



The process of Creolization and History in Postcolonial Caribbean

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Abstract: *The present study deals with the history and culture of the Caribbean in the postcolonial context. Despite the physical isolation and colonization, de-colonization, displacement, slavery and emancipation, Caribbean society leads to the emergence of 'new world', 'new ethnicity' (Stuart Hall), national culture and literary identity. This article makes an attempt to study the process of Creolization and historical background of postcolonial Caribbean society. The concept of Creolization in the Caribbean context is a social process that lies at the very centre of discussion of transculturalism, transnationalism, multiculturalism, diversity, and hybridization (Young, Robert). This study examines the terms rooted in the ethnic and cultural complexities of the Caribbean experience.*

Keywords----- Creolization, Caribbean, Postcolonial

1, Introduction

Creolization is a social phenomenon that is to understand the 'New World' experience (Brathwaite). The origins of Creolization for the Caribbean region lie in the contested and interrelated process of colonization, slavery, and migration. Caribbean society bears the legacy of colonial oppression, exploitation and marginalization. Amerindians, Africans, and Indians were included in Europe's onward march of 'Progress', but only as performers of predefined roles in the drama of European Empire. A culturally and racially divided plural (Creole and hybrid) society was created, its hierarchical structure held together by force (Smith-772-75). If ascribed racial difference was the primary distinguishing feature of colonial domination (Fanon, *Wretched* – 39-42), ethnicity, colour, class and gender differentiation and exclusion were also central to colonial society. These sites of difference often became the basis for scenes of disruption as the colonized struggled to free themselves from their colonizers.

Writers like Wilson Harris, Samuel Selvon, V.S. Naipaul, and George Lamming are greatly concerned with the socio-cultural, political colonialism, slavery and economic problems of the individual and West Indian society and try to define the social patterns of Caribbean society. As Kenneth Ramchand observed:

The West Indian novelists apply themselves with unusual urgency and unanimity to an analysis and interpretation of their society's ills, including social and economic



deprivations of the majority, the pervasive consciousness of race and colour,... power after independence the lack of history to be proud of and the absence of traditional or settled values (*West Indian Novel and Its Background*, 1983:4).

2, Historical background

There has often been a tendency in the Modern world to dismiss the Past, as Henry Ford did with his statement that “History is bunk,” (Chicago Tribune, 1916), and pretends that it has no influence on the present. Most contemporary writers insist that the past cannot be so readily ignored. Major historical events, beliefs, and people reverberate through the ages, and it is dangerous to deny this. To understand the relation between action and consequence or cause and effect, it helps to establish what the past entails and how it affects the present. When modern writers write about historical times and people, their aim is often to show the ways in which history impacts the present. Many writers consider the central importance of the past as being its ability to help us define who we are in the present. In this context Fred D’ Aguiar opines that:

There is simply too much history between us all [...]. What began as a single thread has, over the generations, woven itself into a prodigious carpet that cannot be unwoven. There is no good in pretending that a single thread of cause and effect exists now when in actual fact the carpet is before us with many beginnings and no end in sight. (*The Longest Memory*, 33)

History has always been a major concern in Caribbean literature, exerting, in Mark McWatt’s words, “an almost obsessive influence upon the creative imagination of the west Indian writer” (McWatt, 12). The reassessment of the past is indeed a source of regeneration and identity for the rootless and dismembered people of former colonies, even though such (re) consideration a process of “the backward glance” inevitably involves some suffering.

That some Caribbean writers of the younger generation, most of whom have settled outside the Caribbean area, should address slavery in their fiction seems therefore to be in line with that tradition. Like their literary predecessors, these “New Voices” have turned to the past in an attempt to understand where they came from, better to comprehend who they are and where they are going.

3, Caribbean historical and postcolonial process

Caribbean is not ethnically, culturally or nationally homogenous. Samuel Selvon was a creole from Trinidad. He says “I was Creolized from an early age, which is a good thing, in



my opinion as a mixing of tradition makes for a more harmonious world” (Nasta, 1988: 70-71). Selvon’s novels reflect the diversity of West Indies. His Immigrant novels: *The Lonely Londoners*, *Moses Ascending* and *Moses migrating* explores the first phase of British Black Community from their arrival as West Indian migrants and their transition to becoming what Stuart Hall calls the ‘New Ethnicity’ and ‘New World’. In this context, Dr. K T Sunitha in her thesis records the psychological journey of the Caribbean transition in society from ‘old world’ towards ‘new world’. She writes:

Caribbean novelists explore an imaginative insight into the growth of West Indian sensibility and interpret to the West Indian history coupled with an exposition of Caribbean transitions in society... As a historical fact, Empire creation and colonial settlement involved on the part of Conquerors or settlers, a transition with a beginning in the ‘Old World’ and an arrival in the ‘New’. The arrival in a ‘new world’s’ involved for settlers and conquerors a dislocation of geography, climate and race. (*Caribbean Transition: Motif of Journey in the Fiction of George Lamming*; 1984, 1)

Caribbean literature presents the predicament of a people who are dispossessed; resulting from cultural conflicts, economic disparities and tensions emerging from the struggle for political power. The Caribbean scene presents a complicated fabric of divisions and diversities of a ‘society of societies’ of different cultures, roots and races (Gilkes, Michael. *The West Indian Novel: 1981*). The society is peopled by indigenous inhabitants, the descendants of African slaves and Indian indentured labourers as well as the descendants of mixed liaisons. West Indian writing of mark is but a twentieth century creation influenced by many Amerindians and Europeans as Caribs have no sense of strong affiliation or loyalty to any particular society, culture or nation. Though much of Caribbean literature is expatriate, it opens new direction in depicting the crises of West Indian situation with precision and frankness.

4, The processes of Creolization

The study is about the social and cultural concept of creolization in the postcolonial Caribbean. “Creolization” in the Caribbean is the process in which African American cultures emerge in the ‘New World’. As a result of colonization there was a mixture between people of indigenous, African, Asian and European descent, which came to be understood as ‘Creolization’. The later traditionally used to refer to the Caribbean; although not exclusive to the Caribbean it can be further extended to represent other Afro-diasporic individuals. The



mixing of people brought a cultural mixing which ultimately led to the formation of ‘new identities’. It is important to emphasize that Creolization also is the fusion of the ‘old’ and ‘traditional’, with the ‘new’ and ‘modern’. Furthermore, ‘creolization’ occurs when participants actively select cultural elements that may become part of or inherited culture. Robin Cohen states that Creolization is a condition in which “the formation of new identities and inherited culture evolve to become different from those they possessed in the original cultures” (“Creolization and Cultural Globalization: The Soft Sounds of Fugitive Power), and then creatively merge these to create new varieties that supersede the prior forms.

Today, Caribbean accommodates the legacy of hundreds of years of colonization and display a large population of mixed races and cultures. Trinidad and Tobago has reached the population of 1,096,585 as per July 2008. The ethnic composition in today’s Trinidad is reflective of her colonial history. According to year 2008 data, collected and processed by Trinidad and Tobago Central Statistical Office, the ethnic composition of Trinidad has occurred as East Indians 40.03%, African 37.52%, Mixed 20.46%, White (Caucasian) 0.63%, Chinese and other 1.36% (<http://www.cso.gov.tt/cso/census2004-08/default.asp>). These mixed races and cultures lead towards Creolized and hybrid society.

According to Charles Stewart the concept of creolization originates during the 16th century, although, there is no date recording the beginning of the word creolization. The term creolization was understood to be a distinction between those individuals born in the “Old World” versus the “New World”. As consequence to slavery and the different power relations between different races creolization became synonymous with Creole, often of which was used to distinguish the master and the slave. The word ‘Creole’ was also used to distinguish those Afro-descendants who were born in the ‘New World’ in comparison to African-born slaves. The word *creolization* has evolved and changed to have different meaning at different times in history. There are different processes of creolization have shaped and reshaped the different forms of one culture. For example, food, music, and religion have been impacted by the creolization of today’s world.

Once the indigenous ‘New World’ populations were decimated, the growth and development of plantation economies that arose in the Caribbean in the seventeenth century produced path-breaking patterns of economic and cultural exchange between Europe, the ‘New World’ of the Americas—including Central America, the Guiana, Mexico, and Brazil—and the African continent. Catalyzed by the slave trade, which forcibly removed untold



numbers of peoples of diverse racial, cultural, and geographical origins from their African homelands and transplanted them into vast island plantations, these already variegated groups subsequently came into contact with other transplanted peoples from Europe, South Asia, China, and the Middle East. As a result, the Caribbean region quickly became a key point in what would become the creolization of these composite populations.

Brathwaite points out the term was used in Trinidad to refer to the black descendants of slaves to distinguish them from East Indian immigrants. He says:

New ethnic groups such as Portuguese, Chinese, Indians were introduced. New colorations into the black/white/coloured stratification; New numerical dispositions, new religions: moslem/Hindu, new occupational specializations—cocoa/ rice –farming and new cultural identities, problem and orientations were continuously introduced into the already fragmented world. (*Development of Creole Society in Jamaica*).

The process of racial mixing triggered the issue of Creolization which is regarded as a cultural process based upon the stimulus / responses of individuals within the society to their (new) environment and to each other (Ashcroft 1998). The newly produced society, through a process that can be explained with the concepts of ‘acculturation’ and ‘inter-culturation’ is moulded into a ‘new’ sphere carrying the vestiges of both the cultures of ‘traditional’ and ‘new’. The world of colonization is all about a dominant culture that exposes its set of ideas, belief and customs on an indigenous society which is valued as inferior to the colonizer (Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*). The indigenous society and the new settlers (African slaves and Indian indentured labourers) exposed to a dominant culture absorbs the white master’s rules, both consciously and unconsciously. Instead of adapting the dominant culture, they adapt to the ‘new culture’ (Creole). This process leads towards the transition of ‘new culture’, ‘new ethnicity’ and ‘new world’. The process of adapting to the new culture may be considered as decolonization in culture.

Creolization and hybridization mainly arise through migration and diaspora when the new middle classes and their cultural and social practices become a mixture. It involves different meanings not only across time but also cross (Trans) cultural contexts. Creole and Hybrid characters deeply feel the ‘double consciousnesses’ (Fanon) in their mind. Here the characters live in between two worlds, that is the nostalgic world of ‘old world’ and the practical world of ‘new world’. Creole and Hybrid characters are always in-between their



‘roots’ and the present place. Derek Walcott in his poem “A Far cry from Africa”, captures this liminal situation and his sufferings of the hybrid state. He writes;

I who am poisoned with the blood of both,
Where shall I turn, divided to the vein?
I who have cursed
The drunken officer of British rule, how choose
Between this Africa and the English tongue I love?

5, Conclusion

Thus, Creolization has frequently been used in post-colonial discourse to mean simply cross-cultural ‘exchange’. This use of the term has been extensively criticized since it implies negating and neglecting the inequity and variation of the power relations. By stressing the transformative cultural, linguistic and political impact on both the colonized and the colonizer, it has been regarded as ‘new ethnicity’, as replicating assimilationist policies by masking or ‘whitewashing’ cultural difference (Ashcroft 1998: 118-119)

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