INTRODUCTION

Asha Muhammed “Search for identity in caribbean fiction” Thesis. 
Department of English, University of Calicut, 1998
CHAPTER - I

INTRODUCTION

Man is forever in search of his self. This search takes him through the dark corridors of the past into the complexities of the present, leading on to the vast, unknown future. It makes him probe within the psyche, unravelling the mysteries of the conscious, subconscious and unconscious layers to arrive at the myths and archetypes that define the meaning of existence. It also assumes the form of an outward quest, struggling against the odds of exploitation and deprivation, fear and aggression, race and gender, politics and religion, identifying the paradoxical relationship between individual and community, 'self' and 'other' in a vast and incomprehensible world. All literature is involved with this search in one way or the other, twentieth century literature more so, on account of the interest in psychology fostered by the works of Freud, Adler and Jung. Different aspects of this search are portrayed through different modes and genres by the stalwarts of the twentieth century like D.H. Lawrence, T.S. Eliot and Samuel Beckett. In post-colonial literature, the search takes on an added
dimension because of the Prospero-Caliban relationship of colonization and the inevitability of Caliban's use of Prospero's language to rail against the colonial master.

When one examines the genre of the novel, one finds the fictional mode adapted in ingenious ways to portray this search in all its complexity. In the present day world, the novelist is very much aware of the inadequacy of interpretation and the disorienting reality of the unexplainable. Language is the tool whereby he tries to create order out of chaos. Language itself is bonded to ethnicity and tradition as is evident in the vast differences in idiom and syntax among people who speak the same tongue. Among the literatures written in the English language, there are differences dependent upon geography, ethnicity and other factors. The English used by the Canadian author is different from that used by the native British writer as well as those used by the Australian or the Caribbean. If one compares a Caribbean novelist writing in English to an Indian novelist doing the same, the nature and extent of the difference seems to be
overwhelming. The presence of an extant, viable native literature tends to intimidate the Indian writer though he draws his sustenance from it. The Indian writer exercises his choice of writing in the language of his intellectual make-up fostered by a colonial education. In contrast, the Caribbean novelist is forced to use the language of the colonial master as the creole version of English has replaced completely the native Amerindian and African dialects. The trauma of colonization and enslavement had annihilated and marginalized the native traditions so that the only tradition he is familiar with is that of the white masters. To quote Gareth Griffiths from his book, A Double Exile "If the African writer in the twentieth century has been concerned with questions of identity and place and has suffered a double exile from his own tradition and from that which has been offered by education and colonial example, the West Indian writer has suffered these same problems with an added intensity. The African writer has an alternative living tradition to that offered by his schooling; a language which he possesses by birthright, and an historical identification with the continent he inhabits. The West Indian has only the fact of his
separate existence, his colour, and his distinctive habits to oppose to the colonial values he has inherited. It is not surprising then that the central fact of West Indian writing is the struggle to define a separate West Indian reality and to establish its values as significant and worthwhile" (1978, 79).

Though Griffiths's concern here is with the black writers of the Caribbean, it holds true for the East Indians and the Chinese as well whose ancestors had come to the Caribbean as indentured labourers. The collective Caribbean experience made it difficult to keep to ethnic traditions in places far from the soils that nurtured them. Moreover most of the indentured labourers were illiterate just as the Negro slaves had been in the era before their arrival. So the legends and folk tales could survive only in the oral tradition in the wake of displacement and enslavement. The plurality of Caribbean experience with people of different races living side by side and often together, presents anomalous situations that are redefined in terms of fiction by writers hailing from different ethnic groups. Trying to grow roots in a world that
transcends meaning, the Caribbean novelists' search for the 'self' becomes a quest for a Caribbean tradition, a community to which you belong.

When one examines the Caribbean preoccupation with selfhood in the midst of all this confusion, one is amazed by the similarity of approach among the writers who hail from different islands and different racial and social strata. The attitudes are different but the basic problems tend to be the same. Though the term 'West Indies' is a misnomer, the islands of Jamaica, Trinidad and Barbados and British Guyana forming part of the South American continent, share a common heritage of colonization, enslavement and indentureship that makes the term a useful one for classification. They share common problems and a common language though they do not come under a single head of administration. Caribbean fiction itself is a twentieth century phenomenon, the first novel identified as Caribbean, being Tom Redcam's Becka's Buckra Baby published in 1903. The social, historical and political problems of a multicultural society tend to occupy the thoughts of the Caribbean novelist whose sense of rootlessness gets projected in
his fiction as the search for identity. The genre of the novel is in the process of growing up, each creation being an attempt to arrive at the core of Caribbean experience, by questioning the norms of the colonial masters, presenting alternative attitudes and techniques to break free from the shackles of systems and controls imposed from without. Though techniques vary, one can recognize six characteristic situations that recur again and again in Caribbean novels. These situations present the conflict between the inherent 'self' and the alien 'other' in an attempt to arrive at the true recognition of the 'self.' This does not mean that the scope of enquiry is limited or that the writers do not make use of other situations or other methods. On the other hand, the attempt here is to present a contrastive analysis of different authors and different works in the light of how they make use of these situations to explore the search for identity.

Childhood has special relevance in Caribbean fiction as the child's growing awareness of the world around him provides the novelist with the analogue of the West Indian experience. There are many novels where
the protagonists are children. The two novels by Michael Anthony, *The Year in San Fernando* and *Green Days By the River* focus attention on the child's progress to maturity in alien environment. In addition to novels devoted wholly to childhood, childhood experiences form integral parts of most of the West Indian novels. *Reader's Guide to West Indian Literature* by David Dabydeen and Nana Wilson-Tagoe has the following comment to make:

> The children's responses to their environment, their interpretation of adult standards and their confusions about history and race reflect both the confusions and fantasies of childhood and the sensibilities of a colonial upbringing. (1987,39)

In George Lamming's work, *In the Castle of My Skin*, the world of childhood becomes part of the colonial ethos. The emphasis is on the maturing consciousness of the child narrator and the boy C's personal growth is linked with the changes in the society he finds himself in. In Jean Rhys's novel, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, the childhood experiences of the white heroine play a crucial role in determining her character. V.S. Naipaul's *Miguel Street* presents a
child's view of the world around him. *A House for Mr Biswas* by the same author records the childhood experiences of the protagonist with comic irony unveiling their role in determining his later experiences. In *Jane's Career* by H.G. De Lisser the white author projects the experiences of a black girl who leaves her rural home to work as a domestic servant in the city. Jane's gradual movement from the innocence and naivete of childhood to the experience and cunning of adulthood form the mainstay of the novel.

In post-colonial literature, the struggle for existence becomes a prominent motif providing scope for the conflicts between the 'self' and the 'other.' The struggle assumes different forms and manifold facets depending on character and situation. At the grassroots level, it is the struggle to survive in the midst of poverty and deprivation. The struggle to get food, to procure employment, to get cheap accommodation, to get education, to avail medical help, to keep up appearances, to get recognition in society - the list is endless. In the Caribbean milieu attention is focussed on the difficulty to eke out a living in a country where
to be black is to be stupid, illiterate and poor. The social hierarchy is based on colour and the educated 'coloured' class snatches all the jobs left after the white people have had their pick. In this milieu women characters are portrayed as suffering from double exploitation. De Lisser's *Jane's Career* shows Jane exploited as a menial in the Mason household but when she breaks free, she finds that she has to give in to the overseer to keep her new job. Roger Mais's novel *Brother Man* portrays the struggles of the slum dwellers with a great deal of sympathetic understanding. Mais seeks to highlight the social neglect of the slums at the same time revealing the indomitable will of the people and the healing, unifying power of the communal spirit. Alvin Bennett's novel, *God the Stonebreaker*, presents the craftiness of the woman of the slums that helps her survive in a vicious world. Mittelholzer's *Corentyne Thunder* presents the stark, careworn existence of the East Indian peasant in a landscape that is totally unsympathetic to him. A particular incident in the novel portrays Ramgollal's absolute bewilderment when his daughter complains of agonising pain.
The struggle to get employment and a decent place to live are other aspects portrayed in different works. Mr Biswas's dream for a house of his own is both the actual struggle to get one and also his attempt to carve out a niche for himself in a world that is indifferent and alien. C.L.R. James's *Minty Alley* focusses on the difficulty of getting cheap accommodation. The struggle to get educated is also portrayed in many works. In Sam Selvon's novel, *A Brighter Sun*, the rising aspirations of the illiterate Tiger to come up in the world are poignantly portrayed. *A House for Mr Biswas* depicts the struggles of Mohum Biswas's son Anand to pass the examination that would open the doors of higher education to him.

Another viewpoint of the struggle is portrayed in *Wide Sargasso Sea* where the declining fortunes of the white creole family add to the sense of isolation and feeling of insecurity in the heroine. In *Children of Kaywana*, Mittelholzer portrays the struggles of the pioneering European settlers through the fortunes of the van Groenwegel family. They face violence, rioting and natural calamities and survive despite them. Wilson
Harris's novel, *The Secret Ladder*, shows the clash between progress and ancestral roots as the descendants of the bush Negroes are threatened with eviction by a proposed dam on the land they had identified as home.

Understanding or recognition of the self becomes possible only through tracing the roots of tradition and culture. The chaotic nature of the Caribbean society with its intermingling of races makes a journey into the past inevitable. The private world of the slave and indentured labourer is one of frustration, anger, pain, brutality and fantasy. He yearns for a home either in Africa or India, a yearning that is romantic and illusory, never to be realized. Though emancipation freed the slaves and independence did away with the colonial fetters, the emotional dependence on the white masters continued. To many West Indians, England was home country, regardless of race and colour, a continuing syndrome of dependence fostered by colonialism. In striving to break free from it, he recovers past relations endowing them with different meanings. To George Lamming, history came to signify more than the history book's definition, it came to mean
not a succession of episodes with causal connections but the creation of a situation offering antagonistic opposition and a challenge of survival that had to be met by all involved. He explores colonial relations probing the nature of colonial dependence and rebellion. His novels, *In the Castle of My Skin* and *Natives of My Person* present the persistent symptom of psychological and cultural division in terms of past experience. Claude McKay, articulates the divided Afro-Caribbean consciousness in his poems and novels. His novel, *Banana Bottom* represents the superiority of an ethnic black culture in opposition to the borrowed culture of the whites that is acquired by Bita Plant through her European education. In the end she rejects surface sophistication to come back to her real stature as a black girl in a rustic milieu. In sharp contrast to this, the black protagonist of De Lisser's novel *Jane's Career* adopts the role of passive acquiescence to the norms of colonial society. She is successful by the standard of the white author, getting herself a husband, a house and ironically, a servant. In *Wide Sargasso Sea* the heroine lives in a society where the hostile Negroes threaten their existence. Her gradual isolation
contributes to her later unstable state of mind. Her estrangement with her husband completes the crisis. At home she is ridiculed as "white cockroach," in England she is shut up as a mad woman. Among writers of East Indian descent, the racial themes surface as awareness of ethnicity. Naipaul's A House for Mr Biswas redefines Indianness in the context of a multiracial society. Selvon's Turn Again Tiger presents Tiger stepping back into the past to confront the trauma of indentureship. The mere process of creolization, Selvon seems to imply, does not bring in liberation.

Full length historical novels have also been popular among Caribbean novelists. Mittelholzer's trilogy of three novels record the social and historical reality of Guyana. In them, he makes an attempt to unravel the causes for the cultural and emotional ambivalence in the Caribbean. V.S. Reid's novel, New Day makes use of the fortunes of the Campbells, a fictional family of mixed African and European ancestry to illustrate the situation in Jamaica as it moves towards a responsible political leadership. The Guyana Quartet by Wilson Harris consists of four novels that shed light on different aspects of Guyanese history.
Using the imaginative language of myth and archetype, he redefines the paradoxes of the past in terms of the mixed inheritance of the present. His quest for wholeness embraces all the races of the Caribbean and the ambivalence of ethnic relationships based on history.

Love and sex are favourite themes of novelists all over the world. Relationship with the opposite sex plays a crucial role in the emergence of selfhood. But the conventional framework of romantic love with its pattern of courtship and marriage is not popular in Caribbean fiction. The peculiar nature of Caribbean society makes the portrayal of love and sex different from that elsewhere. Kenneth Ramchand quotes Philip D. Curtin's Jamaica Legislative Council report entitled Two Jamaicas (1955) in his book, The West Indian Novel and Its Background:

The planters had little interest in the sexual mores of the slaves. The slaves made whatever sexual union they chose and these were usually more permanent than simple promiscuity. The Jamaican Negro normally had a "wife", perhaps more than one, this family made a social unit that had nothing to do with the blessing of the established church... By the time, the missionaries arrived on the scene, Afro-Jamaican "marriage" was too well established to be easily changed. (1970, 120)
This presents only one side of the picture however. In the days of slavery, the slave women were valued in terms of their ability to produce the labour force. The white planters often succumbed to the attractions of the easily available slave women. Though some of the coloured offspring that ensued were treated well by their white fathers, vast numbers of them were unacknowledged. In the post-emancipation era, the freed slaves found it difficult to form meaningful relationships. The sanctity of church marriage was not always insisted upon by the Negroes who preferred to live together without getting the consent of priests. The system worked for some people but not for the vast majority. Many of the men preferred to be free of responsibility as they had no legal obligation towards their children, so the burden of parenthood fell completely on the mothers. Many novelists present women acting both father and mother to the child. In George Lamming's novel, *In the Castle of My Skin*, the image of the rural mother appears as a person committed to her child and the land, uncritically optimistic and unquestioning. This is not the only image however. The vulnerable woman who is doubly deprived and oppressed
appears in many novels. Jane's Career contrasts the life of the woman in the rural and urban environments in Jamaica, exploring the exploitative nature of her relationships with men. In an atmosphere free of romantic sentimentality the men she comes into contact with try to exploit her sexually. With natural cunning, she comes through however and is finally glorified by a church marriage. In Roger Mais's novels, the degraded woman of the slum is presented as possessing a generosity of spirit that is part of the communal spirit of the slum.

Illicit and incestuous relationships are also portrayed by many novelists. Novelists like Claude McKay, Jean Rhys and Edgar Mittelholzer portray abnormal ways and questionable relationships. McKay's Banana Bottom portrays Crazy Bow Adair, a lunatic with great musical talent who exploits Bita sexually before she is quite mature. This results in her being taken on as a protégé by the Craigs who provide her with the opportunity of studying abroad. One of Bita's suitors, Herald Newton Day, goes into disgrace because of his sexual aberration with a nanny goat. Jean Rhys's
heroine in *Voyage in the Dark* gets degraded gradually into a life of prostitution though all she seeks in life is a little love and warmth. Mittelholzer's main theme is the schizoid tendency within the psyche brought about by the opposite pulls of the Spirit and the Flesh. In *Corentyne Thunder*, Geoffrey's inner division becomes manifest in his relationship with Kathree: "I's not in love with you yourself only with your body. I told you that on the second day we were together, if you remember, and you said that you were fully satisfied with my loving only your body. Ugh, but I'm sick of loving bodies, Kathree. It leaves me unsatisfied and depressed" (1941, 292). *The Harrowing of Hubertus* portrays Hubertus's division of loyalties that harrows him. Later on he rejects the uncompromising Christian stance he had taken earlier to describe his illicit relationship with Faustina as a deep and sincere love that is a joy in the eyes of God. Mittelholzer also portrays sexual perversions as manifestations of psychological trauma. Wilson Harris uses questionable relationships as metaphors for the traumatic events of history.
In the East Indian milieu, man-woman relationship becomes significant in the larger context of the family. In the case of Mohun Biswas, his marriage into the Tulsi household becomes the starting point for exploring different family relationships, especially with the other members of the Tulsi household. The vast numbers of Tulsis tend to intimidate Biswas and question his claim on his own wife and children. In Sam Selvon's Tiger novels, Tiger's wife Urmilla is presented as dominated over by her husband. But in his *Moses Ascending*, a novel depicting the migrant London experience, women are portrayed as more aggressive.

The motif of sexual union with a white woman occurs often in the novels of Caribbean writers who are non-white. In *Turn Again Tiger* Tiger's obsession with a white woman is portrayed as the residue of the colonial experience with its emphasis on white superiority. Tiger has to overcome this obsession to be liberated completely from the shackles of indentureship. In the novels of white writers the coloured girl is depicted as attractive and promiscuous, often threatening the
existence of the white heroine. At the basic level, the woman is presented as either a worker or a prostitute doggedly pursuing her path in life. The women of the upper classes are also portrayed as victims of social exploitation. There are exceptions however, for *Children of Kaywana* presents the character of Hendrickje, the cruel matriarch of indomitable will.

.anattitudes to religion help to highlight the contrasts of 'self' and 'other.' In the Caribbean, the Christian missionaries were largely responsible for the emancipation of slaves. Earlier, the white planters had preferred to keep the slaves in heathen ignorance, looking upon the Negroes and Amerindians as races ordained by God to serve the Christian masters. The Christian ideas of morality, sin, mercy etc., pertained only to their dealings with white men and the slaves could be treated as cruelly as possible. At the same time, they objected to the slaves worshipping their own deities as they considered such worship satanic. The missionaries changed the situation by converting the slaves to Christianity and insisting on kindness and fair treatment. Their protests against cruelties and
slave concubinage created awareness among the British public and led to the decree of emancipation being passed in the parliament. Conversion to Christianity did not change the Negroes completely, however. Many of them continued to worship their god 'Obi' in secret, attending the church at the same time. The practice of obeah, a type of African witchcraft, was banned by law but continued to be practised in secret. In the era of indentureship, the East Indians brought the Hindu and Muslim religions into the Caribbean. Their beliefs and festivals too went into the Caribbean melting pot and became common for all.

Obeah and cult practices occur in novels of every racial origin as the belief in obeah is not restricted to the Negroes alone. The obeahman is a character frequently met with in Caribbean fiction. Ismith Khan's novel, The Obeah Man presents the obeahman as protagonist. The White Witch of Rosehall by Herbert G. De Lisser presents a white woman indulging in Haitian witchcraft. The white protagonist of Wide Sargasso Sea resorts to obeah to keep her hold on her husband. In Roger Mais's novel, Brother Man, the obeah man Bra' Ambo
is presented as the antithesis of Bra' Man: he sells ganja and exploits the people. Brother Man, the Rastafarian protagonist, spreads the message of peace and love. The Rastafarian cult itself aims at regaining the dignity of the African through the religious association of Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia with a god like figure. In many novels the poor people are depicted as spending their hard earned money on obeahmen, who exploit their naivete.

Many writers present the functionaries of the Christian religion with irony. Their missionary zeal concerning the morality of the Negro population is often exposed as hypocritical and fraudulent. When it comes to the authors of East Indian origin, the rites and ceremonies of the Hindu religion are presented as bizarre in a society rapidly undergoing creolization. Naipaul depicts the irony in the Tulsi household where the very pious Hindus become perpetrators of Christian dogma. The sons of Tulsi assume god like stature on account of their western education. Naipaul's novel, *The Suffrage of Elvira*, depicts the doctrinal confusion of Hindu, Muslim and Christian beliefs with comic irony.
In addition to them, there is also the practice of obeah complicating the issue.

Another motif in Caribbean fiction is nationhood and political power. The political arena is full of predatory politicians preying upon the susceptibilities of the ignorant masses. The shifting nature of political dominance does not bring true freedom. It only substitutes one type of oppression by another. So political themes are popular among the writers who aim at creating greater awareness among the people. George Lamming's novels, Of Age and Innocence and Natives of My Person explore the themes of political and nationalistic aspirations in the West Indies. Naipaul's Guerrillas and The Mimic Men examine the relationship between the colonial experience and nationalistic aspirations bringing out the ineffectiveness of nationalism in a society devoid of a centre. Political questions are also treated comically by Sam Selvon in his Moses novels.

In addition to novels where the political theme is centralized, there are many novels that raise political questions as subsidiary concerns. In
Jane's Career, the rustic Jane quenches the political ardour of a budding trade-unionist making him a pro-establishment figure. This is in keeping with the reactionary politics of the author. Mittelholzer's Kaywana Blood traces the family fortunes of the van Groenwegels in terms of the changing political climate of Guyana. Turn Again Tiger presents Tiger's confrontation with the colonial experience bringing up questions about his own place in the social hierarchy. Thus the need for forming meaningful relationships in a multiracial society is explored in fiction from political and nationalistic viewpoints.

Proceeding from the thematic to the formalistic, the first thing that strikes the eye is the language. The English of the Caribbean is different from that of the native speaker, its essential rhythm and grammar being charged with the tropical environment. The early African slaves used to speak their dialects with some mixture of broken English. Their white masters in turn had to adopt African words in order to make themselves understood by their slaves. This passed through the generations of white, black and coloured
populations adding to the varieties of creole. When the East Indians and Chinese came, they too got creolized, while the other groups assimilated words and expressions from their languages. As education was restricted to the privileged few, most of the common people used dialect. Different registers are made use of by the authors in depicting characters of different social and cultural strata. As the fictional mode of the omniscient narrator is the most popular, most of the novels present alternations between standardized West Indian English and different dialects. For example, the white author of *Jane's Career* uses dialect in the conversation of the Negroes often for comic effect. Daddy Buckram, one of the marginal characters, uses dialect to impress the rules of morality on the young girl's mind but he borrows from the language of the Bible creating a most incongruous mixture. Sam Selvon uses dialect in *A Brighter Sun* but his sense of identification with the character, Tiger, closes the gap between the language of narration and the language of the fictional character. Authors like V.S. Reid and John Hearne use dialect to do the work of both narration and dialogue. The natural rhythms of creole are made
use of as stylistic devices by certain authors. The use of calypsonian rhythm gives a distinct flavour to Selvon's novel, *The Lonely Londoners*. Wilson Harris's choice of language creates the effect of poetry both in terms of imagination and in terms of rhythm.

As has been stated earlier, the presence of various ethnic groups living side by side complicates the Caribbean situation, but it takes on an added significance when one considers how most of these races are not native to the soil but have migrated there from elsewhere. The original inhabitants, Caribs and Arawaks, were decimated by the early European settlers barring a few groups that chose to cohabit with the Negro slaves in the days of the plantocracy. In the days of indentureship, the Chinese labourers also mingled freely with the black population. The East Indians were more reserved and traditional but there were several instances of mixed marriages even among them. Moreover, white supervisors continued to take advantage of coolie women just as the white planters had earlier exploited the Negro women. All this goes to prove that racial purity is just an illusion in the
Caribbean. As Caribbean fiction tends to be vast, some method of narrowing the field of enquiry has to be resorted to. Though classification based on ethnicity is arbitrary, I have resorted to such a method on the basis of the essential sensibilities and sympathies of the novelists. For example, Mittelholzer has been identified as "coloured" while George Lamming has been classified as "black." The classification also helps to unravel the historical reasons for the Caribbean crisis in identity.

The novels have been classified as white, East Indian, black and coloured. The two white novelists chosen for detailed analysis are Jean Rhys and Herbert De Lisser. Two novels of each author, _Voyage in the Dark_ and _Wide Sargasso Sea_ by Jean Rhys and _Jane's Career_ and _The White Witch of Rosehall_ by De Lisser, have been subjected to scrutiny on the basis of the six situations described earlier. V.S. Naipaul and Sam Selvon have been selected from among the East Indian writers. The two novels of Selvon depicting the peasant experience are taken as one unit as _Turn Again Tiger_ was
written as a sequel to *A Brighter Sun*. *A House for Mr Biswas* has been selected from among the novels of Naipaul to offer effective contrast. The chapter on black novelists elucidates the theme of selfhood by contrasting three novels by three different authors. Of these, Claude McKay's *Banana Bottom* is a pioneering work, George Lamming's *In the Castle of My Skin* is a bildungsroman and *Brother Man* by Roger Mais presents a Rastafarian protagonist. The saga of race achieves a new proportion with the emergence of the mulatto. The three novels of Edgar Mittelholzer that form the Kaywana Trilogy have been contrasted with the four novels of Wilson Harris that form *The Guyana Quartet*. Both Harris and Mittelholzer aim at re-telling the history of Guyana through these novels. So a contrastive analysis becomes worthwhile in terms of the Caribbean identity. As other novels and other authors cannot be ignored altogether, an attempt has been made to touch upon a few relevant works in the final chapter that also sums up the conclusions drawn from such a critique.