiar with certain aspects of the Hindu caste system and with the Indo-Caribbean peasant experience, will, I am sure, respond more fairly and intensely than the reader who assumes that Ladoo is indulging in prurience for its own sake. Accordingly, at the outset, I exclaim with Vergil's Sybil, "Procul este, profani" (*Aeneid* 4.258).

What is at the heart of *Yesterdays* is the patent incongruity between a deeply entrenched belief in the Aryan gods and a contagious and far-reaching amorality; between a divinely sanctioned injunction to foster inner and outer cleanliness and an obtrusive obsession with defecation and filth. We read of routine defecation in the canefields; we see men seated on latrine seats; we hear of at least one character confessing that as a boy he ate goat droppings; and we find in another character an uncontrollable urge to defecate at the slightest inclination, be it a belly cramp or the sweet sound of the Latin phrase, "Cogito, ergo sum." Indeed, we may scatologically modify Descartes and use as an ironic motto for *Yesterdays*, "Vacuo, ergo sum" ("I defecate, therefore, I am"). *Yesterdays*, I believe, is a fine example of what

George Meredith in "An Essay on Comedy" terms "low" comedy (24).

To understand more fully Ladoo's ironic technique in *Yesterdays*, it is necessary to provide some background material. For Poonwa's Mission to Canada is the reverse of what was the most important event in the lives of thousands of indentured labourers — the coming of the Canadian missionaries to Trinidad. In 1863, John Morton laid the foundations of a system of ecclesiastic and academic education that was profoundly to affect the lives of a large portion of the Indo-Trinidadian community. The Presbyterian Church and its Schools reshaped the values and customs of generations of Indo-Trinidadians. Canada, not normally considered an empire-building country, was nevertheless the origin of what in effect was a colonial undertaking. For the acceptance of Christianity in time meant the preference for English over Hindi and other Indian languages; for foreign over local; for white over brown and black. The early converts followed the missionaries in the acceptance of the status quo, until the ineluctable tide of change brought a new awareness and a desire to investigate the interests and motives underpinning the Canadian Mission enterprise. The good done is readily acknowledged, but the pernicious colonial practices of the early missions are now being exposed. Idris Hamid shocked, angered, and enlightened many when he declared:

The Canadian missionaries, Morton, Grant, and the others that followed, seldom addressed themselves to the cruel treatment and exploitation committed against the Indians. There is little or no protest from them about health conditions, low wages, housing conditions and harsh regulations. To raise this question is not to raise a mid-20th century question for a 19th century problem. The questions of slavery, its attendant evils, and the exploitation of human labour, were central issues in the nineteenth century. At least they were central for some churchmen and some churches. If one could extrapolate attitudes then, one could assume that the Canadian missionaries would have upheld slavery or a modified version of it. (49-50)

Poonwa's Mission to Canada, then, must be seen against such a background. For while there is obviously more than a residual seriousness in the inverted Mission, Ladoo leaves no doubt as to

the legitimacy, motivation, and putative success of the young man's undertaking. Poonwa, a twenty-five-year-old high-school graduate, decides to give his dreary life meaning and focus by becoming a Hindu missionary to Canada. The point of the mission is to avenge the brutal and inhuman treatment he received as a child from a blonde, blue-eyed Canadian teacher at the Tolaville Canadian Mission School. This is the kind of enterprise that creates only heroes or fools; and the attempt to implement it without proper or adequate preparation, thought, and qualification on the part of its originator is self-condemnatory. When Poonwa proudly exclaims, "My Hindu Mission to Canada is an original idea" (77), we sense the author's undercutting irony. For while Poonwa's commitment to the idea may be positive, his mere passionate intensity is mocked:

Instead of having a punishment room like the Canadian Mission School in Tolaville, he was going to have about five such rooms. Through flogging and teaching he would . . . teach them to deny their culture; he would make them wear Hindu garments. Then he would get merchants from Carib Island to tie up their trade and drain their national resources into the West Indies. But now and then he would give them a little money as aid also; and he wouldn't give them the money just like that; he would make them crawl and beg for it. Then he would teach them that white is ugly and evil; only black and brown are good. . . . (106)

All this from an arrested, petulant adolescent who does not know a word of Hindi or anything about Hinduism. His motive is mere revenge; his method of revenge guaranteed to fail.

Poonwa receives strong encouragement in his mission from his mother Basdai and from her best friend and neighbour Rookmin. These two women are really less interested in the mission than in seeing at least one man escape the wide embrace of demon rum. Thus Basdai, obsessed as her son, is committed to making life for her husband as difficult as she can. The equality women enjoy with men in this fictional world allows Basdai to make this kind of confession to her best friend:

Pressure is joke. Choon dont know de woman he playin wid. Gal Rook, I go stand on Choon windpipe till he get dat money. One kiss me ass chile I hav in dis world. Man, I is Poonwa modder,

and I done tell Choon, dat Poonwa have to go to Canada. I goin to give Choon pressure so, till he shit in he pants. (25)

Basdai and Rookmin are central to the comic design of the novel. They are every bit the equal of their male counterparts, in decision-making, in directing the affairs of the family, in managing their domestic economies, in sexual adventure, and in what we might call using the traditional language of men. Basdai has been regularly and willingly seduced by Ragbir, and several times has lain with Pandit Puru. Fearless and independent, she hectors, abuses, and humiliates her husband until he signs the mortgage papers. And she manfully faces up to Sook, the village queer, in a deliciously funny scene. Tailor, the tenant who comes from nowhere and has nowhere to go, refuses either to pay rent, to leave, or to clean the latrine he has been using. Basdai enters a heated verbal exchange, and wins, even if only temporarily, a moral victory:

Tailor got mad and told his landlord that he wasn't going to pay any rent. The rent revelation worried Tailor. Unable to spin further reflections, Tailor said, "Under British Law, Choonilal, I go lost you ass in jail. Under British Law you have to pay me for living under your house. I goin to sue you for every cent in your bald head ass."

"You modderass you!" Choonilal shouted. "You live by me and now you talking about Law. Say praise God I give you food to eat. You nimakaram modderass."

Sook took up for Tailor. The queer said, "All you be careful. Maybe Tailor could really put all you in jail, yeh."

This talk about the Law was really eating Basdai. She flung open the window again, and said, "Ay Sook! watch you ass, you know. Wot de ass you talking about jail. Answer me nuh."

"Like you want man, Basdai," the queer shouted.

"Yeh, I want man, Sook," she shouted. "God make me wid a hole to take man. But you is a man and you takin man. You shoudda shame. Why don't you go and kill yourself?"

This had a burning effect on the queer. It was all right if a man told him about his bad habits, but he couldn't take it from a woman. So he said. "Man sweeter than woman." (18-19)

Rookmin, no less verbally truculent than Basdai, has been married to Sook, for thirty years. Although sexually alive, she has stayed with her homosexual husband because he has a real gift

for conciliation and because of his ability to do business. A "serious woman," who threatens to "root out [Tailor's] testicles," falls prey to her sexual curiosity and becomes the laughing stock of the village, when she is caught in a most humiliating sexual position with her lover. This happened years ago, but the novel's title suggests the importance of past experiences.

That night Ragbir brought the man to Karan Settlement. He flung a pebble on Sook's house: a sign for Rookmin to come out. When she came out Ragbir went and sat under Choonilal's chataigne tree. On the middle of the road the lecherous watchman had seduced her. Wishing to make a good impression on the shopkeeper's wife, the watchman told her to go on her hands and knees. She refused. The man begged her. She went down on her hands and knees. Then there was a bawling; the lecherous man drove it up the wrong hole. Rookmin screamed and screamed. Sook ran out of the house. With a torchlight he saw his wife's position and laughed out loud. Choonilal and Basdai ran out on the road also; then Ragbir came too. Rookmin was still getting on, but the men were about to kill themselves laughing. Suddenly, Basdai grabbed the man's testicles and squeezed. He bawled out and withdrew his organ; Sook gasped in amazement. (100-01)

Ragbir, with an "unlimited capacity for mischief" (19) and an appetite for confusion, enjoys the misfortunes of others. With the longest "totey" in the village and enormous testicles, which are almost always exposed, he is a Caribbeanized Falstaffian figure, a lord of misrule, recognizing, like his Shakespearean mentor, neither time nor place nor measure. He recognizes and acknowledges no incongruity between having Choonilal's best interests at heart and seducing Choonilal's wife regularly. In this comic context, in which, it seems, anything goes, Ragbir appears to be on the side of good, steadfastly maintaining that Choonilal must not mortgage his property, and that Pandit Puru is a greedy man who simply wants to acquire by devious means his friend's property.

The most despicable character in *Yesterdays* is Pandit Puru, one of a long line of confidence men in literature and one who, like Chaucer's monk, wilfully abuses his sacred office. Indeed, the reader is hard-pressed to find anything sacred or holy about Pandit Puru. He is the vehicle for much of Ladoo's satire on man's penchant for being duped by purveyors of religious truths. Puru is, to

say the least, an odd figure, with his lily-white priestly gown, his shining cowboy boots, and his five diamond rings. We are told that he "looked like a gambler" (88). The most trenchant comic irony in this characterization, bordering on the emetic, is a fine touch, worthy of Chaucer:

Pandit Puru shoved his right index finger up his nose; the finger twisted as if he was dragging out some kind of expensive jewelry. (89)

Poonwa, too, is the butt of Ladoo's comic anger. He is Ladoo's version of the traditional comic figure, the buffoon. He is driven by a monomaniacal revenge, the idiocy of which is succinctly summed up in his bold assertion pencilled in his notebook: CHRISTIANS ARE CRIMINALS. His buffoonery is further confirmed when his feigning death fails to convince his father that he should sign the mortgage papers. He succeeds only when he climbs the chataigne tree with a pound of goat rope tied around his neck threatening to hang himself. This young man, selfish, ungrateful, and petulant, enjoys his finest comic moment on his farewell night in a scene with the homosexual Sook:

. . . Sook said, "I go give you one hundred dollars if you bull me."
 "Are you certain?" Poonwa asked.
 "I swear to God."
 "I can't do it."

Being a sentimental man Sook broke into tears without any warning. "It is a nice night yeh," he sobbed. "And since tonight is you first time, we go do it in de Christian Church."

On any other night Poonwa would have allowed the queer to weep his heart out, but suddenly, seeing it as an opportunity to get even with the Christian blonde and the blue-eyed Jew, he nodded.

"All right," he said, "I'll bull you for free."

"You don't want de hundred?!"

"No. This is my farewell gift."

Sook shook his head and opened the eastern door of his shop. Uncapping a stout, he handed it to Poonwa.

"Drink dat fust," he said. "It make you iron stand like a lion."
 (109)

Ladoo's intentions are quite clear in this scene; he does not endow his anti-hero with the ability to distinguish between what appears to be a simple gesture of revenge and what in reality is a wilful

act of self-denigration. For only now does Poonwa finally succumb to the widespread upas that infects life in Karan Settlement. Revenge becomes for this wretched young man the ultimate sexual fillip.

Like his son, Poonwa, Choonilal is centre-stage much of the time. Indeed Ladoo focusses most of his attention on him, making him his chief comic pointer as well as his hero. Choonilal is the victim of what critics assert is a widespread component of comic structures — an inverted Oedipal situation. Son and wife have become one in an attempt to divest Choonilal of his property, the result of thirty-odd years toiling in the canefields. While Choonilal is neither killed nor literally emasculated, his son's mission and the solidarity between wife and son have virtually ended sexual relations between husband and wife, information provided by Basdai herself: "Since Poonwa talk about he mission, we never do it" (25).

Choonilal has to accept his son's mission, which threatens his entire existence. He has worked hard to secure a house, and his wish to keep it in the face of tremendous pressure, internal and external, is a reflection of an experience which to the Indo-Caribbean man has special significance, as Naipaul so memorably recounts in *A House For Mr Biswas*. There is great anguish, endless worry and real tears; even illness from debility which makes Choonilal look "like a dead man; his face was pale, and his eyeballs were watery" (93). We leave him at the end of the novel, having finally signed the mortgage papers against his better judgment and in the correct fear that Pandit Puru is a crook. Choonilal is forced to beg for affection and reimbursement from his only son:

Bursting into tears, he extended his arms to embrace his only son. But as his father approached him, Poonwa ran out of the house. At this Choonilal cried louder, so Pandit Puru comforted him by speaking of the Mission to Canada. (108)

All this serves to remind us that in comedy everywhere laughter and tears are next of kin. Choonilal may, with great justification, echo Malvolio's conviction that he has been most notoriously abused.

The character and presentation of Choonilal raise a moral problem for the reader. Of all the characters in *Yesterdays*, he is the only one who deserves to be, if not successful, at least not

unsuccessful. He has worked hard throughout his life; has prayed to the Aryan gods devoutly though intermittently; has been kind and sympathetic to the stranger, Tailor; and has been a good neighbour. It is true that for a time he had abandoned his wife and gone into the full-time practice of sodomy with Sook; but within the moral context of *Yesterdays*, this is hardly enough to make him lose his wife, his only son, and his house. He even loses what most comic heroes have enjoyed, the last laugh.

In its celebration of idiosyncratic life among a particular enclave of Indo-Caribbean peasantry, *Yesterdays* is a disturbingly comic novel. In its earthiness and rampant sexuality, it paints a cogent and moving picture of men and women living as it were on the bedrock of existence, within the narrow confines of barrack life and peasant imagination. *Yesterdays* is ribald, irreverent, and scatological; but it is neither deliberately disgusting nor gratuitously obscene. Its sustained verbal profanities are as appropriate as the genteelisms of Jane Austen's comic depictions of the landed gentry. Ladoo could not have employed any other linguistic register and achieve the same verve and success. *Yesterdays*, with its unrelenting pictures of human sexuality may be seen as a sort of linguistic version of the three-dimensional erotic sculptures on the temple walls at Khajarahho in India. The novel participates comfortably in an erotic and esthetic tradition that has produced these famous sculptures, the *Kama Sutra*, the *Upanishads* and the unabashed poetry of Kali Das and Mira Bai.

Finally, *Yesterdays* subverts the widespread and erroneous stereotype of the Indo-Caribbean peasant as a complete workaholic, hopelessly tied to the land, without a vibrant sexual life. Thus the novel celebrates one grand sexual feast in which men and women equally engage in heterosexual and homosexual activity with impunity. Karan Settlement is a long way from the forest of Arden or the Aegean Woods, the green world of Shakespearean romantic comedy, but it is fictional context in which there exists neither guilt, nor remorse, nor disease attendant upon indiscriminate sexual practice. It is hard to know just how Ladoo approached the writing of *Yesterdays*; one senses a looking back in derisory anger at his home community. Fortunately, he con-

trolled his anger sufficiently to create a bittersweet comedy that is unique in West Indian fiction.

NOTES

- ¹ Calcutta Settlement is three miles south of Chaguanas in central Trinidad. Chaguanas is the real birthplace of V. S. Naipaul and the fictional birthplace of Tiger Baboolal, the hero of Samuel Selvon's first novel, *A Brighter Sun*.
- ² The word "janglee" (I have spelt it this way to indicate the pronunciation of the final syllable) means "wild" in Hindi. The English word "jungle" derives from it. The "janglees" were "wild": hirsute and unkempt.
- ³ This information was provided the author by Lenore Salick, an eighty-year resident of Trinidad.
- ⁴ The term "Jangli Tola" is both historical and fictional. Many villages in Trinidad (Ladoo's "Carib Island") still bear this name.

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