

KEN RAMCHAND THE WEST INDIAN NOVEL AND ITS BACKGROUND (1970)

Introduction (pp. 1-15)

In a seminal study undoubtedly influenced (directly or indirectly) by Zola's naturalism, Ramchand's concern is with "prose fiction, mainly novels, written by people who were born or grew up in the West Indies" (3). These novels "can be distinguished from other works written in English" (3) by the following factors: they most often have a "West Indian setting" (3), contain "fictional characters and situations whose social correlates are immediately recognisable as West Indian" (3), were written in the "twentieth century" (3) by "native" (3) West Indians who are "descendants of Europeans, . . . of African slaves, . . . of indentured labourers from India, and various mixtures from these" (3), and draw upon "West Indian raw material" (3). Although the earliest known work that meets all these criteria was published in 1903, Ramchand agrees with George Lamming that, to all intents and purposes, the "West Indian novel, by which I mean the novel written by the West Indian about the West Indian reality is hardly twenty years old" (3).

Ramchand agrees with V. S. Naipaul that the West Indian novelist performs an indispensable social role because "[l]iving in a borrowed culture, the West Indian, more than most, needs writers to tell him who he is and where he stands" (4). It is not unusual for the novelist in general to be "regarded as having something special to say to their societies" (4), Ramchand observes, but West Indian novelists apply themselves with unusual urgency and unanimity to an analysis and interpretation of their society's ills, including the social and economic deprivation of the majority; the pervasive consciousness of race and colour; the cynicism and uncertainty of the native bourgeoisie in power after independence; the lack of a history to be proud of; and the absence of traditional or settled values. (4)

In other words, Ramchand argues, West Indian novelists demonstrate a "social consciousness" (4) the contours of which are understandably peculiar to the region.

Ramchand is of the view that there are self-evident links between the West Indian novel and the most important generic influence on it: the "nineteenth century English novel" (4). However, he argues, while West Indian novelists are "familiar" (4) with the West Indian writer "naturally departs from the nineteenth century English novel with which he is most familiar" (4) in two important ways. Firstly, he contends, the West Indian writer's "social consciousness is not class consciousness" (4). His point here would seem to be that, where English society in the nineteenth century was a profoundly and mainly class-conscious society, other social determinants (e.g. race) are also operative in the West Indian context. Secondly, this social consciousness is not "concerned with consolidating or flattering particular groups" (4): "[m]ost West Indian novelists write about the whole society" (4). In other words, his argument is that West Indian literature does not plead the cause of any particular community or group within the broader society, a claim that would seem to be tenuous given his comments elsewhere, not least his attack on Brathwaite.

Arguing that some West Indian novelists are preoccupied with the "chaos" (4) and others with the "open possibilities" (4) of West Indian society, Ramchand argues that arguably the most important tool of such social realism (naturalism) is "characterisation" (5) in the novel. West Indian novelists have expressed, in particular, an "interest in the previously neglected person" (4). He agrees with Lamming's view (which cannot help but recall Wordsworth's representational goals) that the West Indian novelist did not look out across the sea to another source. He looked in and down at what had traditionally been ignored. For the first time, the West Indian peasant becomes other than a cheap source of labour. He became through the novelist's eye a living existence, living in silence and joy and fear, involved in riot and carnival. It is the West Indian novel that has restored the West Indian peasant to his true and original status of personality. (qtd. in Ramchand, 4)

It is in the West Indian novel that, for the first time, the "Black characters [by 'black' here, I think he means persons of both African and Indian descent, that is, 'non-white' characters] are not restricted to being peripheral or background figures" (4). It is to this that the "realistic exuberance with which West Indian writers of the 1930's expressed the life and surroundings of the West Indian peasant" (5) may be attributed.

The “challenge of articulating the hitherto obscure person” (5), Ramchand argues, has affected “characterisation in West Indian novels” (5) in a variety of ways. As a result, some writers “seek ancestral inspiration in ‘African traits’ or an ‘African personality’” (5), others such as Michael Anthony “ignore such imaginary but unimaginative props” (5) in order to undertake what Ramchand terms a “genuine exploratory attitude to ‘the person’” (5) which manifests itself in “fidelity to the open consciousness” (5) of his characters and his “portrayal of the instability of ‘character’” (5). Others such as Harris see the “obscurity of the broken individual in the West Indies as the starting point for a creative inquiry into the question, ‘What is a man?’” (5).

Ramchand at this point returns to the ways in which the West Indian novel diverges from the “main pattern of the nineteenth century English novel” (5) which he defines as involving primarily an “analysis of character in relation to the manners and morals operative in a given period” (5). Ramchand argues that given the “formlessness of West Indian society, and the existential position of the individual in it” (5), “such a pattern is not one that seems relevant or comes spontaneously to the writer from the West Indies” (5). This is borne out, he argues, by the different ways in which Naipaul’s fiction has been received in the Caribbean and in the UK: Naipaul’s “deflation of characters by means associated with novels dealing with manners and morals appears to West Indians to be least extraneous to the same author’s expression of the void in colonial society” (5). Seemingly (and wrongly) divorcing character (the moral choices, behaviour and personality of the individual) from society (the general socio-historical context by which s/he is necessarily determined), Ramchand claims that West Indian writers “are as much interested in society as character, and that the interest in character is seldom one in behaviour or morals” (5). It is such “distinguishing emphases” (5) of the West Indian novel which are often in the minds of “those who describe it as being involved in the quest for national and personal identity” (5-6), rather than ethical norms per se, that is, questions concerning right or wrong conduct. Ethical choices are inextricably bound up, most philosophers would argue, with social and political issues as a result of which the nineteenth century English novel is arguably as socially inscribed as the West Indian novel.

Ramchand argues that the West Indian novelist must be scrupulously objective, as opposed to partisan. He points out that in an “area of deprivation, longing and rootlessness, where so many people are inarticulate” (6), it is little wonder that the novelist may be tempted by the desire to write “passionate documentary” (6) or risk being “criticised for not adopting prescribed stances” (6), usually of Marxist inspiration. Such a flawed perspective may be glimpsed applied in “doctrinaire” (6) ways in Lamming’s criticism of the work of John Hearne to which, Ramchand argues, they do “little justice” (6). Lamming, he points out approvingly, argues that the artist has a social and national responsibility:

His responsibility . . . will be judged not only by the authenticity and power with which his own private world is presented, but also by the honesty with which he interprets the world of his social relations, his country . . . for those who have no direct experience of it, but are moved by the power of his speech, his judgement and his good faith. (qtd. in Ramchand, 6)

In other words, the criterion of authenticity and the process of literary self-expression ought to matter less in West Indian literature than that of verisimilitude and literary mimesis. Indeed, given these criteria, Lamming’s criticisms of Hearne fail to do justice to the “complexity” (6) of even his own “highly political” (6) novels which stress, in Ramchand’s view, the responsibility of the author “to himself, his society and to ‘the community of Man’” (6).

Ramchand contends that the “attitudes of West Indian writers, their equipment as artists, and the social groups to which they give fictional prominence vary widely” (6). The respective oeuvres of Naipaul and Harris “illustrate the wide range of techniques and the opposite attitudes to ‘reality’ between which most West Indian writing lies” (6-7). Naipaul seeks to hold a mirror up to society in the manner prescribed by the nineteenth century English novel of manners and morals, deploying a “repertoire of traditional novelistic skills” (7). Mixing realism with satire, Naipaul traces the “contours of a fictional community modelled from the East Indian presence in Trinidad” (7) by “seizing upon an essential defining trait and allowing it to express itself” (7) and through “precise observation of gesture and posture, and an uncanny ability to render the inflections of the speaking voice” (7). Naipaul’s work is located within the “tradition” (9) of the “novel of

persuasion" (9), Harris's term (in "Tradition and the West Indian Novel") for the "mainstream tradition of the English nineteenth century novel" (9). This kind of novel

rests on grounds of apparent common sense: a certain 'selection' is made by the writer, the selection of items, manners, uniform conversation, historical situations etc., all lending themselves to build and present an individual span of life which yields self-conscious and fashionable judgments, self-conscious and fashionable moralities. The tension which emerges is the tension of individuals—great or small—on an accepted plane of society we are persuaded has an inevitable existence. (qtd. in Ramchand, 9)

All in all, Naipaul's "relentless accumulation of realistic particulars from the social scene persuades us and the character that the society has 'an inevitable existence'" (9).

At the other extreme of West Indian writing, Harris' novels "grow out of a responsiveness to the brooding landscape and the fabulous fragmented history of his native Guyana" (8). His work undertakes a "concentrated exploration of 'the person'" (10). His fiction

brings imperial / slave history and the aftermath into its field, but the author's way of seeing the world around him and the kind of fiction in which it expresses itself challenge us to see with new eyes. (8)

Harris writes within a tradition very different from the mimetic realism of Naipaul. Harris's own innovative experiments in his fiction, to be precise, his "disregard for the usual conventions (time, character, social realism)" (10), offer a direct and complex challenge to the mimetic basis of the naturalistic fiction found in the 'novel of persuasion,' to be precise, "its commitment to ordinary linear time, to the creation of finite characters and to the portrayal of a self-sufficient social world with reference to which characters are valued" (10). These innovations, Ramchand argues, are in the service of an "almost literal-minded obsession with expressing intuitions about 'the person' and about the structure of societies men have built for themselves through the ages" (10) but "of particular and immediate concern in the West Indies" (10). Harris is of the view that there exists in the West Indian a "sense of subtle links . . . which are latent within him, the latent ground of old and new personalities" (qtd. in Ramchand, 10):

such a conception of the person seems natural in the West Indies where so many cultures and peoples have interacted upon one another. Instead of creating characters whose positioning on one side or another of the region's historical conflicts consolidates those conflicts and does violence to the make-up of 'the person,' the West Indian novelist should set out to 'visualise a fulfilment,' a reconciliation in the person and throughout society, of the parts of a heritage of broken cultures. (10)

This is why, Ramchand argues, the

ground of loss or deprivation with which most West Indian writers and historians engage is not for Harris simply a ground for protest, recrimination and satire; it is visualised through the agents in his works as an ambivalent condition of helplessness and self-discovery, the starting-point for new social structures. (12)

Ramchand asserts that on this basis a "vision of essential unity" (10), a "conception of wider possibilities and relationships which still remains unfulfilled today in the Caribbean" (qtd. in Ramchand, 10), is "pervasive" (10) in Harris' fiction.

For the foregoing reasons, Ramchand urges critics to adopt a "larger contextual view of modern West Indian writing" (12). This is because, whether one is reading the works of the earliest generation of West Indian writers or the later generation of those writing in exile in London, novelists "seldom depart from a concern with the shape and possible directions of their society, its central issues and causes, its patterns of group life, and the quality of life possible for individuals in it" (13). In short, it is "imaginative fiction built around the lives of the folk" (15). However, Ramchand is concerned to offer a "less restricted view of the relationship between literature and the society it draws upon" (14). On the one hand, Ramchand is concerned with the possibility that, in the hands of less able critics overseas, West Indian novels might be reduced to serving as "primary evidence for theories about societies" (14), a possibility reinforced by the "tendency of West Indian commentators themselves to value novels according to their immediate social or political relevance" (14). However, on the other, Ramchand fears that "in seeking to avoid a disproportionate

valuation of content as against form" (14), the critic might be "drawn into an aestheticism that denies social function altogether" (14). In an effort to strike a happy medium, Ramchand opts to emphasise in part I of his study a "deterministic view of the effect of social factors upon the growth of a literature" (14) and to stress in part II the relative "autonomy of the work of art" (14). The goal in so doing is to avoid social reductionism without ignoring the specificity of the text itself.

"The Contemporary Linguistic Situation" (pp. 90-96)

If Ramchand is especially interested in the use which realist novelists make of characterisation, he also privileges diction as another important tool of realism. He is of the view that the diction found in the works of West Indian novelists is designed to imitate the language spoken by real West Indians. Here, Ramchand attempts to define the contemporary West Indian linguistic situation" (90) by asking us to "envisage a scale. At one end of the scale is . . . Standard English (SE) . . . the language of British expatriates" (90) which "exists as an ideal form to be aspired towards by mentally colonised West Indians" (90) and which is the "unknown norm by which even the illiterate measure social standing" (90). At the "farthest end . . . are the unschooled speakers of a number of closely related dialects that are the twentieth century continuations of Creole English" (91). The work of West Indian novelists oscillate between these two extremes. Ramchand posits the existence of what he calls "West Indian Standard (WIS)" (92) which "lies nearest" (92) to SE. Its vocabulary is more or less the same as SE apart from a few "West Indianisms" (93) and differences in pronunciation. "At the point where WIS resembles SE least, it is closest to the dialects" (93) synonymous with creole English. Ramchand argues that speakers of WIS have been sufficiently educated to control the grammar and lexis of Standard English; they may learn to pronounce in other ways but they retain ability to pronounce in their natural WIS way; above all, however, they are more or less instinctive speakers of or thinkers in a West Indian dialect or dialects. The third criterion suggests that the speaker of West Indian Standard is an educated West Indian whose social origin is in the dialect-speaking group or whose social contacts make him a dialect-speaker. (94)

These criteria, Ramchand argues, "help us to understand why the most distinctive speakers of West Indian Standard come from the Black or Coloured classes" (94) who emerged as a class in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the wake of the spreading of "popular education" (94) and changes in the "social and psychological conditions" (94). Ramchand's point is that West Indian writers belong predominately to this class of persons equipped with these linguistic capacities: they have "enriched their work by exploiting the possibilities of the folk dialect" (96).

"Dialect and West Indian Fiction" (pp. 96-107)

Ramchand contends here that the West Indian novel is the "only substantial literature in which the dialect-speaking character is the central character" (96): the

conventional associations of dialect with comic characters or with characters on the periphery have not been eliminated, but they are disarmed of any stereotyping appearances or effects by occurring among other contextualisations of dialect. (96)

This use of language subtends the novel "centrality of the Black or Coloured character and the articulation of this hitherto obscure and stereotyped person" (96). The key force in this regard is less a "purely literary impulse" (96) than the "documentary demands of social realism" (96): West Indian novels are "shaped to meet wider expressive needs" (96) as West Indian writers are "constantly opening up the possibilities of language" (96) in their works.

Ramchand contends that the relationship between SE and creole English can be explored in relation to two main areas: in the "relationship between the language of narration (the language of the implied author) and the language of the fictional character" (96) and the "use of dialect to express the consciousness of the character" (96). In the case of the former, sometimes there is an "incongruity between the language of the narrator ([what Wayne Booth terms] the implied author) and that of the fictional character" (97), the SE-speaking narrator / implied author belonging to a "different social world from the

world of the dialect-speaking character" (97). However, this is no black and white distinction in that the "two voices no longer reflect mutually exclusive social worlds" (97). There are, in short, varying degrees of proximity between the language used by narrator and character (and class reflected thereby), ranging from sheer distance (e.g. H. G. De Lisser's Jane's Career), through approximation (Reid, Hearne), to affinity, if not identification (Selvon's A Brighter Son). The same is true of the link between use of dialect to express the character's consciousness. Some writers like Mittelholzer believe that there is a "strict realistic criterion of appropriateness to the character" (103) as a result of which he resorts to a "mediating omniscience" (103) to express "anything complicated" (103) about the character rather than "work . . . directly through the character's consciousness, or in the character's language" (103). By contrast, once more, in Selvon's fiction "dialect first becomes the language of consciousness" (105) and "becomes saturated with inner experience" (103):

Selvon does not present Tiger's consciousness exclusively through dialect; but authorial comment, reportage of the character's thought processes, and reproduction of these processes directly in dialect modulate into one another so smoothly that the impression given is of direct access to the dialect-speaker's raw consciousness" (105).

In short, "dialect is a natural part of the equipment of the West Indian novelist, used as a means of narration, and for expressing the consciousness of the peasant character in a wide range of situations" (107). There are "certain common features" (105) to this use of dialect, including improvisation in syntax and lexis; direct and pithy expression; a strong tendency towards the use of image, especially of the personification type; and various kinds of repetition of syntactic structure and lexis combining with the spoken voice to produce highly rhythmic effects. (107)