Search for Self-Identification:

The Meeting Point
Clarke's trilogy, chosen for the present study, addresses the lives of a small circle of Barbadians from that same fraction of island's population, men and women who are now resident immigrants in Toronto. The author in his trilogy weaves together interesting sequence of events around the lives of some immigrant domestics from Barbados and the people in their lives. The trilogy portrays vividly the social, economic, and racial concerns of the blacks in Toronto and its rich sub-urban areas. Being a writer of certain social concerns, Clarke continually touches upon many of the social problems as and when he sketches out the lives of his characters. While many of his themes are common to Commonwealth and Third World Literatures, the phenomenon of racism itself is handled by Clarke in markedly different ways. "Racism, repression, violence, hostility, poverty, frustration, isolation, sexual deprivation, black consciousness, black identity, and sex become major elements in his intricate web of storytelling." (1)

_The Meeting Point_ is set in the mid sixties. It deals exclusively with the lives of the West Indians immigrants of Toronto - their menial jobs, their struggles to cope with strange customs, and their enlargements, often sexual and usually at a disadvantage with the Whites.
In *The Meeting Point*, we encounter almost all of the main characters of the trilogy. Firstly there is Bernice Leach a domestic maid who is the main character. Dots is her friend and a fellow domestic, who resides in the adjacent lane along with her wayward husband Boysie Cumberbatch. Both Bernice and Dots are approaching middle age. Estelle Leach is Bernice's younger sister. She comes to Toronto on a visit. She is more attractive, more intelligent and self-reliant. She stays with Bernice in her cramped apartment. Henry White is Boysie's close friend, who unlike others has lived for fewer than ten years in Canada, left Barbados, but like Boysie is apparently now among the permanently unemployed. Agatha, a rich Jewish graduate student is the girlfriend of Henry White. Bernice's employers are the discordant couple Sam Burrmann and Gladys Burrmann.

Sam and Estella carry on a mutually exploitative affair - Estelle seeking Sam's influence to enable her to acquire landed immigrant status and Sam trying to prove his virility at the cost of Estelle's chastity.

Most of Clarke's central characters are women who come to Canada on the "domestic scheme", a Canadian Government Policy, first implemented in 1955, allowing a limited number of women from the West Indies to enter the country in domestic service and thus acquire citizen-ship. (2)

At the centre of the *The Meeting Point*, we have Bernice Leach and all the other characters are linked to her by means of some relationship or some mutual understandings or by the sense of oneness that develops out of the parties that they arrange secretly in their respective apartments in the absence of their employers. Bernice hosts a party in her apartment when Estelle, her sister, arrives Canada. Bernice and Dots go to the aerodram to receive Estelle and this shows that there exists a true chord of friendship among the characters. Dot exclaims at the airport: "She come", said Dots, "Because we can see her standing
like a lord, like-like-like a queen. (T.M.P.p.58). Then they celebrate Estelle’s arrival wholeheartedly.

Bernice enters service as a working maid to the Burrmanns, a rich Jewish family in Toronto. She is, some times treated generously but more often with condescension or abuse:

Clarke’s domestics suffer from the humiliation of diminution in social status: from loneliness and some times a lack of male companionship. At other times they suffer from the callousness of the men, they have brought with them, men who, unable to gain a footing in Canadian society turn their frustrations on their wives and girl friends. (3)

Bernice suffers from loneliness and lack of male companionship. To overcome this she spends her time in reveries and also writes a letter to her man, Lonnie, in Barbados stating that money is not the only thing she seeks in Toronto:

Canada to me, is only a place to make money in, not a place to live in, or feel relaxed in. These people don’t owe me nothing; and I owes nothing in return. But I am here, and I have to make the most of a bad situation. I want you to understand, Lonnie, let although I have not sat down and poured out my heart to as I used to, and as a woman would pour out her heart to the man she loves, it do not mean that you were not always in my mind, and in my heart. A young strong woman cannot live in this place by herself. She needs a man (T.M.P.p.182)

Bernice Leach is physically unattractive, of small intellectual means, living a highly monotonous and constructive life. In the novel we see her in a state of complete frustration which prevents the gratification of certain impulses
and desires either consciously or unconsciously. Working for the Burrmanns she is in a White world within which she is relegated to the black’s perpetual state of slavery. Mrs. Burrmann treats her with scorn and distrust initially. However as the novel proceeds -

Mrs. Burrmann overcame her earlier reservations about Bernice’s black hands touch her white bed linen and her silver cutlery... and permitted her to graduate from merely preparing meals to serving them at the table. (T.M.P.p.3.)

Mrs. Burrmann treats Bernice as inferior and this sets up a great deal of tension in the novel. Bernice, unable to command respect and dignity builds up an inner hate for the Burrmanns and the Whites in general. This hate is the result of the conditions created by Mrs. Burrmann like those of slavery, meagre wages, and hard work. Bernice interprets her employers’ inability to accept her fully as a human being on economic level, in addition to the prevailing usual symptoms of inter-racial hostilities on the external level. Inspite of Mrs. Burrmann’s affection Bernice always sees herself as a servant, a sort of twentieth century slave. It was mainly the amount of hard work that reminded her of her status. The racial tension in the novel is heightened by the juxtaposition of the colours black and white and Bernice’s own resentment at the exclusive ‘Whiteness’ of her environment:

Silently she grew to hate Mrs. Burrmann even more than she hated winter and the snow. To her Mrs. Burrmann not only symbolise the snow, she symbolised also, the uneasiness and inconvenience of the snow. Her lonliness grew too; and so did her hatred of Mrs. Burrmann: deeper and deeper the same was a December, January and February piled snow on the ground. (T.M.P.p.7)
Bernice is paid ninety dollars a month. Beneath her seeming calm and contentment she is a hostile and explosive character. That she does little to alleviate her sufferings rests on her awareness of poverty all along in her life. Rooted in her feeling is the fact that despite the economic hardship, despite the discrimination, despite the humiliation, she is better off materially in Toronto than in Barbados. It is the awareness of this uneasy truth that intensifies her frustration and a hate for the Whites as well as her own self.

Struggle for identification that is the identity crisis faced by the characters is yet another feature of Clarke’s characters. Inherent in Bernice’s struggle for livelihood is the search for self identification, acceptance as human being, as a black in the Canadian sea of whiteness which surrounds her. There are the usual symptoms of inter racial hostilities—the oppressiveness of the sub-Urban rich families towards their domestics and the aggressiveness of the police to blacks all of which tend to exacerbate the hostility between the blacks and the whites. On one occasion Freeness, one of the minor characters of the novel and a friend of both Boysie and Henry is harrassed by a white police officer. A white woman comes to his rescue and tells the officer that he had just got off the street car with her. On yet another occasion as Estelle, Bernice’s sister, arrives at the airport on a visit to Toronto, an immigration officer provokes an ominous comment from an anonymous bystander by commenting on the loss of her passport. He says in a soft voice which carried more than he had expected, or intended to, “...hope Canada don’t get like Britian”. (T.M.P.p.44)

Bernice’s own resentment of the Whites has its source in the sexual exploitation of the black women in the earlier times in Barbados:

Mammy tell me that in these black days any excuse for a man, as long as he was White, could hold on ‘pon her grandmother by the hand, or grab her grandmother by the neck, or by her behind and drag her in the nearest cane field
or behind the pig pen and lay down flat on top o 'she, and work off himself and his unwanted substance and seed in her belly. And on the back of that, leave her to the four winds." (T.M.P.p.34-35)

The novel mirrors the emotional frustration from the blacks' knowledge that they are used as cheap labourers and as instruments to satisfy the White people's primal hungers. The novel also depicts the black men's desire to even the scores by going out with white women. Clarke sets up a source of interracial conflict in the trilogy by showing White men chasing the black women and black men chasing the white women. These primal impulses result in a major strain in the relation between the blacks and whites, blacks and blacks, and whites and whites. Dots expresses one view:

But look at these women eh?. They would come in a man's bedroom and take him from on top of his lawful wedded; not one ounce of shame. (T.M.P.p.73).

In another incident Priscilla, a West Indian nurse, seethes with anger at the black man who deserts her and others in favour of white partners at a party given by Bernice. This sexual laxity is a feature common to the lives of the rich in Forest Hill where Bernice lives with her employers. It so shocks Bernice that she cannot help saying to her friend Dots, "you never will dream of the things that takes place behind these expensives curtains and drapes." (T.M.P.p.9)

In a significant way Clarke shows that the tensions found in the lives of the blacks also exist in the lives of the whites and the rich. This particular side of the picture is brought alive through the depiction of Mrs.Burmann and Mr.Burmann. The former accuses the latter of her inability to bear him a son; '... to carry a child... without goddam loosing the child, or doing some crazy thing to it.' (T.M.P.p.154)
Shame and Embarrassment precipitate the black man’s self-hate and apathy towards other blacks. This is revealed at the airport where Estelle who faces problems with the immigration officer finds a black family waiting to be processed and feels the pangs of being black:

The black family held down its head in shame and embarrassment; the black woman sitting on the other side of the ocean from the white woman, averted her eyes: the man of God was now talking to the immigration officer and Estelle suddenly felt cold and lonely. (T.M.P.p.46)

When Estelle becomes pregnant, Priscilla observes at the hospital:

And the head nurse, Priscilla... now vivacious, ferocious, an aggressive nurse, black, tightly built and commenting, ‘Another black whore! Oh Lord! to the white nurse who didn’t want to comment on racial subject, or patient. ‘They don’t even have any shame!’ Priscilla said, making it clear to the white nurse that there are two kinds of black women. (T.M.P.p.248)

This feeling of racial insecurity arises from the social conditions around the black man that constantly remind him of his status of continual inferiority which ultimately leads to a loss of faith in one’s inner strength and capabilities. When Dots advises Estelle to learn certain manners by telling her that Canada is a place where the blacks learn to do certain things and redress themselves, Estelle says that she is better mannered and that she wishes to lead the life of a black though she has come to live amidst the whites. Boysie supports her by saying: “We is in captivity here.” (T.M.P.p.60). But its not the way in which Bernice feels. She seems to be content with the life she leads in Forest Hill although she knows about the plight of the blacks at Toronto, Africa, and United States. She is
ready to voice against any atrocity or social injustice against her people, but only within the four walls of her apartment or over the phone with Dots:

'I happy as hell in Canada', she told Dots; and Dots had to wonder whether it was the same person who had said last week, Canada, Mississippi, Alabama, South Africa, God, they is the same thing! And when Dots asked how, Bernice added, 'As far as a black person is considered, this made Dots unhappy and confused. (T.M.P.p.95).

Bernice's ambivalent attitude towards the black man's universal struggle emerges from her own state of insecurity. She feels that she has no definite world to confine herself to. Her dependence on the white man for economic support and shelter puts her in a very awkward position. So she backs the blacks in the hidden recesses of her mind and her self-contained shelter, against herself and other social fall out. She sneaks out only for a few hours to attend the church: "Going out to the church is one of her greatest diversions." (4), and this characterises her life. The church is a place where she can hide—though for a few hours, from the scolding eyes of the whites and from her burden of life in Forest Hill. This alienation and aloofness help her feel a domestic. Occasional meetings with the other immigrants breathes into her a sense of personal and racial equality, even if for a few hours. Shaw street is symbolic of racial harmony and equality and on the contrary, Forest Hill is the seat of oppression and racial inequality. A sense of isolation is the greatest enemy of the immigrants like Bernice. It dehumanises her and her fellow blacks in Toronto. Their alien culture and the lack of a sense of belonging and a feeling of two-fold transplantation first from Africa to Barbados and then, from Barbados to Canada - lock them up insecurely in a threatening and hostile country. So they think:

Look child this idea of leaving your home and coming into somebody else country is a damn brave thing, eh. Everyday
there's something to remind you that you wasn't born here 
that you don't belong here. (T.M.P.p.116)

Bernice's isolationistic tendencies lead her to react very negatively to other blacks. The feeling that every black's defeat is her personal defeat frightens her and she struggles to free herself from this responsibility and forces her to become an introvert. She entertains the feeling that every black's defeat is her own defeat and struggles to free herself from this racial responsibility, shutting herself in her ivory tower in Forest Hill which she thinks is her means of getting some repose. On the day of Estelle's arrival she plans to finish her job as early as possible and find time to go to the airport and receive her beloved sister. At this juncture Mrs.Burrmann calls her and tells her to prepare lunch for eight guests. This irritates and slaughters her joy. To come out of it Bernice does some silly things. Her hostility towards Mrs.Burrmann makes her indulge in the sabotaging of her employer's groceries. Further she feels that though she does not get a raise in the salary there is a always raise in the amount of work. Even after three years it is the same. "Some items, she poured down the drain and some items she took to her room."(T.M.P.p21). Infact this hostility is not against Mrs.Burrmann, it is more of her reaction to her loneliness and boredom. In her imaginary letter to her son's father and her lover, Lonnie, she explains that she was unaware of the fact that loneliness could intimidate one and work against a person: against a person.

I am not happy up here. There is a lot of wrong with this country; but I will say one thing. Loneliness, Lonnie, is a thing I did not know to exist against a person, as I have come to know it, in this Canada... sometimes, things is so bad that I have to sit down and cry and wish that I was back home where I can speak to a friend, or laugh with him, a
friend, or even laugh with myself, if there is no friend or laugh as if I were mad. (T.M.P.p183)

The absence of any meaningful association with the people of the host community, the black domestics feel like appendages to a system - a system which ignores the importance of their lives. This is because they hardly come into contact with many blacks, and also because they are alienated from the mainstream of Canadian life. Psychological and social conflicts create in them, a sense of purposelessness. Dots tells Bernice that "their purpose of living in Canada as blacks, is through the tender mercies of God the white man and the landlord, all of whom are white and when these three gods feel alike it, bram? They lick your behinds like they do down in Mississippi." (T.M.P.p193)

A constant tone of racial nervousness and insecurity is seen in the forefront of these characters' actions and thoughts. Much of it is relevant to the American Civil Rights Campaigns of the mid sixties. A superficial reading suggests that that the black characters are used to wage the author's campaign against racial descrimination. But a more intenser reading makes one get annoyed at the way Bernice stalks around-full of fear, full of hate. This throws light on another dimensions of the problem of racism. As the story proceeds it becomes clear that Bernice's fear is not so much of white people as of accepting her negritude. She feels content to read the black newspaper *Muhammed Speaks* and gets complexion lightness from Harlem. But that is as long as she is willing to identify herself with the blacks in America or Toronto marching for equal rights. She is ashamed of their show even as some others are. She drags Estelle away from watching, and feels that they are 'making fools of themselves' (T.M.P.p220). She abhors this public display of solidarity and prejudice and racial descrimination. She opines that blacks are stupid trouble makers. Apathy, self hate, and a rejection of black values make Bernice suppress any feeling of association that she might have for blacks:
...Christ it sickens me to my stomach to see what this blasted world o' black people is coming to ... And these niggers in Canada! Well, they don't know how lucky they are. (T.M.P.p220)

Bernice's sister Estelle does not accept this. She challenges this distorted, and imprecise view of the blacks' situation and reminds Bernice of her so-called allegiance to the Muslim faith.

To Bernice racial injustice as a social problem is prevalent only among the lives of the American blacks and that of has nothing to do with blacks from Barbados. Bernice lacks the sense of universal black brotherhood, which is abundantly enshrined in the Muslim's beliefs. The internal contradictions of race consciousness dominate Bernice's life. This is also reflected by the other characters in *The Meeting Point*. Bernice's friend Gertrude, a negro woman from Africa born and bred in Grenada opines that having been saved will eliminate the loneliness that she feels "living amongst all them white people". (T.M.P.p23). This is dramatised by her unwillingness to be accepted as a black person as we find her praying:

I am saved, amen! and have been washed in the precious blood of the lamb, and be-Christ, all of you brothers and sisters here and see now that I have been washed whiter than snow, amen! Gertrude was so black that even Bernice used to make jokes about her colour. (T.M.P.p.23-24).

The idea or paradox in her education is that her appearance in this religious act of faith is that which seeks acceptance into the fold of white christian brethren on the basis of colour-the colour of her soul - white.
The comment by an American negro Atlas - "These dumb West Indians should be back in the cane fields sweating" (T.M.P.p.176), about Boysie and Henry clearly shows how much the black man hates his skin colour and also his rejection of the immigrant blacks. Boysie and Henry give vent to their frustrations and fear by declaring their hate for the 'American Nigger. Boysie observes: "I hate them American Negroes more than I hate white people" (T.M.P.p.176)

Hate is not always the primary motive of Clarke's writings. Sometimes it is employed as a means of showing the evolution of the characters' self identification and their awareness of their conditions of existence. When Bernice drags away Estelle from watching a bunch of black people marching along the road, the latter observes that the former does not have a proper understanding and that she is wrong. Bernice spells:

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\text{You and me (Bernice and Estelle), we is West Indians, not American Negroes. We are not in that mess. Leave that damn foolishness, you hear? 'cause we grow up in a place the West Indies where nobody, don't worry about things like colour and were you aren't condemned because you are blacker than the next person'} \text{(T.M.P.p.220)}
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The affair between Mr. Burrrmann and Estelle is one of love-hate antagonism. He takes her to the cheapest pubs and restaurants where he seduces her. In fact he uses her to test his virility and tells her: "You make me feel like a man again" (T.M.P.p.169). Here Estelle is reduced to the position of a common whore. He drags her around the city to cheap bars, for, better would not allow them. She becomes pregnant and this is when Mr. Burrrmann is seen in his true colours. He accuses her of consorting with Boysie or Henry. He is not ready to accept any responsibility for his actions. So is the case with Estelle who uses him to acquire her landed immigrant status. The furtive and misty affair persists as a mocking reflection of their common ignorance and inadequacy. It
comes as a jolt on the social status of Bernice. She feels that it is an act that makes one bow one's head in shame, though she herself has borne a son, the result of her illegal and illicit affair with her lover, Lonnie, back in Barbados.

The novel is undoubtedly one dealing with the lives of the domestics, would-be-domestics, and students. It is also a novel of conflict bringing to the fore the various issues confronting the immigrants:

What disconcerts the critic is the inevitability intensity endangered by the novel's theme of conflict, for conflict is the very essence of *The Meeting Point* - the social and cultural confrontations between white Toronto and its Black West Indian immigrants. (5).

Though there is nothing new about *The Meeting Point*, given the much explored theme of hatred in modern fiction, the novel presents an interesting reading. Mrs. Waddington subscribes to this view:

There is nothing new or showing about hatred in modern fiction; but in *The Meeting Point* its not only unrealistic, its uninteresting and you get the feeling that the writer is taking out on the reader what his characters ought to be taking out on one another inspite of these flaws, *The Meeting Point* deserved a serious reading because Clarke is attempting to deal with the two biggest problems of our time - race relations and poverty. (6)

Writing about the inadequacies of the technical skills of Clarke, Mrs. Waddington points out that:

Judging by this novel, Clarke's talent and his conception are not equal to his subject - atleast not at the level which such
themes demand. For his novel is too short to deal with all the problems it raises and yet it is far too long and repetitive for what it actually does deal with. (7)

In a recent survey of Black fiction, The Common Wealth Pen,(a), A.L.McLeod rejects the disturbing truth of conflict in favour of the "More Universal" and "Realistic" portrayals of black experience (by white artist, of course) choosing Conrad's pre-historic myth on the "Dark Continent", Heart of Darkness (b) and Oliver Schreiner's superficial 19th century irrelevancies, The Story of A African Farm (c). Another critic, Robert A.Bone bases similar arguments on the mystifying proposition that "the colour line exists not between the pages of a book but outside in the real world."(8)

Mrs.Waddington's review (in Canadian Literature 35) suffers from the White critics' age-old ignorance of the black environment and situation upon which Clarke bases his novel. She dislikes the fact that the heroine Bernice Leach has been cast in the role of a live-in domestic because the "built-in-humiliation" of her status supposedly contributes to the unrealistic "short-cuts" of the work. But there is nothing unrealistic or artificial about Bernice's status. Until just over a few years ago the de-facto racism of Canada's Immigration Policies (now acknowledged by the Canadian Government) effectively excluded most Black West Indians with the exception of students and domestics (including Bedomestics). The humiliations faced by Bernice have not been devised by Clarke but the majority of the white employers of these domestics. These domestics are contractually obliged to work as live-in maids for a stipulated period after their admission into the country. Far from being an 'unrealistic' short-cut, Bernice's economic position is an accurate reflection of the degrading status of many black West Indians immigrants in Canada.

Another important dimension that looms large in the novel is the Jewish one. Bernice's employers, the Burrmanns symbolise the fact - the incontrovertible
fact - that the Jews are the largest single group of employers of Black West Indian domestics in the Toronto area:

The compounding of the cultural problems is not an Austic Clarke fantasy, but a fact of life: the Jew is as prominent in the social and economic experience of West Indian domestics, as he is in the black American ghettos. And what James Baldwin writes of the ambiguous black-Jew relationships in America is largely true of the cultural conflicts and economic conflicts between Bernice and her Jewish environment. The devout Negro compares himself with the Biblical Jews in their bondage, suffering an eventual freedom. But paradoxically, this implements a special bitterness for the Jews who, it is felt should 'know better' or identified (rightly or wrongly) as tradesmen, with the hatred, oppressive society.(9).

The trilogy also mirrors the Black - Jew relationship and prejudiced connection between the Jew and German. Mr.Burrrmann and Estelle, and Henry White and Agatha demonstrate the evolving ambivalences in the inter-relationships between Blacks and Jews. Mr.Burrrmann does not feel attached to his wife, Gladys Burrrmann. This is because Mrs.Burrrmann dominates him. She had been his source of financial aid during his student years and has helped him get the degree in Law. Sometimes she even goes to the extent of saying: "To me Sam, you are a man in absentia." And also, "You're either going to take me into your life. Sam, or I want you to stop quit sneaking behind me. I'm a woman, and I have needs and I won't sit around here all day, all night, if my husband can't fulfill those needs."(T.M.P.p.153). Mr.Burrrmann feels the need to prove his manhood because his wife has not borne him a child. But he does not exhibit any particular affection for Bernice though she has been working for him for the past
three years. But surprisingly enough, we find him immediately attracted to Bernice's sister Estelle:

It seems he kept her (Bernice) at a distance a servant ought to be kept: with coldness and civility. He regarded Bernice... as a machine to perform certain well defined jobs (T.M.P.p.106)

The other side of this relationship is dramatised by the black, Henry White and his Jewish graduate girlfriend, Agatha. These relations which extend to the psychological realities, formed by the Black experience are often dismissed as 'unbelievable'. Henry's ferocious approach to inter-racial sex as a means of avenging himself of White society remain incredible only when abstracted from the 'unbelievable' actualities of current social attitudes. Henry's tactics are instructively in response to the White taboos or inter-racial sex; hence he strikes back racism that has denied him humanity by asserting his manhood in the very area in which it has been most feared and maligned by White superstition.

However Henry White's primal relationships must also be related to another area of importance - the psychological and social issues of The Meeting Point. His anti-White exploitation of Agatha must be contrasted with his deliberate use of the affair together with the imaginary bank accounts and real estate holdings, as a status symbol of his 'Whiteness' (his surname suggests irony). Henry's internal conflicts are paralleled by Bernice's rapid oscillation between Black Muslim Literature and complexion 'lightness'. These paradoxical attitudes symbolise the tensions released by the Black revolution, the conflict between the new 'blackness' and the old self-deprecation.

Mrs. Waddington complains in her review that The Meeting Point lacks the reconciliation implied by the title saying that there is: "No let up in the warfare between White and Black". (10). But the above mentioned paradoxical attitudes
which symbolise - the tensions released by the black resolution, the conflict between the new 'blackness' lead to the major moral and psychological issues which Mrs. Waddington misses.

Intact Meeting Point denoted not the harmony of reconciliation - but the conflicts that have been sparked and intensified by the black resolution - the inner tensions of the black individual and the external confrontation between black militancy and white status-quo(11).
REFERENCES


3. ibid, pp.97.


6. ibid, pp.97.


10. ibid, pp.101.