ALIENATION IN CARIBBEAN LITERATURE

WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE WORKS

OF

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A Thesis submitted in Fulfilment for the
Degree of Master of Arts
in The University of Nairobi

August, 1976.
Abstract

In this study, alienation is understood as a situation in which the majorities in the Caribbean are peripheral to, estranged from their world because they have always been held in economic bondage, and dependent upon this, in cultural bondage as well. Secondly, that the author in failing to grasp the real cause and trends of this bondage within history, and in failing to pave the directions for society in a contemporary world is also thereby estranged from these majorities.

The study argues that Caribbean literature cannot be understood independently of the history and the economy of the Caribbean society. This society was founded for only one purpose - the production of the raw materials that were necessary (later) for European Industrialisation. The society was "controlled" by absentee-landlords, while those who journeyed there -- European overseers, African thralls and Asian indentured labourers were forcibly ejected out of their communities. They all shared in a common estrangement from their original homelands.

The more important form of alienation is that undergone by the African slave within the mercantile system: it is possible to see the latter as the first
proletarian in the growth of world capitalism - a kind of predecessor to the European factory-worker of the last century. His alienation here can be explained in familiar Marxist terms in reference to his economic dispossession in the ownership of the means of production; the social anarchy consequent upon this; and his psychological disaffection with the work process. But there is in fact a difference between the European Industrial environment and the Caribbean slave situation: Europe was the theatre of exchange of all that was produced, while conversely, everything that was produced in the Caribbean went outside. And therefore the Caribbean faced and faces greater social anarchy, and greater pauperisation of its labour. The unemployment, underemployment, over/underproduction and in short, the serious underdevelopment of the Caribbean is a kind of exacerbated alienation that must be understood against the background of mercantile relations.

It is further argued that as a result of, and in addition to her economic dominance, Europe also assumed cultural overlordship over the Caribbean. The ex-Asian and the ex-African underwent linguistic, religious, cultural loss as a consequence of crossing over into the Caribbean. Up-to-date, there is a strong bias towards European culture in the Caribbean. The
acceptable language, modes of dress, entertainment are all European. Indeed to grow and to know the world in the Caribbean involves coming under the influence of European culture. This is why we must speak of the peoples of the Caribbean as doubly estranged: in the first place economically, and as a consequence of this, culturally. It is suggested in this study that nothing in fact has changed in the Caribbean society since its inception: the emancipation in the 1830s only managed to create a class of "free" agricultural labourers; while sovereignty, Independence, in the 50s and 60s has not been accompanied by the creation of an internally responsive politico-socio-economic ideology (exception Cuba) within which the up-to-now estranged majorities could develop. Extensive economic growth in the neo-colonial era has left the people 'out'; and Europe is still culturally dominant.

It is because of an economy and history that is geared towards the West that Caribbean literature reflects and/or manifests alienation: In the first place, considering this literature as an entity, we find that it is a literature oriented not so much towards public utility as towards the consumer. It is no wonder therefore that most writers in the Caribbean publish their books with internationally recognised
publishing houses - the latter may be international corporations in their own right, or affiliated to a parent International Corporation. Arising from this, Caribbean literature is then embedded to world capitalism, and any writer from the Caribbean, however revolutionary he may think he is, is nevertheless getting his share of profits from exploitative world capitalism. In that way alone capitalism separates the writer from the people. In this study, it is further pointed out that in a largely illiterate society, the entire development of the writer - through school, search for market et al. - is away from the society of the majority. This is why most writers are strangers to the ordinary, the commonplace and the real.

Another link between this literature and alienation is that economic and cultural alienation (however these are handled) is its subject of reflection, and most of the critical views arising from it can be explained in reference to this alienation. It is argued that the whole body of Caribbean literature can be held together in a framework within which alienation then becomes a theme. In this study that framework is sub-titled Movement Away; Exile; and Return.
In *Movement Away*, we consider books on the movement away of the slave from the continent of Africa, etc., and about our exposure these days, to a white controlled system, and particularly a white-dominated educational system. In these books, alienation manifests itself as culture-conflict occasioned by the differences between cultures. The contentual progress of these books, it is argued, leads the protagonists to the metropole. It is fitting therefore that the earlier theme is superceded by the *Exile* theme. Here, the books considered portray the lives of the Blacks, the West Indians, in the metropolis; and alienation involves the psychological disillusionment consequent upon the immigrants knowledge of the "centre of civilization" from first hand. The intensity and quality of the shock will depend on the class of the protagonist. The main critical attitude from this literature is a reaction "we-also-had-a-culture-too" contained most clearly in Negritude poetry (represented here by Aime Cesaire's *Return to My Native Land*). This reaction is seen to have been very important in practical nationalism, but was in fact more properly the cry of a few men who had been greatly exposed and subjected to white power and lost contact with their world. Naturally, *Exile* anticipates the *Return*. In the latter, the problem is one of a failed national
identity. Some writers, often in spite of themselves praise this loss, and thereby produce a literature which has close affinities to metropolitan literatures - displaying their allegiance to alienation. Others are led to cynical despair; while others positively question the system which has reduced the majority to anonymity. There is an emphasis in this study that as writers portray the "objective" alienation of their world, they themselves reveal their distance from that world in the approximateness with which they handle the social reality. It is hazarded that the distance is proportional to their class attachments. Further, it is suggested that the most realistic writer (and therefore the least symbolic and psychological) is the most useful to a developing Caribbean. George Lamming is particularly chosen for study here for providing a whole spectra of study on "objective" colonial alienation and for including the important idea of the alienation of the artist within the whole study. Nevertheless he also becomes increasingly abstract. The African novel, Sembene Ousmane's God's Bits of Wood is presented as the most integrated study on colonialism, and the most valuable because of its interest with the problems of development in contemporary third world. And therefore the candidate often contrasts
Ousmane's analysis of alienation with George Lamming's.

The candidate argues that economic and cultural "satellite-status" will only be obviated by the creation of an economy that benefits the majorities; and that writers will be of the greatest use to their communities through viewing themselves as part of their societies and not through alienation. The creation of the new economy to which they must now point will make this very possible.