CHAPTER - I

INTRODUCTION

West Indian history is dominated by social and political 'White-violence' and 'black resistance' and the attempts of blacks and coloured to assert themselves as individuals with dignity and pride. Caribbean society is a heterogeneous society, 'a society of societies' of dispossessed beings. The country's economy is based on and oriented towards making maximum profits by exploiting the poor and the oppressed. A large number of East Indians, African slaves and others were transported to West Indies to support the plantation-economy and the Europeans had been there as temporary settlers longing to go back to their home country after making fortune. The West Indian Society characterized by violence, oppression and racial segregation, is exposed to a complex fate.

Christopher Columbus discovered the West Indies islands in 1442. The Spaniards had confrontations with the aborigines like caribs and Arwakas and had driven them out and brought African slaves as substitutes to work on their farms. European settlers occupied vast territories in the islands and started investing huge sums on plantation. Subsequently, Colonies were formed
under the European administration which conceded right to property only to the whites and made African slaves work only as labourers on agricultural lands of the rich. And the emancipation in 1833 by the British government was only an 'illusion of liberty'. The 'plantation-economy' introduced and maintained by all crudest possible ways, favoured only the rich to become richer leaving the labourer poorer and poorer. Even the atrocities and violence in the society led to racial segregation and mounting of tensions. Further, social and economic backwardness, exploitation and chicanery, strained the relationship of the master and the servant and the European settler became interested in the 'self' and not in the progress of the Island.

Wilson Harris called this syndrome 'victor-victim stasis' and an exploration of the way in which this has affected the contemporary society became the central theme in his first four novels which formed the Guyana Quartet. George Lamming's Natives of My Person (1972) examines the effect of the process of colonisation on European settlers of all classes. Mittleholzer, in the Guyana trilogy explores the obsessions and apprehensions of the quasi-historical Van Groenwegen family. It was not until the end of the Napoleonic wars that the islands ceased changing hands and a degree of stability was established in the region. The territories including the two mainland colonies of British Guiana (now Guyana) and British Honduras (Belize) were brought under the British rule at the end of
this period. The break with the colonial domination affected the entire region. Though they share the common language and the same Colonial history, West Indian writers such as Walter Maca, Lawrence and Norman Cameron in Guyana, C.L.R. James and Alfred Mendes in Trinidad and Claude Mckay, H.G. de Lisser and Thomas MacDermot wrote in their poems and short stories about the plight of humanity in the islands.

Panama and Central American migrations and participation of West Indian soldiers in the First World War brought a new Social and Political awareness in the people and inspired them to fight for political independence and individual freedom. This infused West Indians with a national feeling and Marcus Garvey emerged as a leader of the movement. Subsequently, West Indian islands achieved political independence from the British in 1950's and 60's. In the late fifties, the socio-cultural movements 'Pan-Africanism' and 'Pan-Americanism' also helped in forming the West Indian Federation on 3rd January, 1958, which remained so till 31st May 1962. And finally, West Indian islands became independent countries. With the Conglomeration of African races, indentured labourers, Amerindians and Europeans, the caribbean society acquired a multi-racial, multi-national, multi-lingual and multi-religious complexion. And the subsequent decolonisation changed the nature and behavioural patterns of the people. But because of diversity
in respect of culture, religion and race and thinking, disharmony and disorder in the society continued for years. And even the educated in the society found themselves at the cross-road, confused, neither could follow their native tradition and culture nor reject the alien culture and value system. In the post-colonial society the individual stood out isolated, utterly confused and estranged, unsure of himself. The loss of cultural identity, and the plight of individual are explored by the caribbean writers to bestow on the Creole possible recognition and provide remedial solutions to the problems of the individual and society through the modes of 'self-awareness', 'self-belonging' and 'journey into the past' and 'revival'.

West Indian novel is a twentieth century creation. The supposed first-caribbean novel *Bakha's Buckra Boy* of Tom Redcam appeared in 1903. But 'novel' became fully developed as art-literature between 50's and 60's of this century. Writers like Harris Wilson, Samuel Selvon, V.S. Naipaul, George Lamming became greatly concerned with and about the socio-cultural problems of the individual and West Indian society and tried to define the social patterns of Caribbean society. As Kenneth Ramchand observed:

"It is not unique for novelists to be regarded as having something special to say to their societies. But 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, the cynicism and uncertainty of the nature of bourgeoisie in power after independence, the lack of history to be proud of and the absence of traditional or settled values."

Caribbean writers have endeavoured to analyse the situation and the human condition in pre- and post-colonial situations in West Indies. And the protagonists of their fiction symbolically represent their age and society. Some novels record the traumatic experiences of the people during the colonial rule.

Lionel Hutchinson's novel, One Touch of Nature (1971), described the fate of the descendants of peasant immigrants, known in Barbados as Red legs. Jen Rhys in Wide Sargasso Sea (1966) explores the neurosis which confusion of identity must have produced among creoles. Alfred Mende's first novel Pitch Lake (1934) is about the son of a portugese immigrant in Trinidad whose efforts to sever his connections with the common people lead him to commit murder. In Delisser's The White Witch of Rosehall (1929) the three major characters - Anne Palmer, her young lover Rutherford and Rider, the alcoholic clergy man -- are unsuccessful Europeans, who could not
compromise with the blacks and their culture. The early twentieth century witnessed serious economic crisis in West Indies due to natural calamities and thus affecting the sugar industry and country's economy. The depression in the agricultural sector caused immigration of rural folk to towns and cities in search of employment. DeLisser's *Jane's Career* (1914) recorded the exodus of young girls from villages to cities in search of jobs even as domestic servants. Not all succeeded like Jane, many became prostitutes, living in the squalid barrackyards to which West Indian writers from C.L.R. James onward have turned time and again for settings in their work. Many men were forced to leave their islands in search of work mainly to go to the Panama canal and the banana Republics of Central America or to Cuba and the United States as seasonal farm workers. Some moved from Barbados St. Lucia and Grenada especially, to the Brazilian Sugar plantations and to a part of Spain waterfront which was then a thriving trans-shipment port for the produce of South American Countries such as Brazil and Venezuela. *Tropic Death* (1926), a collection of short stories by Eric Walrond, presented a grim picture of this search for work.

In West Indies years of economic depression between the two World Wars fermented political and cultural problems and also generated unemployment problem. Further, the repatriation of people to West Indies from Panama posed a serious
threat to the economy of the country. By thirties of this century, the independence movement in India had generated certain political awareness among them leading to the emergence of the calypso as a political weapon in Trinidad, the satirical mode of which reflected in The Beacon, Picong and Calaloo, a current magazine. Towards the mid thirties trade unions were formed, became politically active and also to fight against the government. R.A.C. de Boissiere's novel Crown Jewel (1952) chronicled the movement in Trinidad between 1935-37 for social action against the prevailing systems. The events in the late thirties and forties must have profoundly influenced the minds of the youth and also the writers. George Lamming's In the Castle of My Skin (1953) is based on his childhood perception of the Barbados riots. John Hearne's voices under the window (1955) and Neville Dawes' The Last Enchantment (1965) dealt with the changing attitude to class and colour.

From a literary perspective, the period from 1944 when Jamaica's new Constitution was granted, to the break up of the West Indian Federation in 1962, was the most eventful in modern West Indian history. New trends had emerged in West Indian society after the 1937 riots and the Second World War. The new black professionals emerged as a class with the growing political power inspiring them to write about the political developments. Almost every publication in the area was fired by a new regional ideal, transcending class and island barriers.
A sense of pride in the history and culture of the Caribbean became fashionable and the new middle class tried to build up its own traditions.

The East Indian indentured labourers too joined the struggle for a better life and became more interested in acquiring property or starting business. Stories of miserly Indian farmers, such as the father of Beena and Kattree in Mittelholzer’s Corentyne Thunder (1941), which formed part of West Indian Mythology tend to obscure the fact that for the East Indian indentured labourer as much as for the African ex-slave before him, a decent living for his children could only be obtained through self-sacrifice. Sam Selvon’s protagonist Tiger, in A Brighter Sun (1952) and Turn Again Tiger 1958, is an example of Indian peasant farmer involved in the double struggle for financial security and intellectual advancement. Their children for success in life, conscious of their less fortunate peers and parents, tried their fortune in business social circle even sacrificing their familiarities. Edward Baugh presented similar situation in his poem 'Small Town Story'. The boy in George Lammings’ In the Castle of My Skin (1953) also experiences similar sense of alienation from his friends at the village school when he leaves for the secondary school. Like Naipaul, Lamming too writes out of personal experience. The shared experiences of the two World Wars had gone a long way to temper this
insularity among working-class West Indians. The labour unions were among the earliest West Indian groups to canvas support for an Independent Federation and their efforts received financial support of groups of West Indian residents in the United States who were already aware of the advantages of a corporate identity. Subsequently West Indian Federation was formed in 1958 only to be disbanded in 1962, when Jamaica was allowed to reconsider its membership through a referendum.

George Lamming estimates in *The Pleasures of Exile* (1960) that in those ten years from 1948 to '58 at least a dozen West Indian writers conscious of their corporate living had established themselves internationally. Magazines such as KyK-over-al, Bim also focused on the importance of socio-cultural interaction with people abroad for new ideas and interests and for creativity. This tendency of the writers also attracted the readers outside the territory. The publishing efforts of the Miniature poets series and the Caribbean voice programmes which broadcast a magazine of creative writing to the West Indies from London between 1948 and 1958, also facilitated the change in the outlook of the people. Walcott's play *Henri Christopher*, produced in January 1952 best epitomised the spirit of the time.

The array of gifted West Indians who participated in the London production was itself indicative of the characteristic movement into the exile of Caribbean writers that had begun
when Claude Mckay left Jamaica for the United States in 1912. One cause of this trend in the fifties was the widely reported success of Edgar Mittelholzer, George Lamming and Sam Selvon who got their novels published within three years of their arrival in London. They succeeded in attracting British audience and in gaining international recognition. Even after the first flush of success few writers returned to West Indies to stay, with a hope to survive as creative writers in a society where chronic unemployment for one quarter of the work force was still a reality, and the life of a writer was seen as an affectation in which only the rich or mentally ill could afford to indulge. In an article called 'The Regional Barrier' written in 1958 for the Times Literary Supplement, V.S. Naipaul acknowledges the usefulness of residence in London as an aid to creative objectivity. At the end of the article, Naipaul puts his finger on the problem which must have haunted all the West Indians writers living in exile.

And yet I like London for all the reasons I have given, it is the best place to write in. The problem for me is that it is not a place to write about. Not as yet. Unless I am able to refresh myself by travel to Trinidad, to India I fear that living here will eventually lead to my own sterility and I may have to look for another job. Eventually most of the major West Indian novelists living abroad were able
to cross the regional barrier and write about their adopted country."

Many of their works are concerned with the theme of exile. In Selvon's *Moses Ascending* (1975), V.S. Naipaul's *Guerillas* (1976), George Lamming's *Age and Innocence* (1958) and *Water with Berries* (1971), and Andrew Salkey's *Come Home*, Malcolm *Heartland* (1976), there is an almost Kafkaesque failure on the part of the exile to reconnect with the 'Real' world of 'black home.'

After the collapse of the Federation new schisms began to appear within the Caribbean society. The fragile regional alliance between the professional middle class and the world class against the common colonial enemy was swept by a new wave of elitism and national chauvinism in the West Indian territories which were granted independence after 1962. Rivalries between the islands became fiercer and an atmosphere of bitterness and suspicion prevailed, in the circles of old political allies each trying to blame the other for the failure of the Federation to deal with the new political reality. Burnham-Jagan rivalry induced in 1962 some of the bloodiest scenes of racial violence between Africans and Indians in West Indian history. The horror and absurdity of this confrontation is reflected in the unusually compassionate tones of V.S. Naipaul's comment on the Burnham-Jagan split in his West Indian
documentary, *The Middle Passage* (1962) and at another level of environment, in the despair in the poems in *Jail Me Quickly* (1963) by Martin Carter.

While the Indian African confrontation in Guyana is no longer as bloody an issue as it was in the early sixties, the East Indian living in the West Indies also can no longer be characterised as the exotically dressed quiescent community of which Claude McKay give us glimpses in *Banana Bottom* (1933). Sam selvon's first novel *A Brighter Sun* (1952), is the earliest West Indian novel depicting the Indian-African tension as a major theme. Like Mittelholzer's *Corentyne Thunder* (1941), this novel also provides insights into the life of the East Indian Farming Community. But Naipaul's classic novel *A House For Mr. Biswas* (1961) attempts to deal with a further stage of East Indian involvement in Caribbean society. In the world of Tulsi's, family and racialties also influence social advancement.

The new racial and political tensions in the region after the break up of the Federation and the granting of independence to Trinidad, Jamaica, Barbados, and Guyana were paralleled by the emergence of new cultural features in West Indian Society. The West Indian literary tradition had evolved from the changing language and folklore of the region and itself affecting some changes. Samuel selvon of Trinidad and Louise Bennett of Jamaica, for example, have contributed to the nature
of the literary tradition through the use of local dialects and language in their work. But by the Sixties, changes in West Indian social structure had begun to affect the language and cultural orientation of the lower classes.

One of the major repercussions of the mass movements of the seventies has been the renewed contact between Cuba and the rest of West Indies. The Cuban link has helped to draw West Indian literary criticism closer to Latin American traditions which, it has been argued, have too often been ignored in assessing the works of writers like Wilson Harris and Dennis Williams. C.A.M.'s role in the creation of this link has been crucial. Its magazine, Savacou, was one of the most influential publications to emerge from the flurry of literary activity which followed the Black Power crisis. Other publications which date from this time include Bango Man and Abeng in Jamaica, Moko and Tapia in Trinidad, Manjak in Barbados and Ratoon in Guyana. Their names are associated with the re-orientation of interest in their language and history among West Indians.

Now that literacy is no longer the exclusive domain of the middle class, writers have begun to create from within the conditions they describe, and not as outsiders championing adopted social causes. Rastafarian poets such as Ras Dizzy and Bongo Jerry, whose long poem 'Mabrak' has become a West Indian Classic, have been able to communicate qualitative
experience which few outsiders would have perceived. Similarly
the social protest of reggae musicians such as Bob Marley, and
some of the calypsonians helped in the discovery of serious
audience and the range of their own creative potential. A
parallel exists between this development and the writing originating in Metropolitan centres in Britain and America where a West Indian sub-culture has evolved. This includes the picturesque Satire of Sam Selvon's *Lonely Londoners* (1956) as well as Austin Clarke's more recent short stories about West Indian immigrants in Toronto. Most of this new experience, however, has been channelled into poetry. Johnson's *Dread Beatny* and *Blood* (1975) represent a crucial element in the poetry of many second generation of West Indian immigrants who feel frustrated by the limitations of their new societies imposed on them.

Change is still the only thing constant and continuous in West Indian Society. Often, the scale of time and distance on which it occurs is so condensed that a chronological consideration such as this is misleading, as it tends to imply that one phenomenon has replaced another when in fact they co-exist. The cycles of change described in the thirties, fifties and seventies are still being repeated in the life and experience of individuals. Inspite of their diversity, West Indian writers are held together by a background of trauma and promise which they share with the entire Caribbean community.
For the first time in West Indian Society 'Negro' has become a protagonist of the novel. Black characters are no longer peripheral or background figures and the hitherto obscure person is given prominence in West Indian prose and fiction. 'Negritude', a socio-cultural movement to fight against years of denigration and for cultural identity has inspired many West Indian writers. Decolonisation has encouraged black African look back to African past and its rich cultural heritage with pride and dignity. George Lamming's *Season of Adventure* documents the theme of conflict of cultures elaborately. Its focus is on African heritage and its impact on West Indian Society. V.S. Reid's novel - *The Leopard* speaks of Africanness and African personality. The novel presents a mystic view of person and place, in a vein of sexual imagery of a violent kind. V.S. Naipaul too records African sensuousness, heritage and violence and excitement in post-colonial disorder in the third world countries in his later novels alike *Guerrillas, A Bend in The River* and *In A Free State*. Caribbean novel in general depicts wide range of human experience peculiar to West Indian Society and Situation.
REFERENCES
