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'One People, One Nation, One Destiny': Mahadai Das and the Ideology of Progress in Postcolonial Guyana

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Abstract

This paper will address the work of contemporary Indo-Guyanese poet Mahadai Das in the context of Guyanese nationalism and postcolonial theory. These discourses exhibit a commitment to linear historiography and an ideology of progress, in which 'postcolonialism' is represented as an epochal step forward from colonialism in both space and time. This representation informs the representation of the movement to independence in Guyana in Mahadai Das' first collection of poems *I Want To Be a Poetess of My People*. Das began writing in 1977 as a stridently nationalist poet, yet by the time of her second publication *My Finer Steel Will Grow*, five years later; she had become a political dissident. This radical change in her political loyalties is central to her later collection and highlights the inadequacy of the nationalist ideology of her earlier nation-narratives. *My Finer Steel Will Grow* marks a refusal to represent 'postcolonialism' as a movement forward in space as well as time, undermining the linear tropes of both nationalism and postcolonialism.

'One People, One Nation, One Destiny': Mahadai Das and the Ideology of Progress in Postcolonial Guyana.

In this paper I will be reading the poems of contemporary Indo-Guyanese poet Mahadai Das in the context of Guyanese nationalism and postcolonial theory and suggesting that her work highlights the limitations of these discourses. My suggestion of the limitations of postcolonialism does not seek to detract from the very valuable work of theorists like Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak, but with the term 'postcolonialism' itself.

My interest in the implications of this term was generated by an essay entitled 'The Angel of Progress' by Anne McClintock, in which she suggests:

Metaphorically, the term 'post-colonialism' marks history as a series of stages along an epochal road from the 'pre-colonial' to the 'colonial' to the 'post-colonial'- an unbidden- if disavowed commitment to linear time and the idea of development [1]

In terms of this chronology of development, 'postcolonial' becomes an epochal step forward in both space and time, characterised by its progress from and improvement upon the past epoch of colonialism. In this paper I am interested in how appropriate this representation of the movement to independence is to the lived experience of the postcolonial subject. In this analysis I will be considering the discourse of nationalism in the republic of Guyana. It is my contention that the same idea of progress, which informs 'postcolonialism', lies at the heart of this nationalist discourse.

In the years leading up to Independence in Guyana, a powerful anti-colonial and revolutionary discourse developed. When Independence was achieved on May 26 1966 this was translated in to radical nationalism. Guyana became 'postcolonial' under the proud and progressive motto 'One People One Nation One Destiny'. This motto promised an ideal state with limitless possibilities, a space in which the 'Guyanese' people would ascend to their destiny hand in hand. The motto was central to the representation of the new nation promoted by the Guyanese government the People's National Congress (PNC) and its leader Linden Forbes Burnham. The nationalist discourse of the PNC was fuelled by anti-colonial sentiment and like 'postcolonialism' it centred round the binary categories of colonial and postcolonial. As such the nation was determined as much by what it no longer was as by what it was becoming.

My references to 'nation' in this paper are founded upon the interpretation of the nation provided by Postcolonial theorist Homi K Bhabha in *Nation and Narration*:

The nation fills the void left in the uprooting of communities and kin, and turns that loss in to the language of metaphor. Metaphor... transfers the meaning of home and belonging, across the 'middle passage' or the European steppes, across those distances, and cultural differences that span the imagined community of the nation-people [2].

As a metaphor the Guyanese nation represented a resolution to the displacement and 'unbelonging' that were the legacy of colonialism, slavery and indenture. More than this, the nation advocated social cohesion and a unity of interests that promised a resolution of existing social fractures along class and racial lines. Fractures which existed between the two dominant groups of Indo and Afro Guyanese brought to Guyana as a result of the colonial practices of transporting slaves from Africa and, after abolition, indentured labourers from India. When indentured labour was pitted against the labour of free blacks by the plantation owners this caused a deep socio- economic racial divide. These socially divided groups have historically closely identified themselves with their own political parties- the PNC for the Afro-Guyanese, the Peoples Progressive Party or P.P.P for the Indo-Guyanese. The new independent nation promised a resolution to this socio-political split.

Thus the movement to Independence was figured as a transformative step, a radical epoch characterised by its *newness*, and its *progress* from the colonial past. In nationalist discourse the date of Independence on May 26 1966, was a movement forward in space as well as time. Like the term ‘postcolonialism’, nationalism in Guyana exhibits a commitment to linear time and the idea of progress.

To illustrate this point I turn to a poem by Indo-Guyanese author Mahadai Das entitled ‘Militant’, taken from her first collection *I Want to be a Poetess of My People*. According to Denise deCaires Narain in her recent book on Caribbean Women’s Poetry, this collection is ‘propelled by a militant nationalism’ [3]. Narain suggests that Das was an enthusiastic supporter of the PNC and *I want to be a Poetess of My People* was a public endorsement of their regime. As Narain has indicated, with the PNC being perceived as a party, which exclusively championed the needs of the Afro-Guyanese, the support of Indo-Guyanese Mahadai Das would have been perceived as radical and progressive. *I Want To Be a Poetess of My People* was published in 1977 by the Guyana National Service Publishing Centre, which indicates an affiliation between Das and the post-independence Guyanese nationalist movement. As such the poems of the collection can be considered as nation-narratives. None more so than ‘Militant’:

Militant I am
Militantly I strive
I want to march in my revolution.
I want to march with my brothers and sisters
Revolution firing my song of freedom.
I want my blood to churn
Change! Change! Change!
March!
We are the army.
We are the people.
We are Guyana marching for change. [4]

The poem exerts a powerful sense of energy, which is conveyed through the exclamations and the emphasising capital at the beginning of each line. Sentences are short, even regimental, urging the poem forward with the progressive momentum of marching. This march is fuelled by the idea of revolution, which promises to propel the nation forward into a new and improved epoch of freedom. The words ‘militant I am/ Militant I strive’ emphasise more than the *idea* of change, they promote the very real changes that were going on in Guyana in the 1970s- national service for example. The commitment of the poet to linear development is apparent in both the progressive march of the poem and in her evocation ‘Change! Change! Change!’ The nationalist message of ‘Militant’ is clear: One People, One Nation, One Destiny’.

The poem continues:

You and I are posterity
In our veins run atoms of gall.
Atoms of gall.
Cane-sugar’s ever-running historic stream,
In history’s sad march
Was I ever a son of my land?

Now-
I want to clench the stain of my earth in my palms.
Seeds that I planted
For my child to nurture
Will shoot forth through my soil,
My earth.
My land.
My country. [5]

The colonial past is here distilled in to the anti-colonial feeling of 'Atoms of gall'. But in the epochal severing of the word 'Now', the poem embraces a *new* era which concludes 'history's sad march', 'Cane sugar's ever-running historic stream'. This is a new world in its infancy where the dispossession expressed in the words 'Was I ever a son of my land?' is replaced with the assured possession of independence: 'My land. / My earth. / My country'.

I propose that 'Militant', with its emphasis on development and its promotion of epochal change, supports the representation of independence implied by the progressive categories of the term 'postcolonialism'. But does the similarity between the linear tropes of 'postcolonialism' and nationalist discourse make this representation appropriate to the lived experience of independence in Guyana? I would suggest not. The new nation, which Das represents in 'Militant' is a utopian vision. In reality the independent nation of Guyana has failed to fulfil the promises of the nationalist progressive ideal.

Expressing a strong sense of disillusionment with Guyanese independence, Cheddi Jagan, leader of the People's Progressive Party, the opposition to the PNC, speaking on a radio broadcast in 1992, said:

Independence came on a platter to the PNC in 1966. Since then, under the past administration, it has been 26 wasted years. All we have to show are the symbols of independence- the flag, the national anthem and the coat of arms [6].

Jagan's words suggest that the progressive images created by nation-narratives such as Das' 'Militant' are merely ideological representations. According to Jagan, Independence itself was a façade [7]. Today Guyana is in a neo-colonial state, subservient to Western multinationals, left behind in the race of global capitalism. According to Jagan, the nationalist propaganda of the PNC disguised the fact that only the political elite experienced the benefits of 'postcolonialism' under the PNC, while the Guyanese working people were going hungry. These people continue to hear of progress, but they do not see it.

There is, then, a disparity between the representations of independence offered by both nationalist discourse and the term 'postcolonial' and the lived experience of independent Guyana. The inadequacy of nationalist representation can be explained in terms of the ideological propaganda described by Jagan, but what of the inadequacy of the term 'postcolonialism'?

In an essay entitled 'Continuity and Discontinuity', renowned Guyanese author and scholar Wilson Harris has suggested that representations like that offered by the categories of 'postcolonialism' are limited because they only recognise 'human material' in terms of 'time tables of defensive capital, defensive labour and other territorial imperatives' [8]. In this way the movement towards independence in Guyana can be seen as progressive, only in terms of the end of colonialism, the transfer of power and the means of production from an external to an internal government. Thus, in the terms of Harris' argument, the linear model of time, which is observed by 'postcolonialism', can be imagined as a 'static clock' [9]. Static because it gages the history of a country only in terms of a fixed trajectory of progress from one epoch to another and fails to recognise deviations from a homogenous representation of linear time. For Harris this limited representation of time extends far beyond nationalism and 'postcolonialism', it is a historical convention, which informs all of modern philosophy. As such linear modes of time and development have effectively marginalised any alternative representation of history.

Ironically many postcolonial theorists are preoccupied with this problem and the need to fracture the very homogenous narrative of history, which the linear categories of 'postcolonialism' reinforce. Through the practice of deconstructing historiography these theorists are attempting to uncover the voice of the 'authentic' postcolonial subject.

This is no easy task, for the voice of the postcolonial subject in nations like Guyana is circumscribed- by a political hegemony, which has strategically silenced alternatives to nationalist discourse. Janice Shinebourne, a Guyanese contemporary of Mahadai Das has expressed her belief that "Forbes Burnham (the leader of the PNC) had authoritarian views about culture and literature. (He) felt strongly that art and culture should serve nationalism' [10]. Through legislation, propaganda and control over print culture the Guyanese government have regulated the representation of the nation. And beneath this hegemony, the relationship between literature and nationalism has been maintained by force. Those who expressed dissatisfaction with the nationalist PNC government were labelled as political dissidents and could be interned without trial, or even assassinated.

To illustrate this point I refer to a later collection of poems by Mahadai Das entitled *My Finer Steel Will Grow*. This collection was published in Vermont in 1982. This date is significant because, five years after her first publication Das resides outside of Guyana and has become a political dissident. On the rear cover of the publication the following text appears-

We offered to publish this chapbook under a pseudonym, but Mahadai responded "I will probably be safe for a few years, as the Guyanese government is concentrating on gunning down dissidents at home [11].

This passage is striking because the government which is represented as a threatening force is the very same government which Das enthusiastically supported in 'Militant' only five years earlier. So what has happened? One explanation for her radical change in political loyalties is illuminated in the opening dedications of *My Finer Steel Will Grow*. Amongst others Das dedicates this collection to 'the children of Walter Rodney' making the explicit statement 'Walter Rodney was assassinated by the Burnham

government' [12]. Walter Rodney: historian and political activist, was committed to offering a true representation of the lives and history of the Guyanese working people. In his poignant last words he spoke out publicly against the PNC government and its leader Linden Forbes Burnham criticising the regime for having 'degenerated in to political violence' [13].

Rodney's death can be seen as a moment of consciousness for Das, revealing the hegemony and violence beneath the progressive façade of the new nation and forming a metaphorical centre to *My Finer Steel Will Grow*. This is reflected in the words, which appear in the title poem: 'The felled star is like a dagger/ stuck deep in my heart' [14]. This moment of consciousness disrupts the ideological 'passage' of linear time, which Das subscribed to in her earlier work and creates a space for an alternative representation of postcolonial Guyana. This is implied in the opening passage of the collection:

There was always the urgent essentiality
and the meeting of hearts.
There was, too, time wickedly playing
games; the scent
of a certain flower. Consequently
I write: in retrospect, I speak
To you [15].

This passage suggests a desire to illuminate something different to her earlier representations of Guyana. The implication is that there 'was always' something else: an 'urgent essentiality': a sensory and intimate lived experience within the homogenous narrative of Guyanese history. The representation of progression has become illusory, seen here as 'time wickedly playing games'. The words 'consequently I write' suggest that it is because of the inaccuracy of such representation and because of the desire to illuminate an alternative that Das now writes.

Throughout the collection Das writes of a world which is radically different to the ideal state which she described in 'militant'. This is apparent in the title poem 'My Finer Steel Will Grow':

Now that the prince's sceptre has rusted
and the legs of his gilded chair totter-
even now the heavy clank of chains
is heard in his cellars.

Ah yes! the government of heaven
has grown corrupt:
my passage to earth's eden
is laid with fire.

Spider! who has wickedly woven
your thistled network of shadows,

hung your knotty schemes upon
our guiles and warm branches, [16]

Here, far from a passage to utopia, the movement to independence has become a decent in to hell. There is no progressive march in to a bright future, but a perilous journey in to a dark and fallen world. I suggest that the dark 'prince' of the first stanza refers to the PNC leader Linden Forbes Burnham, appearing as Ananse the spider in stanza three, spinning a web of false promises of revolution and freedom. In the 'heavy clank of chains' heard in his cellar Das reveals that, in the movement from colonial to postcolonial the Guyanese people did not become free but merely substituted one form of servitude for another. The world they now find themselves in is a sinister and chaotic place, which is reflected in the thematic structure of the poem. The clipped certainty of the lines of 'Militant' has given way to distraction and confusion. Unlike 'Militant' this is not a coherent narrative, but more of a heap of broken images, or the fragments of a static clock. Here the only momentum is the faster spinning of the gyre: the quickening of the decent in to chaos. The movement from pre-colonial to colonial, to postcolonial has become a widening spiral of oppression and injustice.

To conclude I propose that *My Finer Steel Will Grow* actively interrogates the idea of development, which has historically defined representations of independent Guyana. In refusing to represent the movement of independence as a step forward metaphorically in space as well as time Das' work undermines the linear tropes of both nationalism and postcolonialism. And the chaotic and non-progressive vision offered here by Das is essentially more appropriate to the lived experience of on-going political and racial violence, poverty and oppression, while the disillusionment of her collection reflects a nation which has been left by the majority of its artists.

Yet the bleak vision offered by Das in *My Finer Steel Will Grow* offers little hope of resolution of this crisis despite a pressing need for a more positive re-imagining of Guyanese history. However, a more positive image does emerge towards the end of the title poem of the collection:

beware!
In this forest of green and great dreams,
in the unvanquished footsteps
of our first pride, we tread;
with our string of beads and our naked
spears we come with our shield of courage
to repossess
our native waterfall [17].

Earlier in this paper I indicated Das' attempt to voice an alternative experience to the homogenous narrative of Guyanese history. Here Das achieves this as she evokes a time before this narrative, voicing a native and *pre*-historical experience. The 'unvanquished footsteps' and the 'first pride' of this passage create a pre-lapsarian image of a time *before* the chaos of colonialism, postcolonialism and the new nation. Essentially Das returns to the beginning; before the epochal road of linear narratives and the construction of the static clock. With the repetition of 'our' and 'we' Das

creates a new solidarity and repossession of the land which replaces the nationalist sentiments of her early work. With this repossession comes the hope of 'green and great dreams': the potential for a creative re-imagining of postcolonial Guyana.

Notes

[1] McClintock, Anne. "The Angel of Progress: Pitfalls of the Term Postcolonialism." *Colonial Discourse/ Postcolonial Theory*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994.254.

[2] Bhabha, Homi K. *Nation and Narration*. London: Routledge, 1990. 291.

[3] Narain, Denise deCaires. *Contemporary Caribbean Women's Poetry: Making Style*. London: Routledge, 2002. 171.

[4] Das, Mahadai. "Militant." *I Want To Be a Poetess of My People*. Guyana: Guyana national Service Publishing Centre, 1977. 23. (A selection of poems from this collection is available online on <http://www.paravel.com/mdas>.)

[5] Ibid.

[6] Jagan, Cheddi. "The Struggle for Independence': Text of Radio and Television Broadcast by His Excellence Cheddi Jagan, President of Guyana, May 15, 1993." <http://www.jagan.org/articles.htm>. Accessed 15/12/01.

[7] Jagan, Cheddi. *West on Trial*. London: Michael Joseph, 1966. 402.

[8] Harris, Wilson. "Continuity and Discontinuity." *Selected Essays of Wilson Harris: The Unfinished Genesis of the Imagination*. Ed. Andrew Bundy. 179.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Shinebourne, Janice. "Twin Influences: Guyana in the 1960s and Anglophone Caribbean Literature." *Caribbean Writers: Essays from the First International Conference*. Ed. Selwyn R. Cudjoe. Wellesley, MA: Calaloux Publications, 1990. 143.

[11] Das, Mahadai. *My Finer Steel Will Grow*. Vermont: Samisdat, 1982. Rear cover.

[12] Ibid. 2.

[13] Rodney, Walter. "Walters famous last Words in Georgetown 1980." *Caribbean Contact*. July 1980. <http://walterrodney.com/>. Accessed 15/12/01.

[14] Das, Mahadai. "My Finer Steel Will Grow." *My Finer Steel Will Grow*. Vermont: Samisdat, 1982. 4.

[15] Das, Mahadai. *My Finer Steel Will Grow*. Vermont: Samisdat, 1982. 2.

[16] Ibid. 5

[17] Ibid.

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