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REVIEW ARTICLES

SIX CARIBBEAN NOVELS BY WOMEN

Crick crack, monkey. MERLE HODGE. London, Kingston, Port of Spain, and Exeter NH: Heinemann Educational Books, 1981. xiv + 112 pp. (Paper US\$ 5.00, £ 1.45)

Beka Lamb. ZEE EDGELL. London, Kingston, Port of Spain, and Exeter NH: Heinemann Educational Books, 1982. 171 pp. (Paper US\$ 4.50, £ 1.50)

Jane and Louisa will soon come home. ERNA BRODBER. London and Port of Spain: New Beacon Books, 1980. 147 pp. (Paper £ 2.95)

The Bridge of Beyond. SIMONE SCHWARZ-BART. (Translation, by BARBARA BRAY, of *Pluie et vent sur Télumée Miracle*. Editions du Seuil, 1972.) London, Kingston, Port of Spain, and Exeter NH: Heinemann Educational Books, 1982. xviii + 174 pp. (Paper US\$ 5.50, £ 1.95)

Heremakhonon. MARYSE CONDÉ. Washington, D.C.: Three Continents Press, 1982. (Paper US\$ 7.00)

The orchid house. PHYLLIS SHAND ALLFREY. London: Virago Press, 1982. xvi + 235 pp. (Paper £ 2.95)

Over the past two and a half years, six novels have appeared in English-language paperback editions that were written by and

about Caribbean females. Of the six (four of which were published earlier, two originally in French), three are the first such novels to be published in Heinemann's Caribbean Writers Series,¹ the primary source for present-day readers of Caribbean novels in English. If one excepts the works of Jean Rhys, which have long been available through Penguin and are now being issued by Norton, this handful of books probably represents the majority of Caribbean novels by women that are currently readily available in English. One might easily conclude that the number of Caribbean novels by women is very small. Indeed, a 1977 issue of *Savacou* devoted entirely to Caribbean women mentions only a couple of additional novels. But a quick count of women novelists listed in Donald Herdeck's *Caribbean writers: A bio-bibliographic critical encyclopedia* (1978) reveals approximately twenty writers in English, twenty-five in French, and ten in Spanish — over fifty in all. Almost none of the French and Spanish novels listed have been translated into English, but even the vast majority of those novels written in English are probably unknown to most readers of Caribbean literature. Clearly, we have been missing out on something, and we might wonder what. A brief look at the six novels just published may give us an idea.

Crick crack, monkey, by Trinidadian Merle Hodge, was originally published by André Deutsch in 1970. Now number 24 of the Caribbean Writers Series, this novel is similar to several other novels in the Heinemann Series — Michael Anthony's *The year in San Fernando* (1965), Geoffrey Drayton's *Christopher* (1959), Ian McDonald's *The humming-bird tree* (1969) and Joseph Zobel's *Black shack alley* (1950) — in that it is the story of a child growing up. But here the child is a girl. The novel follows the life of Tee from the death of her mother in childbirth and the departure of her father for England (where Tee assumes her mother has also gone) through the ensuing seven years to her own departure for England to rejoin her father. During this time she is mothered by two aunts, representing two opposing cultures. At first she lives with Tante, the sister of her dark-skinned father, in the country. There, in the midst of economic poverty, she is nurtured on the robust spirit of peasant life as it is revealed through her lively and down-to-earth aunt and a variety of other relatives and village people, including

the unemployed youth who loiter on the village bridge. Her greatest delight is her visits to her grandmother, who lives in "an enchanted country" in the hills, made even more magical by the Anancy stories she tells. A market woman, her grandmother engages Tee in her daily tasks of gathering the mangoes, chennettes, and plantains and of making the guava-cheese, bennay-balls, and chilibibi that she sells on Sundays in town, and she tries to encourage in Tee the pride and strength of her own grandmother. When it comes time for school, the local schools fill up, and Tee ends up in a make-shift class where she learns the lesson that will determine the rest of her youth: "that Glory and The Mother Country and Up-There and Over-There had all one and the same geographical location." Eventually her other aunt, "The Bitch," the sister of her light-skinned mother, carries her off to town, to "real" schools, and to her other self — "the Proper Me." She soon comes to see that "the whole of life was like a piece of cloth, with a rightside and a wrongside," and the rest of the novel recounts how Tee, now Cynthia, tries to resolve the conflict within herself between these two sides.

Zee Edgell's *Beka Lamb*, published for the first time in the Caribbean Writers Series, takes place in Belize and seems to be the only novel by a woman, if not indeed the only novel, to have come out of Belize. A fuller, more ambitious work than Hodge's (which often seems more like a collection of reminiscences than a novel), *Beka Lamb* records a few months in the life of its fourteen-year-old heroine, beginning and ending with her winning an essay contest and passing, after initially failing, the first term of her freshman year in a convent school. The significance of Beka's achievement lies in the tale leading up to these events. As in *Crick crack, monkey*, there is a sharp contrast between two ways of life. But whereas with Hodge's novel our sympathy is meant to lie with the unvarnished life of the peasant, the hypocrisy of the other world making us fear for the heroine, Edgell's story forces us to respect that other world, for it is turning (though ever so slowly) into the world of the dispossessed. "'Befo' time,'" Beka's feisty grandmother remarks, "'Beka would never have won that contest'; always 'the prizes would go to bakras, panias or expatriates.'" Indeed, not long before, Beka's place would have been with "the

washing bowl underneath the house bottom,” rather than with “books in a classroom overlooking the Caribbean Sea.” But Beka, the “flat-rate Belize creole,” does win, and she does so without compromising her integrity. Instead of adapting to that other world, she makes it her own.

The tale leading up to Beka’s victory concerns Beka’s best friend, seventeen-year-old Toycie, and it is here that we see dramatically the conflict between two ways of life. Beka’s resolution of it is not only as a disadvantaged Creole, but as a female. What she chooses for herself — the opposite of what Toycie accepts — is both the result of her understanding of Toycie’s fate and the means by which she would thwart its repetition. Although Edgell affirms that there is much to be valued in the black Creole heritage, she sees nothing romantic about poverty or the pain and defeat that accompany it. Nor does she see education as necessarily merely an exercise in mimicry. Thus, when Beka decides to stay in school and try again, she does so out of respect for, rather than rejection of, her own people, guided by a teacher who values the lives, past and present, of those people and who instructs Beka in her obligation to serve those lives. But Edgell suggests that education is not enough to make the difference between defeat and victory. When one of the defeated women in Beka’s world comments, “No mother, no father, no school. What can I do?” Beka realizes that her friend Toycie had only school, since her father had gone off to Panama and her mother had “lent” her to a friend and then left for the United States. Beka, in contrast, has not only her mother and grandmother, with whom she shares her life as well as her room, but her father, who also went to Panama, but returned. When Toycie in her trouble is told she must leave school, it is Beka’s Daddy Bill who comes to her defense, as protective of her as he is of his own daughter. And though he fails in his mission, his constant presence as provider, guide, and companion — as a father — is what seems to make the difference between Toycie’s fate and his daughter’s. It is because of her whole family, as well as her education, that in the end Beka can announce her independence as a female.

Beka’s painful growth towards self-government mirrors that of her country. As with Samuel Selvon’s *A brighter sun* (1952), this

novel is the story of the maturation of a people as well as of an individual. Through the political activities of Granny Ivy and the business concerns of her son, Bill Lamb, Edgell gives us a fictional account of the turmoil of the year 1951 preceding the arrest of Philip Goldson and Leigh Richardson (here Gladsen and Pritchard) for sedition. Granny Ivy, a loyal member of the People's Independence Party (based on the People's United Party, founded in 1950), whether funded by Guatemala or not, is a strong opponent of West Indian Federation without Independence, seeing it as a British ruse to get cheap labor. Bill, who believes that "the British brand of colonialism isn't the worst we could have" and that one nation's independence is less important than the ultimate dependence of all nations on one another, is committed not so much to political as to economic reform through working hard and "using the opportunities available." Deprived in his own youth of an education, he sees Beka's initial failure as a lost opportunity: "The money you wasted could feed a poor family for six months," he laments. But whatever the strategy for improving life in Belize, there is general consensus that it needs improving. "Sometimes I feel bruk down just like my own country," complains Beka. "I start all right but then I can't seem to continue. Something gets in the way and then I drift for the longest while." What both Beka and her country want is self-respect — the ability to see themselves as something other than the trash left over after the sugar cane has been sucked dry, to use Granny Ivy's image. And when she and Toycie change the label on Toycie's guitar from "Made in Spain" to "Made in Belize" they are pretending, at least, that that self-respect is theirs.

Both Hodge and Edgell depict the conflict between two Caribbean worlds — the world of the predominantly black Have-Nots and the other world of the predominantly white and, to a lesser extent, mulatto Haves — within the lives of their heroines. Jamaican Erna Brodber's *Jane and Louisa will soon come home*, published for the first time by New Beacon, suggests that the burden of this conflict must be carried by the black woman — literally in her womb — and that its only resolution may be the negation of life. Neither an extensive family, an extended education, political involvement, nor religion can resolve it.

Brodber traces the life of her heroine, Nellie Richmond, from her sixth year, when the school inspector advises that she be moved ahead five grades, to her late twenties, by which time she has acquired a few gray hairs and a doctorate, apparently at an American university. During this time, Nellie tries to work out her "social identity" — an identity complicated by the incompatible lines of her descent. "Papa's grandfather and Mama's mother," Nellie begins her story, "were the upper reaches of our world." We gradually discover that "Papa's grandfather" is William Alexander Whiting, the child of "reddish-yellow" Albert and Elizabeth Whiting, and that "Mama's mother" is Granny Tucker, "with the two wiry black hands." By the black Tia Maria, William Alexander had fathered Kitty, who had married "Puppa" Richmond, the "black patoo." Alexander Richmond, Nellie's father, is their son. The heritage of Nellie's mother, Sarah, on the other hand, is probably pure African, Granny Tucker being the child of a slave and Sarah's father, Corpie, having fought as a black man in the Boer War. The multitude of relatives descended from William Alexander on the "pale" side and Granny Tucker on the black side make up Nellie's immediate family. But in Nellie's world "everybody is related," and the child is faced with threading her way through a maze of interrelationships, some of which are deliberately obscured by her elders. (The title of the novel refers to Nellie's twin cousins, exactly her age, from whom she hopes to learn answers to some of her many questions.)

Just as Anancy, the clever spider of the African folk tale, spins his white cocoon — his "kumbla" — to protect his offspring, Nellie's Great Grandmother Tia Maria had, through William Alexander, spun her "khaki" one. But the identity that Nellie is able to construct from the extensive family that is her kumbla is not strong enough to carry her unscathed into the outside world. Nor can it satisfy her upon her return. For in either place — because of Tia Maria herself as well as Puppa Richmond and Sarah — she is cursed.

Being female is bad enough. "Girls so hard to grow up," complains Nellie's Aunt Rebecca. "'Learn that the world is waiting to drag you down. 'Woman luck de a dungle heap', they say,

“fowl come scratch it up”.’” But being a black (or brown) female is even worse. Rebecca, who is ashamed of her comparatively light skin, advises Nellie to “‘save yourself lest you turn woman before your time, before the wrong fowl scratch you luck.’” Rebecca herself is proof of the dangers of ignoring such advice. Having become pregnant by a black man, she “threw away the child and made herself a mule,” and spent the rest of her life paying for her errors. The best thing a black girl could do, according to Rebecca and perhaps most of the women in Nellie’s world, was to get herself married to a light-skinned man. But even if a black female managed to feel some pride in her color within the confines of her kumbla — and Nellie does inherit a certain amount of pride from Granny Tucker — the outside world was waiting to demolish it. “The trouble with the kumbla,” Nellie was to learn, “is the getting out of the kumbla.”

Nellie leaves her kumbla by way of education, which is valued by both sides of her family. Knowing that “the things she loved would prosper in inverse ratio to her disappearance,” Tia Maria had done “everything to annihilate herself.” The more her children grew apart from her through education, “the more sure she was that they had found their places in the established world to which William belonged, a world that was foreign to her, a world that was safe and successful.” Granny Tucker, too, had pressed education upon her children. Although Tia’s Kitty threw over her education to marry an uneducated black man and Granny’s Sarah gave up hers when she became pregnant by Alexander, the ideal persisted. Brought up “to take to learning,” Nellie is pushed ahead in school, handed over to Rebecca for her secondary education, and ends up with a doctorate. But her education does nothing to prepare her for her life as a black woman. In the United States she discovers that she is, despite her education, simply “a nigger,” and she returns home in anger only to learn that even in her kumbla education makes little difference. In the United States blacks don’t lead; at home the blacks she is trained to lead don’t want to be led. From education Nellie turns to politics, joining a group led by a black man who through education and practical idealism “had reached our highest phase of evolution.” But when he is killed, the group slides into passivity, and Nellie finds herself

with neither cause nor lover. From politics she turns to religion, the Rastafarian Baba replacing the Marxist Robin. Like Robin, Baba is devoted to the people. But he demands a comparable devotion — to the people, not to him — from Nellie, and she backs away from the celibate order of this new savior, still searching for her own role as an educated black woman.

Baba's message, however, is not lost on Nellie. Moreover it is the same message she has received, directly or indirectly, from Aunt Rebecca, Tia Maria, her own mother, and practically every other woman she has known anything about: survival depends on the annihilation of either herself or her children. For "the black womb is a maw" that "sucks grief and anger and shame but it does not spit. It absorbs them into its body." Even if you "disinfect its fruits with fine sterilised white lint" or provide a "white lie," a kumbla, to protect it, "the game was lost: it was the womb or its fruits." Tia had annihilated herself in hopes of saving her children. Rebecca had annihilated her child in hopes of saving herself. Better to "take an antidote. Silence it. Best pretend it doesn't exist. Give it a cap of darkness, take a pill." Or better yet, "sit still like an alabaster baby in your kumbla."

In the end, Nellie refers to "a feeling of hope," envisioning, through a dream of a large fish in her belly that refuses to be born, a brighter future not only for the black woman but for all her people. But this image is only a dream, not strong enough to dispel (for the reader certainly and probably for Nellie as well) the despair already built up. And the structure of the novel itself, which mirrors the jumbled crystal fragments of a kaleidoscope — the spy glass through which Nellie hoped to learn the truth of her world — tells us that Nellie never did learn the answers. She had believed that "if I knew all my kind . . . I could no longer roam as a stranger; that I had to know them to know what I was about." Having gotten to know the inhabitants of her kumbla, she realizes that what her life is about is still a puzzle.

Simone Schwarz-Bart's *The Bridge of Beyond*,² first published in French in 1972, is, at least on the surface, an affirmation rather than a negation of life. Through the language of proverbs, which in themselves suggest a retentive strength carried from one generation to another, Schwarz-Bart conveys an optimism that

verges on romanticism. Set in Guadeloupe, the home of the author, the novel is the story of one black woman, Telumee, and her female ancestors, the Lougandor women, who create out of the very brutality of the world into which they are thrust a world of their own. Through a stoic acceptance of life as it is, they defeat despair.

Telumee's world of the impoverished cane society of the Caribbean is destined for disaster: "When, in the long hot blue days, the madness of the West Indies starts to swirl around in the air above the villages, bluffs, and plateaus, men are seized with dread at the thought of the fate hovering over them, preparing to swoop on one or another like a bird of prey, and while they are incapable of offering the slightest resistance." For the children of this world, the education they receive can do little to reverse their fate. "However much care it took of us, and our frizzy little pigtailed heads, school could not stop our waters from gathering," Telumee explains. It only "opened its sluices and left us to the current." The males of this world are especially vulnerable. Telumee's beloved Elie lifts himself out of the cane fields into the forests, believing that all he needs is "my two arms and my trade as a sawyer" to make his dreams of becoming a customs clerk and owner of a fine convertible and a suit with a ruffle come true. But he soon learns that his friend, the older and wiser Amboise, is right: they are all "like the kid tethered in the field," knowing that "the truth of our fate was not in ourselves but in the existence of the blade." As Elie's dreams fail, so do Telumee's. After a brief interlude in the outside world, where her "one thought [was] to keep myself safe, to remain intact under the white man's words and gestures and incomprehensible grimaces," she returns home to harvest "the three crowns" of a woman's life: "love, the trust of others, and that kind of glory that accompanies every woman who is happy." But she quickly learns that these gifts are "too great not to become dangerous in God's sight," and she is threatened with becoming like the women she had watched throughout her childhood — "women lost before their time, broken, destroyed."

What saves Telumee from her fate is the strength she has inherited from her grandmother, Toussine, who has taught her that "however heavy a woman's breasts, her chest is always

strong enough to carry them.’” In her “uncertain” world, with the other world hovering menacingly outside, Telumee does what the Lougandor women have traditionally done: try “to keep up my position as a Negress, to keep up the way I carry my soul.” It is the strength and grace with which Telumee and her grandmother confront the injustice of life that turn their world into one of “splendour.” In her old age, Telumee sees clearly “that heaven’s gift to us is that we should have our head thrust into, held down in, the murky water of scorn, cruelty, pettiness, and treachery.” But she also sees “that we are not drowned in it. We have struggled to be born and we have struggled to be born again . . .” “It may well be,” she concludes, “that all suffering, even the prickles in the canefields, are part of the glory of man.” Given this strong affirmation of the Caribbean black woman’s power to defy her fate, it is strange that Schwarz-Bart lets her heroine reach the end of her life childless.

Like *The Bridge of Beyond*, *Heremakhonon* (meaning “Welcome House”) is by a Guadeloupean, Maryse Condé, and was first published in French in 1976. But the heroines of these two novels could not be less alike. Although Condé’s Veronica Mercier acknowledges that she comes “from an island where the women are solid matrons” who “make up for males backing out,” those women are not of her milieu. The ones of her world have “realized that a real woman must have hay fever, allergies, and in short be the weaker sex.” Veronica’s milieu is the black middle class, a world of boarding schools, servants, second homes, Directoire decor, European travel, and pride in being “different from other niggers.” But Veronica is a rebel, “full of anti-grace.” Brought up to think she had nothing to be ashamed of, she discovers when she is eight, while on vacation with her family in a mulatto stronghold, that she is ashamed of her blackness, ashamed of her desire to be less black, and ashamed of “the black bourgeoisie that made me, with its talk of glorifying the Race and its terrified conviction of its inferiority.” After nine years abroad, during which time she acquires an advanced degree and a white lover, Veronica is still escaping her family, and she goes to Africa as “one of a new breed” of tourists, “searching out herself, not landscapes.”

In a world in which contempt or absurdity is to be found in

almost every corner (as well as on almost every page of Condé's novel), Veronica wanders from one continent to the next with cynical detachment. Wary of seeing Africa "through rose-colored glasses," she goes there "clinging to my objectivity," avoiding the "exoticism," "clichés," and "sentimentality" that surround "the Dark Continent." But her belief that in Africa she may be "born again" and discover "the love I am seeking for myself through her" is rooted in a vision "of a black world that Europe did not reduce to a caricature of itself. That might say: 'When the West was in a mess, we governed our peoples with wisdom, we created, we innovated.'" Thus Veronica goes to Africa "looking for what remains of the past," hoping to find the ideal Mandingo prince of whom her father is a degenerate replica, and for a while she thinks she has succeeded. But three and a half centuries have separated her from Africa, and all she finds is "a man with ancestors who's guarding them jealously for himself and wouldn't dream of sharing them with me." Her savior turns out to be one of "the most reactionary and retrograde" of the ministers in a new police state that is ruled by a modern Christophe trying "to prove over and over again that he was civilized." What Veronica finds, in short, is a black bourgeoisie that is even more contemptible than the one from which she has been trying to escape. Having "looked for myself in the wrong place," Veronica gains nothing lasting from her African adventure. Only for a brief period does she seem to shed her despair. As a witness to "the fight of a people for their liberty and justice," she finds herself having to "choose between the past and the present," and in rejecting the past as it is reincarnated in the new African bourgeoisie, she does rid herself of the detachment that has trailed her throughout her wanderings and learns how to feel. But this relief is only temporary. In the end, she is still brooding, still "face to face with myself. Trapped."

Phyllis Shand Allfrey's *The orchid house*, first published by Constable in 1953, is the only one of these novels that depicts the world of the Caribbean white Creole society. Set in Dominica, the birthplace and present home of its author, this novel is the story of a family of three daughters, each of whom represents a different response to that world. Of the three, it is Joan who most closely resembles the author. Joan sees that the old day of the white

Creole is over, and, having been trained (like Allfrey) in the politics of Britain's Labour Party, she comes home to take up the cause of "the mute suppressed people" of the island, anticipating Allfrey's own return to a political life in Dominica. With the help of "a common Negro," to use the language of her uncle, Joan starts "agitating the unemployed labourers into a state of unrest." Once reform is underway, she steps out of the movement, but by then she has accomplished her goal: she has revitalized not only her island, but her family and, symbolically, the world into which she was born. Joan's power to turn around the life of the island and her family is due in part, we feel, to the black woman, Lally, who nursed her and her sisters through childhood (a childhood, incidentally, of private tutors). The narrator of the tale through whose eyes we see the white Creole world, Lally is so confident of herself as a woman that she claims "small love for men" and is happiest when the house is free from the various husbands of the women who inhabit it. There is no sign that Joan has as little regard for men as Lally does, but her strength as a reformer seems to be due to some extent, at least, to her refusal to be intimidated as a woman. In contrast to Lally, the father of the family is representative of the decadent life Joan must revitalize: having degenerated after his experience in World War I into the realm of drug addiction and insanity, he is "a wanderer without direction."

The novels of both Condé and Allfrey bear some resemblance to novels by Jean Rhys. Veronica Mercier is very much like Rhys's Anna Morgan of *Voyage in the dark* (1934). Both are lost in a world pervaded by cynicism and contempt. About the only comfort either Veronica or Anna finds is in her recollections of the black servant who nursed her through childhood. And both women experience what Veronica calls "a secret unhealthy voluptuousness in being treated like an object." The similarities between *The orchid house* and Rhys's *Wide sargasso sea* (1966), however, are so strong that they suggest more than coincidence. Allfrey's portrait of "the Master"; characters, such as Lally; symbols, including the manor house; the flat, elliptical first-person narration; even specific names (Christophine and Baptiste); and above all the sense of some mysterious power waiting to dash the world of the white Creole to pieces are all here for Rhys to take up and use in her masterpiece.

Together, these six novels provide a view of the Caribbean that is remarkably comprehensive,³ each of the authors bringing to her creation her own individual knowledge of some particular corner of that world. And probably because they are written by females about females, they provide considerable insight into the roles of females within Caribbean society. But for all of these novelists the most significant aspect of the lives they depict is not gender, but color. All of them write from the perspective of the social critic who is sensitive to this most pervasive and divisive force in Caribbean life. The central concern of each of them is how her heroine confronts the profound sense of shame that history — through its manipulation of color — has imposed upon her individual life. Whether she be black, mulatto, or white, it is this awareness that motivates her and determines the way she reacts to every other aspect of life, including being female. Even her pride is rooted in her perception of shame. Beka, Telumee, and Joan all come to terms with the anxiety produced by this sensibility; Cynthia and Nellie are still struggling; and Veronica fails.

NOTES

1. Several West Indian novels written by men have a female as their central character, for example, Claude McKay's *Banana bottom* (1933), Edgar Mittelholzer's *The life and death of Sylvia* (1953), George Lamming's *Season of adventure* (1960), and Shiva Naipaul's *Fireflies* (1970). Herbert G. DeLisser wrote at least five such novels: *Jane's career* (1913), *Susan Proudleigh* (1915), *Morgan's daughter* (1953), *Psyche* (1953), and *Arawak girl* (1958). Of all of these novels, only one — DeLisser's *Jane's career* — is part of the Heinemann Series.
2. A second novel by Schwarz-Bart originally published in French as *Ti Jean l'horizon* (1979) has been republished in English hardback as *Between two worlds*. Its central character is a young black man who journeys from Fond-Zombi (of *The Bridge of Beyond*) to Africa in search of a means to end the suffering of his people.
3. For an even fuller picture, see the American Paule Marshall's *Brown girl, brownstones* (1953), recently republished by The Feminist Press. This novel, set in Brooklyn, focuses on a first-generation American girl and her Barbadian-American mother.

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